About Us: http://www.the-criterion.com/about/

Archive: http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/

Contact Us: http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/

Editorial Board: http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/

Submission: http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/

FAQ: http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/

The Complicated Politics of Gender Identity in *Macbeth*

Saswata Kusari
Assistant Professor
Department of English,
Sarada Ma Girls' College
&
Prof. Mahua Bhattacharjee
Teacher-In-Charge,
Sarada ma Girls' College

Abstract:

The thematic concern of appearance and reality is dealt with at various levels in *Macbeth*. This paper is an exploration of how the conventional ideas of gender and sexuality are subverted in this play. The paper would also seek to explore how the paradigmatic shift in the conventional gender identity creates a sense of queerness. Our attempt is to interrogate the play from an alternative perspective to bring out the 'non-meaning' that is contained within the play. While doing so, we would also try and raise questions regarding the ways in which bodies generally function; and, whether such minute subtleties lead to an alternative platform where the ideas of gender and sexuality can be explored in a larger context.

Keyword: heterosexuality, homosocial, homoerotic, masculinity, patriarchy, queer.

Introduction:

The theme of appearance and reality is much discussed in *Macbeth.* Various critics have tended to look at the text from diverse perspectives. One of the most difficult plays to perform, Macbeth remains the centre of interest for both the students and the scholars. From the very first scene of the play, it becomes apparent that the play would deal with the problematic area of appearance and reality; as confirmed by the statements made by the witches: 'Fair is foul and foul is fair.' According to Coleridge, this statement made by the witches strikes the keynote of the play. However, in this paper, we are not really concerned with the accepted strand of critical interest. Our aim would be to reveal how the spectrum of the heterosexual matrix (appearance) is disturbed by the apparently problematic gender discourse (reality) that emerges through the study of the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

Aim:

Through this paper, we are going to raise the question regarding whether Macbeth and Lady Macbeth at all fits into the commonly accepted categories of 'man' and 'woman'. From the very moment Macbeth's prospective future is revealed by the witches, his vaulting ambition starts to take control of his nerves. When Macbeth receives the titles of the Thane of Cawdor and Thane of Glamis, as promised by the witches, he himself says that these titles are 'happy prologue' to a play that is going to deal with 'imperial themes' (Shakespeare 20).

However, in spite of all his excitement about his future prospect, Macbeth is never able to recognise his ability to ultimately go and achieve what is being promised to him. He does not show the true Machiavellian instincts as revealed by Junior Mortimer in *Edward II* by Marlowe. When Lady Macbeth receives Macbeth's letter, where he has intimated her about the prophecy of the witches, she is apparently troubled by the thought that Macbeth might not be able to execute what's expected of him because he is 'too full of the milk of human kindness' (Shakespeare). It is from this very point of time that we understand that the conventional stereotypes about the expected gender roles are somewhat subverted in *Macbeth* as Lady Macbeth starts entering into the political arena and starts assuming the role of a man.

Discussion:

Let us now move into a closer examination of the text to show how patriarchal standards of masculinity and femininity are disturbed within the thematic concern of the play. In Act I, Scene II, the bloody sergeant comes to Duncan's castle to report how gloriously Macbeth has fought to protect his country from the impending danger. Hearing tales of such valorous heroism, Duncan instantly bestows him some glossy titles such as 'Bellona's bridegroom', 'valour's minion', 'worthy gentleman' and 'valiant cousin'. All these adjectives instantly reveal how chivalrous Macbeth is. In fact, it seems that there is an overt glorification of violence as well. This very point is raised by Alan Sinfield in his influential criticism of this play. The valorisation of Macbeth's prowess becomes a valorisation of overtly violent, hyper-masculinity. The gulf between appearance and reality, however, becomes even more obvious as this glorious celebration of Macbeth's masculinity is punctured by his wife's spooky doubt about his lack of it. This is basically a reinforcement of the idea that what is apparent might not always be real.

It is ironical to note that, in spite of the long and successful reign of Elizabeth as the British head of the state, Renaissance was essentially a masculine affair. Perhaps Elizabeth was able to withstand as the queen of such a state because she was able to successfully 'unsex'[1] herself. Heroism, valour, courage were considered to be features of a political man; and it may be asserted without an iota of doubt that Macbeth had essentially political motivation. However, *Macbeth* is a play where, just like 'fair' and the 'foul', it is very difficult to distinguish between the private and the political. In this respect, it becomes necessary to understand the politics of heteropatriarchy[2] itself. Patriarchy tries to create a polarization between men and women by rendering the 'virtues' such as strength, courage and rationality to men; and 'vices' such as weakness, fear and emotionality to women. In a patriarchal set up, it is expected that men would stand up as strong decision makers. However, as Lady Macbeth discloses after reading Macbeth's letter, we understand that

---

[1] Queen Elizabeth's sexuality has given rises to end number of questions. Some argue that she has given birth to a bastard child. Others argue that she did not marry because of her same-sex orientation. While, still others are of the opinion that she had a very toxic experience of married life as her father killed some his wives. It is perhaps because of such experience that she never intended to lose her power at the help. Whatever might be the reason Elizabeth not getting married it cannot be ignored that she did not fit into the commonly accepted category of womanhood.

