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Who is Afraid of Lady Macbeth and Queen Cleopatra? An Intrepid Interpretation

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Abstract:

The paper titled “Who is Afraid of Lady Macbeth and Queen Cleopatra? An Intrepid Interpretation” tries to explore and reinterpret the most tainted heroines of Shakespeare as epitomes of exotic femininity. The critical approaches have always rendered them as either a curse upon motherhood or manipulative seductress. This paper cuts across such biased criticism and derogatory perspectives and renders them as strong personalities capable of following their dreams and adhering to their feminine urges thereby jeopardizing all sorts of patriarchal norms. In my pursuit to reinterpret them as women of courage and utter steadiness, I will be incorporating the readings of feminist theorists like Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Adrienne Rich, Luce Irigaray, Gilbert and Gubar etc. to vindicate my viewpoints.

Keywords: Postcolonial feminism, Shakespearean heroines, femme fatale, re-interpreting Shakespeare

Lady Macbeth and Queen Cleopatra are the most tainted of all Shakespearean heroines. They are regarded as femmes’ fatales leading to the death and destruction of humanity just like their ancestor Eve. These two ladies can be well regarded as icons of “exotic” femininity. Lady Macbeth’s wish to “unsex” herself to succeed in her ambitious attempt stands in stark contrast with Queen Cleopatra’s dangerous female sexuality. Critics have despised both these women throughout history and have interpreted them with the most derogatory perspectives. Cleopatra is nothing but a manipulative seductress who is treated more as a sexual object rather than a human being. Even the famous poet, T. S. Eliot refers Cleopatra as a “thing”. The critical approaches towards this Queen of Egypt has been coloured by the sexist assumptions. However, Lady Macbeth is the most intriguing of all. She not only lacks femininity but she is a curse upon motherhood as well. Hazlitt said about Lady Macbeth, “She is a great bad woman, whom we hate, but whom we fear more than we hate”. This fear comes from her utter steadiness.

In my paper I will be analysing these “tainted” heroines from a positive feminist perspective so as to cut across the biased criticism that has been laid down so forth against them. I will re-interpret them as women of the world who have their own aspirations to follow and the courage to assert them accordingly. They are strong personalities with the ability to adhere to their feminine urges thereby destroying all patriarchal norms.

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Queen Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth are the two most complex female characters created by Shakespeare. Unlike Portia, Rosalind, Juliet, Miranda et al they are neither embodiments of love and romance nor do they exhibit the presence of feminine soft-heartedness. On the contrary, they are epitomes of sexuality and deadly ambitions, outwitting all at once and forever. If Queen Cleopatra's inconsistency baffles us, Lady Macbeth's ambitious nature horrifies us. We are left to contemplate how Shakespeare juxtaposed such poles apart characters in his docile, delicate realm of heroines. Critics and authors of all ages have manipulated these two female characters according to their suitability, thereby trying to reinforce and retain the age old concept of womanhood and female virtue. Their masculinity and steadfastness have drawn negative tirades and derogatory remarks.

Antony and Cleopatra is replete with negative epithets like – “Rare Egyptian”, “enchanted queen”, “witch”, “serpent of old Nile”, “wrangling queen”, “Royal wench” – to describe or at times apostrophize Cleopatra, the legendary queen of Egypt. The epithets themselves testify the existence of extreme duality in Cleopatra's nature. She is, at once, an excellent antithesis, full of contradiction and coquettishness to an extreme which triggers off both hatred and admiration at the same time. Cleopatra is presented as a splendid anomaly of nature, but once we start analysing her beyond the apparentness, we decipher a totally charismatic and magnetic persona, who keeps attracting us irrespective of all her guileful vices.

Egypt, a part of the Dark Continent, has always been regarded as the land of black magic and death. For Rome/Romans, Egypt is nothing but an underworld of filth and lust and anyone belonging to or inhabiting this world is looked down upon as “gypsy”. Hence, Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt, is no more than a ‘gypsy queen’ in the eyes of the Romans. Cleopatra is vastly portrayed as a scheming strumpet bringing about Antony's downfall. The Romans fear Cleopatra because they perceive her as doubly “Other” – foreign and feminine. For the West, East has always been regarded as “Other”. In a similar vein, “woman” is regarded as “Other” in respect to man. Thus Cleopatra is twice removed – as a part of the East and to top it she belongs to the “other sex”. But what threatens one more is her erotic power which she adeptly uses to allure men, debasing morality and ethics without any qualm. She is widely criticized for her purported lust which seems to emanate power and passion – an inherent part of her character. To this is added her melodramatic breakdowns and swooning at the slightest moment which endows her with a multifaceted personality.

