



Decoding Shakespeare's Macbeth: A psychosocial reflection and meditation

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Abstract

The pangs of unrequited throne, Lady Macbeth's guilt-ridden soul and Bellona's Bridegroom's dying attempt to escape Birnam Wood loom large in the darker world of Macbeth. Shakespeare, with his sorcery of language, presents a disrupted world of fear, passion and guilt.

These triad (fear, passion and guilt) create a chaotic world which finds its solace in the death of the Macbeths. While discussing the psychological aspects of Macbeth, we cannot but recall A C Bradley's Shakespearean Tragedy. Bradley's reflection on Macbeth's dilemma between the conscious mind and the conscience is illuminating. Following Sigmund Freud in Civilization and its Discontents, Joan M Byles in Macbeth: Imagery of Destruction has further highlighted Macbeth's oscillation between superego and fear of castration. The image of blood is also a recurring theme in Macbeth.

Critics have so far reflected upon the unbridled passion and vaulting ambition of the Macbeths. Their mind-within-mind is an open vista to be explored from different points of view. Three Witches on heath, the unseen dagger, Banquo's ghost and Lady Macbeth's sleepwalk take us to the untrodden psychic world of Macbeth. We are afraid, yet excited. Does any mental disease or illness pervade Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's mind? Is it fear or is it guilt? The explanation is sought for in this paper with a humble attempt to unwrap the shielded mind that hovers our unconscious too.

Keywords: fear, passion, guilt, paranoia, psychosis

Fair is foul, and foul is fair.

Hover through the fog and filthy air. (*Macbeth*, Act I, sc.i, 11-12)

This chiasmatic prophecy at the very beginning of *Macbeth*, by the Three Weird Sisters, introduces us to the world of relentless pain. It is the incessant pain of oscillating between the good and the evil, the honest and the treacherous and finally the conscious and the subconscious of the human psyche that recurs throughout the play. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth fall prey to this pain. Macbeth, as represented in the play, is the harbinger of his own destiny. In order to act on the prophecy of the three witches, Macbeth takes a weapon in his hand. Grasping his bloody hands, we are also about to embark on a journey fraught with fear, passion and guilt.

Harold Bloom in the introduction to his *Shakespeare Through the Ages* has metaphorized Macbeth as a 'dramatic poem'. This metaphor is further extended when he claims, "Of all Shakespeare's dramas, Macbeth is the most contaminating in its effect" (Bloom xi). We can smell blood and guilt both smeared in the dagger of Macbeth. Blood, as produced by the villain-hero's vaulting ambition, is also a metaphor in Ruth L. Anderson's *The Pattern of Behavior Culminating in Macbeth*.

Based on *Chronicles of Holinshed* (1577) both Marlowe and Shakespeare have created their protagonists as ambitious and passionate. In Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* the protagonist sells his soul to devil in order to gain the supreme knowledge. In his pursuit of his ambition, he is ruthless just as Macbeth and Richard III are.

If madness defines Richard III and Macbeth both, vaulting ambition also does so. Both of them are ambitious and cruel. But there is also a difference between the two: Macbeth "is too full of the milk of human kindness" whereas Richard III is merciless. Macbeth's feeling of guilt and fear stem from his kind nature but Richard III is desperate in achieving the crown. Shakespeare has created magic in both plays but Macbeth, certainly, is closer to our mind. Madness is a recurrent theme in many Shakespearean characters. Lear's madness, Jacques's melancholy, Timon's bitter cursing, Macbeth's hallucination and Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking invite us to the world of darkness. The supernatural and Macbeth plot to intrude into the darker world- not only in mind but also in atmosphere. Right from the beginning of the play "The Witches dance in the thick air of a storm, or, 'black and midnight hags,' receive Macbeth in a cavern." (Bradley ix). We, along with Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, hesitantly step into the most ravishing and complex phenomena of human psychology, i.e., madness. We cannot but agree with Carol Thomas Neely that madness is a conundrum to those who would study it. Madness is supposed to be, according to MacDonald, the most solitary of afflictions to those who experience it and they also have to undergo many social restrictions under the influence of it. Shakespeare, not only as an author but also as a philosopher could interpret how excessive fear, guilt and fiery passion often lead to madness. Before Freud made his contribution to psychoanalysis, we find Shakespeare with his fine sense of language is doing that artfully. He could easily discern the diseased mind. Madness, therefore, has remained a fertile ground to the theorists and philosophers for ages. It also tempted me to analyse this paper from a psychoanalytic point of view as we delve in the most unknown, multi-faceted territory of human psyche.