[2] It refers to the way in which patriarchy privileges and emboldens the ideology of heterosexuality

Macbeth is unable to take a strong decision regarding his future course of action; and this, probably instantly feminises him. Unlike Macbeth, Lady Macbeth appears to be psychologically more prudent. Macbeth saw 'hope' in the prophecy of the witches; but it was Lady Macbeth, who was really intent on making things happen. Through her strong masculine gestures, Lady Macbeth is perhaps strongly dismantling the stereotypes that are associated with the identity of a woman.

It is very difficult to resolve the question that arises in the mind of lot readers about Lady Macbeth's allegation regarding Macbeth's lack of manhood. Like Delila, who emasculates Samson, Lady Macbeth's fiery critique of her husband is enough to emasculate him. Her critique raises serious questions regarding his masculinity. The very use of the word 'milk' creates an effeminate aura about his character. It is ironical to note that Lady Macbeth is challenging the masculinity of someone who has already been hailed as 'valour's minion' and 'valiant cousin'. The description of the warrior Macbeth reveals that he has the bloody side of life as well. Then the inevitable question that arises is: Why, therefore, is Macbeth bothered about committing the crime? That perhaps leads us to our initial argument about appearance and reality. In reality, Macbeth is perhaps not as masculine as he appears to be. From another perspective, it may be argued that Macbeth has a rooted sense of Christian morality and a sense of duty towards the state; and it is this sense commitment that has rendered him plausible to impeach violence against his oppositions in the manner that he has done.

As stated earlier, Lady Macbeth's doubt over Macbeth's masculinity is extremely ambiguous. From a heterosexual viewpoint, it might be argued that Lady Macbeth's desire to see her husband kill Duncan is like a woman's desire to see her husband emerge as a strong masculine agency. Borrowing the idea from Jan Kott[3], we might say that Lady Macbeth's demand of manhood is almost like her demand to be loved. However, we would be limiting the scope of our argument if we only look at this text from a heterosexual perspective. Perhaps, Lady Macbeth is afraid not only about Macbeth's lack of masculinity but also about his lack of heterosexuality as well. However, it is a question that is never resolved within the given context of the play. The question whether Macbeth is a true man (and hence a heterosexual) remains a *trace[4]*. Whether Macbeth's lack of virile masculinity is a sign of his entry into homosocial/homoerotic[5] matrix is a fact that can be seriously debated over. We must remember that, though, *Macbeth* was written after the death of Queen Elizabeth, it is an essentially Renaissance text. The Renaissance saw an earnest effort from the critics and the scholars alike to reinvigorate the past glory of the Prehistoric Greece and ancient Rome. Along with various cultural ethos, it becomes necessary to understand how same-sex love was looked at during this period, especially when we know that there was a great acceptance of same-sex desire in the pre-Christian cultures. In this context, I would like to quote a rather

---

[3] This idea is borrowed from Dennis Biggins essay. (see. Works Cited)

[4] In Derridean Deconstruction *trace* refers to the nonmeaning or the hidden meaning that is contained within the text alongside the visible meaning.

[5] The concept of 'homosociality' was introduced by Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick who argued that male-male social spaces are very visible. It might not have to do anything with sexuality. Homoerotic, on the other hand, refers to the essentially sexual relationship between two men or two women.

lengthy passage from the General Introduction to the book entitled *Same Sex Desire in English Renaissance:*

> As the Renaissance sought to renovate the cultural accomplishments of Greek and Roman antiquity, it also renewed awareness of the ancients' common homoerotic practices and aspirations. The reputed same-sex amours of such prestigious figures as Sappho, Socrates Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and Virgil became widely publicized. Hence Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593) observed, "The mightiest kings have had their minions" and "not kings only, but the wisest men." Gutenberg's invention of movable type around 1450 newly facilitated the mechanical reproduction of texts, so that, despite the ensuing development of restrictions on print media, writings and images could circulate much more readily, including those that challenged sexual and other orthodoxies. Same-sex bed sharing was ordinary in early modern culture, and though it was to some extent regulated by an expected etiquette of appropriate intimacy, such situations would have encouraged the development and exploration of homoerotic interests. Virgil's Second Eclogue traditionally said to express his own ardent desire for handsome young Alexis was standard reading for Renaissance schoolboys throughout Europe. Inspired by classical ideals of physical beauty embodied in surviving sculptures, the visual arts cultivated a new esthetic of anatomically realistic and sensuous human corporeality, with much androgynous or muscular male nudity, sometimes directly treating homophile or homoerotic subjects. Such cultural conditions would support Mario DiGangi's view that "the 'homosocial' and the 'homoerotic'…overlapped to a greater extent, and with less attendant anxiety, in the early modern period than would later be possible under a modern regime of sexuality. (1)