In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth's attitude is in par with Queen Cleopatra's. Critic Judith Cook explains – “Lady Macbeth has continued to intrigue and puzzle most commentators and critics over the centuries”. Her character is intriguing in that she is at once strong, persuasive and committed. She is cold and calculating to perform the deeds she is planning. Her desires are absolutely firm and essentially masculine. Her words are harsh, poignant and completely insensitive; and for the first three acts she is vindictive, controlling and ruthless. No doubt that she loves Macbeth and is willing to help him become the king of Scotland, but when he refuses to go any further with the execution of their planning of regicide, Lady Macbeth's desire for the throne wins over her love for her husband. Here Lady Macbeth turns out to be a master manipulator. She goads Macbeth into murdering King Duncan, and “chastise[s] with

the valour of my [her] tongue” (1.5.25) every fear and doubt he has about performing the deed. She even chides and whips at Macbeth’s masculinity and reminds him that – “What beast was’t then/ That made you break this enterprise to me?” (1.7.47-49). It becomes evident that the first seed of such gruesome plan was sown by none other than Macbeth himself.

Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* illustrates how sexual politics play its part at various levels of the society. Though Millett’s mission is to debunk male writers, I will mould her concept of sexual politics to exhibit that Shakespeare’s tainted heroines are placed in a different pedestal by the author himself. My aim is to promote a positive image of both Queen Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth. This paper is meant to expose the patriarchal prejudice against women and also the sexual politics that works through the “socialization” of both sexes to basic patriarchal politics with regard to temperament, role and status. Temperament involves the formation of human personality along stereotyped lines of sex category, based on the needs and values of the dominant group and dictated by what its members cherish in themselves and find convenient in subordinates. The presence of aggression, intelligence, force and efficacy in the male; passivity, ignorance, docility, virtue and ineffectuality in female are regarded as normal. The sex role decrees a consonant and highly elaborate code of conduct, gesture and attitude for each sex. This universality of sexual code has prevailed in an unquestionable manner and the image of women as we know is created by men to suit their needs. These needs, however, spring from fear of the ‘Otherness’ of woman. It is this “Otherness” which is so overtly evident in Queen Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth. These two legendary women have defied and disrupted the conduct code of their sex. They are not passive, docile, ignorant or virtuous; on the contrary they are vehemently violent and aggressive, active, intelligent and full of vices – if we are to measure them as per the patriarchal yardstick. They breakthrough every moral code as expected and apt for women. Queen Cleopatra exercises her power of beauty (a gift of Nature) to seduce and allure men, of valour, like Mark Antony; while Lady Macbeth uses her oratory power to coax Macbeth, the ‘Valour’s minion’. Both Antony and Macbeth use their military prowess in the battlefield and are loaded with applauses. Their talents are recognized as great job done. But when we take into account Cleopatra’s “beauty” and Lady Macbeth’s “oration” – we dare not recognize their talents; instead they are labelled as “strumpet” and “fourth witch” respectively. Critics and commentators overlook the reality that if Queen Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth are the cause for the downfall of Antony and Macbeth; then the latter two are more responsible for their own downfall. These two heroic generals turn out to be so weak in character that they easily succumb to Cleopatra’s alluring beauty and Lady Macbeth’s questioning of Macbeth’s “manliness”. The acts of Queen Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth are openly done. But we tend to forget that Antony agrees to marry Octavia for his personal and political gain, though he very well knows that his pleasure lies in the East. We never question Antony for such deceiving act, but we do accuse Queen Cleopatra for seducing Antony. In a similar vein, once King Duncan is murdered, Lady Macbeth’s existence evaporates from Macbeth’s life. He didn’t need any of Lady Macbeth’s advice of how to rule his newly begotten kingdom. In fact, Macbeth’s hunger for power makes his mind more twisted, crooked and vile. The consequences followed by King Duncan’s death only reveal the reality of Macbeth’s original sins. The gall within him is more poisonous and infectious than Lady Macbeth’s.

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The fact that links both of these women is that they not only dare to question the authority (of patriarchy) but also challenge them right away. If Lady Macbeth directly questions Macbeth's masculinity, Queen Cleopatra simply sexually assaults the male-dominated Rome through Mark Antony – symbolising Roman pride and valour. This challenging and questioning of the authority is in resonance with Luce Irigaray's theory of "strategic essentialism" or "mimesis" – one of the most famous and critical tool of feminism. According to this theory, the stereotypical views are to be put into question. She believes that by "ignoring" those views one can never overcome the harmful effects. True to the methodology of psychoanalysis, negative can be negated only through exposition and demystification. She employs "mimesis" because she believes that a "second sex" cannot exist in its own right, and hence it ought to be challenged. The goal of "mimesis" is to problematize the male definition of femininity to such a degree that a new definition of, and, an embodied subject "position" for women can emerge.

Like Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, too, focuses on the myths associated with womanhood in the representation of female sexuality in the Western culture. Cixous takes up the myth of the Medusa. In *The Laugh of the Medusa* Cixous speaks of feminine repression which results from phallogentric structures inherent in our culture's discourse. To illustrate these repressions, Cixous depicts an image of a dark unexplored room. This room is representative of female language and sexuality. Women fear to explore these two areas as a result of both male warnings and dominance. She explains that if women will question their fears, if they will turn on a light, they will discover that there is nothing to be frightened or intimidated by. They will discover that all their fears and shortcomings were based on images and standards created by men.