With the appearance of the Three Weird Sisters in the opening scene of the play, darkness prevails. The three weird sisters gradually invite us to the dungeon with their deadly prophecies. While talking about the Witches we must remember that in *Macbeth*, we find seven female characters in total- Three Weird Sisters, Lady Macbeth, Lady Macduff, Hecate, and Lady Macbeth's Gentlewoman. Witchcraft used to be practised in Greek polytheistic religion for a long time. Hecate was a goddess of that. However, supernatural worship became controversial in monotheistic Christianity. To appease the Jacobean church, the goddess Hecate is depicted as a witch. Except Lady Macduff and Lady Macbeth's Gentlewoman, all women in *Macbeth* are more or less involved in witchcraft. The Witches and their ambivalent existence are further intensified by Banquo in Act I: They confuse both Macbeth and Banquo as to whether they are men or women. This confusing sexual identity adds to their horrifying image. Banquo doubts their earthly

existence too; we hear him murmuring, "I'th' name of truth, are ye fantastical, or that indeed which outwardly ye show?" What he thinks as a hallucination ultimately becomes Macbeth's forte. The Thane of Cawdor, a man living in wishful thinking, cannot foresee his impending doom. He considers those hallucinated images as real and tries to act on their prophecy. The more the play advances the more his guilt becomes explicit. In order to suppress his gentle and tender nature he ruthlessly murders one by one.

According to Allderidge, England was fascinated with the concept of madness from 1580 to 1640 (141). If we look at the history of the concept of madness in England, we would find that Neely has highlighted it in a different way. While talking about the 18th Century, Neely mentioned that Foucault made a revolutionary change when Foucault associated madness with the mark of unreason and animal instinct, which must be confined and restrained.

¹What are these /So wither'd and so wild in their attire, / That look not like th'inhabitants of th'earth, / And yet are on't? Live you? or are you aught/That man may question? You seem to understand me, / By each at once her choppy finger layings/ Upon her skinny lips: you should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret/That you are so (Macbeth, Act I, sc.iii 39-46)

In the 19th century there was a slow change but the latter half of the 20th century witnessed remarkable change in the dealing of the subject of madness. The philosophers, theorists, anti-psychiatry movement added a dimension to it. Most importantly, there was a search for the chemical basis for mental disorders which "collapsed the boundaries between mad and sane, mental and physical, real and illusory, that were being constructed into the Renaissance" (Neely 317). The broad distinction that separated the body from mind was minimalised in Shakespeare's works. He could easily delineate the interconnection between the body and the mind. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth equivocate before the regicide of Duncan. They most probably tried to conceal their uneasiness at the thought of murdering Duncan. Lady Macbeth conjured up the spirits to 'unsex' her so that she could ignore her feminine traits. Her denial of the self, i.e., feminine quality, led her to the ultimate destruction. But she didn't hesitate to instigate Macbeth. As a result, Macbeth, a man full of human compassion and pity, prepared himself for the bloody murder. His kind nature and repressed fear manifest in the hallucination of the dagger in Act II sc.i ². His proleptic vision of the dagger took us to the untrodden world of human psychology- Id, Ego and Superego.

²Is this a dagger which I see before me, /The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee. / I have thee not, and yet I see thee still. / Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible to feeling as to sight? or art thou but/A dagger of the mind, a false creation, /Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain? (Macbeth, Act II, i, 33-56)

Since I am trying to substantiate my paper from a psychoanalytical point of view, Freud's theory on personality becomes extremely relevant. The 'father of psychoanalysis' focuses on three aspects of the human psyche- Id³, Ego⁴ and Superego⁵. According to his theory, the id is the primitive and instinctual part of the mind that contains sexual and aggressive drives and hidden memories, the super-ego operates as a moral conscience, and the ego is the realistic part that mediates between the desires of the id and the super-ego. If we contextualize Freud within the discourse of *Macbeth*, we will find that Macbeth's oscillation between the id and superego led to his heinous acts in the play. It is his id which

led him to commit the murder of Duncan as well as his address to the dagger was also a symbol of the phallus. The fear of castration⁶ was symbolic of his id; whereas his dilemma in the Banquet Scene reminded us of his superego. It seemed that his ego couldn't strike a balance between his id and superego. As a result, his mind entered into more darkness and he committed a series of blunders. Same was true for Lady Macbeth also. When she summoned up the Spirits to unsex her, she was reacting out of her primitive instinct, i.e., id. If her superego had acted fully upon her, may be, she could be afraid of murdering Duncan as he resembled her father. But her failed ego prevented her from doing so.

In the field of psychoanalysis Carl Jung was a new thinker. Initially both Freud and Jung were friends but in 1912 due to their difference of opinion they parted. Jung regarded the psyche as made up of a number of separate but interacting systems. The three main ones were the ego, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious. Jung (1933) outlined an important feature of the personal unconscious called complexes. A complex is a collection of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and memories that focus on a single concept.