This overlapping model of 'homosociality' and 'homoeroticism' is dealt with at great length in Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II.* It might not be absolutely right to claim that the fears of Queen Isabella and Lady Macbeth are absolutely similar; but there are enough suggestions in the text to reveal that, whatever the cause might be, Macbeth does not stand for the 'ideal' (or hegemonic)[6] masculinity, at least in his private sphere.

From the argument that I have made already, it becomes apparent that I am trying to unearth the possibility of reading this canonical play from a queer glass. This idea can be further developed by interpreting Lady Macbeth's character as well. At the initial stage of the text, especially when she is critiquing Macbeth's lack of intent, she herself is defying the accepted standard of femininity. In a patriarchal social set up, women, just like men, are always expected fulfil certain standards. For instance, women are supposed to be afraid of night. But ironically enough, Lady Macbeth, at least in the initial stages is not afraid of night. While calling Macbeth effeminate, Lady Macbeth wants him to be filled with 'valour' of her tongue. The conventional gender roles are undoubtedly subverted in these powerful utterances made by Lady Macbeth. The biggest point of subversion, however, comes in the form of Lady Macbeth's address to supernatural powers where she wants them to 'unsex' her. In the film version of *Macbeth* (1997) directed by Jeremy Freeston Lady Macbeth makes a suggestion of perhaps unclothing herself as she utters that famous speech:

Lady Macbeth: ...The raven
> Himself is hoarse,
> That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
> Under my battlements, come you spirits

---

[6] This idea was popularised by R.W. Connell. The adjective hegemonic has been taken from Antonio Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony. The term refers to the patriarchal politics by which a certail social class attains a dominant position.

>   That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
>   And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
>   Of direst cruelty.   (Shakespeare, 29-30)

In this very context, Judith Butler's exploration of the idea of female subjectivity becomes extremely handy. In her path breaking work *Gender Trouble*, she argues: "The practical task that women face in trying to establish subjectivity through speech depends on their collective ability to cast off the reifications of sex imposed on them which deform them as partial or relative beings" (159). Lady Macbeth's desire to become valorous by unsexing herself can be considered to be her attempt of dismantling the objective disposition that is often associated with a woman. Lady Macbeth knows very well that in order to subvert the traditional gender roles she must use language (valour of tongue) as an agency of her planned subversion. Judith Butler is of the opinion that, "Domination occurs through a language which, in its plastic social action, creates a second order, artificial ontology, an illusion of difference, disparity, and, consequently, hierarchy that becomes social reality" (161). The language of violence becomes an ontological model for transgressing the inferior position of partiality that is imposed upon women by patriarchy. It is also interesting to note that when Macbeth is finding it hard to gather courage to go on with the crime, Lady Macbeth delivers the most fiery speech of the play:

>   Lady M. ... I have given suck, and know
>   How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
>   I would, while it was smiling in my face,
>   Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
>   And dash'd the brains out,   (Shakespeare, 42)

This fiery speech of Lady Macbeth is indeed enough to chastise Macbeth as he says, "I am settled" (Shakespeare 44). Lady Macbeth's cruelty is a strong reminder of characters such as Agamemnon, Goneril and Regan. Thus, these speeches of her, reveal how the dramatic space was enough to subvert the traditional gender roles for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

From the above discussion, it becomes prominent that the body of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is not functioning in the way they should. While talking about Lady Macbeth's fear about Macbeth's sexuality, we discussed in length about how Lady Macbeth might attempt to bring her husband out of a 'homosocial' (if not a homosexual) space. But, then again, through her raunchy speeches, Lady Macbeth herself problematises the heterosexual matrix. From her speeches, it becomes apparent that she wants to see her husband emerge as a champion man. Then again, she herself wants to be 'unsexed'. If both of them embark upon a journey of becoming masculine, the *Telos* of SEX—GENDER—DESIRE is visibly disturbed. It will not be wrong to claim that the bodies of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth disturb the 'specific codes of cultural coherence' (Butler, 178). Citing examples from Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger,* Butler asserts: "Any discourse that establishes the boundaries of the body serves the purpose of instating and naturalizing certain taboos regarding the appropriate limits, postures and modes of exchange that define what it is that constitute bodies" (178). Perhaps it's the unnatural functioning of their body that brings them close to each other; hence, breeding tremendous queer potential. This queer space is perhaps also reinforced by the prophecy of the witches where they drop a hint about Macbeth's lack of progeny. (However, Lady Macbeth concedes that she has given suck; but we have got no idea about the identity of the baby. Furthermore, the limited scope of this paper does not leave me with an opportunity of exploring these questions).