Carl Jung also classified the human personality into four archetypes: namely, the Self, the Persona, the Shadow and the Anima/Animus. Among them Anima/Animus is related to the "mirror image of our biological sex, that is, the unconscious feminine side in males and the masculine tendencies in women" (McLeod 2018). It actually subverts the traditional concept of sexual identity. If it represents the masculine traits in a woman, it should be termed as Animus and Anima is the feminine trait in a man. Macbeth can be viewed in this light also. If we consider Lady Macbeth's dialogues as Animus and Macbeth's dilemma and hesitation as Anima, we surely jump into the conclusion that they both complement each other. They, as a whole, are a unified soul destined to achieve the crown of Scotland by any means. In their pursuit of the crown, they gradually become victims of paranoia⁷, obsession⁸, depression⁹ and delusion¹⁰. Although these terms have medical connotation, I would like to discuss them from a psycho-social perspective.

Michael Foucault in *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* asserted that "self-attachment is the first sign of madness, but it is because man is attached to himself that he accepts error as truth, lies as reality, violence and ugliness as beauty and justice". We can locate both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's behaviour in this context. Macbeth's vision of the Witches was just an aberration of the truth. His wishful thinking made him believe that whatever the witches were saying was true. Before Duncan's murder he started hallucinating the dagger which was also a paranoid act. He started suspecting his own vision. This paranoid act continued until he gradually lost his senses and started talking to Banquo's ghost, thinking him as real.

Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, seemed to be a comparatively strong woman, rebuking her husband for being kind and compassionate. But, as the play progressed, she, with time, lost her sanity. Though she artfully managed Macbeth's hallucination at the Banquet scene (Act iv, sc.ii), it triggered her guilt ridden soul, sulking into obsession. While analysing Lady Macbeth's character we cannot but recall Roman Polanski's film version (1971) and Trevor Nunn's stage version (1976) performed at the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford. If we closely analyze Act V, scene I (1-80), we find Lady Macbeth, in her sleepwalking (compounded by guilt and insomnia), plays out the washing theme that runs throughout the play. "Her sleepwalking may be seen here as a state of mind where she can express what she is repressed for in a waking state, showing her duplicity of

personality, oscillating around repression and bravery, free expression and cowardice" (Moraes 1). Lady Macbeth was suffering from somnambulism as well as delusion. The Doctor remained silent at the mention of her 'infected mind'. She tried to wash off her guilt by washing her hands repeatedly. This obsessiveness led to her suicide. But as some may wonder how could she commit suicide only out of OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder)? Was she also suffering from depression? If yes, then what was the psychological state of Macbeth? From their numerous behaviours before and after the sleep-walking scene there can be an assumption that Macbeth also suffered from depression. His frequent hallucination was nothing but a part of the depression. We may question whether Macbeth was depressed from the very beginning or is it because of his guilt and conscience that later he became a patient of depression. His depressed mind was accentuated by the Second Witches' scene. It is from this scene that Macbeth murdered a series of people- from Lady Macduff to her children. He desperately sought the man 'not born of woman' without understanding the caprice of the Witches. They were certainly an extension of his personality which would appease at gaining the crown. Macbeth, initially an innocent and simple man, became a victim of Hecate and the witches. He turned into a demonic figure, searching for blood. His thirst for blood and vengeance could not stop Birnam Wood approaching him. Losing everything in life, Macbeth became a philosopher uttering, "Out, out, brief candle! Lives but a walking shadow, a poor player/That struts and frets his hour upon the stage/And then is heard no more: it is a tale /Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, /Signifying nothing (Act V, sc. v (22-27)". Life has now nothing to offer him except darkness. We, as readers and audience, also delve deep into the darkness. Our senses become numb, searching for a ray of sunlight after the devastating storm- it is "calm of mind and all passion spent".

Shakespeare's protagonists have always awakened a sense of awe. We not only admire but also empathize with them. Be it Hamlet or Macbeth or Richard III, he always experimented with the darker side of human mind. As the field of psychology and psychoanalysis are yet unexplored and undefined, there can be numerous interpretations of Macbeth too. In this paper I have tried to reflect on some of the probable causes of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's irrational behaviour though Shakespeare's genius calls for more seminal thoughts in this field.

Notes:

³Id is the unconscious part of our personality. It operates on pleasure principle and impulsive behaviour.

⁴Ego is the only conscious part of our personality. It mediates between the unrealistic id and the external world.

Freud made the analogy of the id being a horse while the ego is the rider. The ego is 'like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse.' (Freud 15).

⁵Superego is also a part of the unconscious consisting of two systems- the conscience and the ideal self.

⁶Fear of castration arises from the fear of childlessness. As Macbeth could never be a father, he wanted to destroy Fleance's father, i.e., Banquo. This is a complex psychology of Macbeth.

⁷The act of suspecting someone without any specific reason.

⁸When someone performs an action irrationally and repeatedly.

⁹That phase of human mind when he/she no longer finds joy in life.

¹⁰ An idiosyncratic belief or impression maintained despite being contradicted by reality or rational argument, typically as a symptom of mental disorder.

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