The obvious question that now remains is regarding Shakespeare's intention behind projecting such ambivalent gender discourse. In many of his works, including the sonnets,

Shakespeare has explored the potential of queerness. But none of them were worked out in great detail. Take for instance, this sonnet:

> A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted
> Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;
> A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted
> With shifting change, as is false women's fashion;
> An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,
> Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;
> A man in hue, all hues in his controlling,
> Much steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth.
> And for a woman wert thou first created;
> Till Nature, as she wrought thee, fell a-doting,
> And by addition me of thee defeated,
> By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.
> But since she prick'd thee out for women's pleasure,
> Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure.

(Sonnet 20)

In fact, the whole sonnet sequence has given birth to a lot of critical doubt as the sonnets are dedicated to a certain male 'fair youth' called Mr. W.H. Fascinating researches have unearthed fascinating reading of these sonnets. However, not a single research gives us a conclusive statement regarding the sexual orientation of the bard. This ambivalent queerness can be encountered with the witches as well. When Macbeth and Banquo meet them for the first time, Banquo exclaims: "you should be women,/ And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (Shakespeare 15). Using terminology from Queer theory, we might call that they represent what Judith Butler would call 'drag':

> In *Mother Camp: Female Impersonations in America*, anthropologist Esther Newton suggests that the structure of impersonation reveals one of the key fabricating mechanisms through which the social construction of gender takes place. I would suggest that drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity. (186)

Judith Butler further substantiates her argument by quoting from the work of Esther Newton:

> At its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, "appearance is an illusion". Drag says [Newton's curious personification] "my 'outside' appearance is feminine, but my essence 'inside' [the body] is masculine". At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; "my appearance 'outside' [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence 'inside' [myself] is feminine. (186)

The whole idea of 'appearance is an illusion' can find no better confirmation than the description of the witches, as provided by Banquo. Queer challenges the essentialist assumption about the body by Feminisms (especially second wave) and upholds the idea of contingency of identity (especially gender identity). If this idea can be applied, then the representation of the witches is nothing sort of a step towards a Queer matrix. In fact, in many other plays as well, this idea of the contingency of gender is explored by Shakespeare. Take for instance, the queer moments that the *Twelfth Night* has to offer when Viola disguises as Cesario. The audience who were getting accustomed to some of these representations would surely have not missed out on such hints provided by Shakespeare.

Conclusion:

At the end, however, the text, unfortunately enough, seems to be a reification of heteropatriarchal ideology. In spite of projecting and exploring the idea of a probable same-sex love (and various other alternatives), Shakespeare ultimately reveals that 'unnatural deeds do breed unnatural trouble' (141). These words of the Doctor, in Act V. Sc. I, seem to show the prejudice that Medical Science has often shown against the homosocial and the homoerotic tendencies. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes, "homosexuality is almost always conceived within the homophobic signifying economy as both uncivilized and unnatural" (180). Perhaps because of Lady Macbeth's 'unnatural' desire of 'unsex'ing herself, Macbeth believes that "she should have died hereafter". Macbeth's words are steeped in patriarchal prejudice. Like a typical patriarch, Macbeth, perhaps believes that Lady Macbeth has transgressed the boundaries that are imposed upon women. Macbeth's greatness is realised at the expense of Lady Macbeth's fall. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are both suffering the same sense of Nemesis. However, Macbeth's poetic composure at the end of the play reveals him to be a strong masculine agency, something that was doubted by his spouse. It also perhaps ironically reveals how short-sighted Lady Macbeth (in general women) is. Being a Christian, Macbeth is extremely conscious about how the polarization Good/Evil is made in *The Bible*. Perhaps this rooted sense of morality—revealed after the murder of Duncan—did not allow him to whole heartedly accept the change of gender roles. The way Lady Macbeth transgressed the limits imposed upon her is indeed an 'unnatural deed'. Her stance of unsexing herself and Macbeth has made her a *femme fatale* to the patriarchal critics. Macbeth is, perhaps, conscious how Lady Macbeth has disturbed the social equilibrium by resorting upon a valorous persona that generally does not suit the personality of a woman. Much like the witches, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth resorted to an identity where appearance became an illusion; and hence, they both should have died thereafter.

Works Cited:

Biggins, Dennis. "Sexuality, Witchcraft and Violence in Macbeth". Shakespeare Criticism. Vol. 69. Ed. Lynn M. Zott. Detroit: Gale, 2003. (pp. 255-277).
Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
Same Sex Desire in the English Renaissance. Ed. Kenneth Borris. New York: Routledge, 2005.
Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Ed. Kenneth Muir. London: Arden, 2013.