Anne Koedt in her essay *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm* explains that men have created myth only to force her to feel inadequate and incomplete. Women have the capability to dispel such horrifying and obnoxious myths by discarding and questioning their validity. The truth that Irigaray, Cixous and Koedt point out is that the power of the myth lies in the degree to which the myth is believed. Man has no power to repress – he is constantly in fear of losing his power and authority and thus tries to confine woman under the façade of myths, culture, traditions. Once woman stops believing, things will fall apart.

Shakespeare depicts his heroines as women full of ambitions who have the ultimate courage to assert their aspirations. In *Antony and Cleopatra* Queen Cleopatra is in love with Antony and she never leaves a chance to assert her love, no matter what the world thinks of her. Out of love she follows Antony to the war against Caesar at sea, and stands by him with her naval fleet. Critics have pointed out that Antony's forces lose the battle when Queen Cleopatra's ship flees and Antony's follows, leaving the rest of the fleet vulnerable. Some even claim it as Cleopatra's "feminine weakness" which drives her away from the battlefield midway; and above all her presence is seen as a distraction to Antony's military adeptness. This is prominent in Enobarbus' conversation with Queen Cleopatra in Act-III Sc-7 where he tries to dissuade Queen Cleopatra's venture at the sea battle. But we never account the reality that in those days Queen Cleopatra dares to shoulder a masculine task of going to a battle

instead of opting for a luxurious retreat amid the veils of femininity. She is adamant and will “not stay behind” and decries Enobarbus’ regarding her presence at the war as “not fit”.

In the entire play, neither Shakespeare nor Queen Cleopatra vent out the reason behind her sudden retreat from the battlefield. But through and through critics have only assumed things in their own way and held Queen Cleopatra responsible for such a great defeat in Antony’s life. However, none of us dare to assume or accept the situation from a different angle. It is Antony who is responsible for his defeat in the war. Antony’s following Queen Cleopatra’s retreat in the midway only reaffirms his irresponsibility as a general of his army and his failure in leadership. His valour and craftsmanship as a military personnel is put to question – in short, his so-called “manliness/masculinity” is questioned.

In a similar fashion, Lady Macbeth strums the right chord of questioning his manliness which triggers off Macbeth to commit regicide. Though Lady Macbeth is often regarded as the “fourth witch” in *Macbeth*, we tend to overlook Macbeth’s latent ambitions. In Lady Macbeth’s speech in Act-I Sc-7 we are made clear the reality that it is Macbeth who once aspired to wear the crown of Scotland. His speedy words to Lady Macbeth about the foretelling of the three witches only confirm his hidden passion. If he is so clear of conscience, then why is he seen so wrapped with the thought of the witches’ words. He could have easily dismissed the forecasting of those anomalies of nature. Macbeth’s urgency is the cause which rekindles Lady Macbeth’s long-forgotten dream of becoming the Queen of Scotland. She does things as befits an ideal wife. Lady Macbeth meticulously plans to help Macbeth succeed in his mission. Nonetheless critics and commentators find faults with Lady Macbeth only, while Macbeth is given the title of “tragic hero”. If Lady Macbeth is charged with greed, so is Macbeth himself. Both are partners in the crime. But nobody cross examines Macbeth’s greedy and galling mind. He never gives vent to his real intentions and apparently it seems that it’s because of Lady Macbeth that he is bear-baited at the end, bringing his death in an ignominious way. On the verge of committing regicide, Macbeth tends to procrastinate when Lady Macbeth’s whipping off his male ego helps him sail through the moment and the deed is done. At this juncture, Lady Macbeth’s evil mind is scanned and despised. She is heralded as the “fourth witch”, the master manipulator who paves the road to Macbeth’s doom. From a feminist perspective, one can analyse the deed from a different angle. How can a great warrior like Macbeth be so easily manipulated to commit such a crime? Thus not only his “manliness”, even his strength and courage and all those glorifying epithets are put under the scanner. Is he so “weak” as to succumb to such evil intentions? As per the norms of the world “weakness” has always been regarded as a “feminine” asset; then how it is possible to attribute such lowly aspect to Macbeth, a masculine figure. Once again the patriarchal authority diverts their fingers to the “weaker sex”. The male-dominated world confers Macbeth’s “weakness” on Lady Macbeth and accuses her for bringing about Macbeth’s downfall followed by a tragic death. Amid everything we ignore the fact that once the deed is done, Lady Macbeth’s presence in her husband’s life gradually decreases. She is only depicted as a somnambulistic patient under treatment and who at the end commits suicide. Macbeth’s attitude towards his wife only reaffirms the utilitarian mind-set of the male partner. Once crowned as the King of Scotland, he turns into a scheming villain who is all set

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to combat with Macduff and his army before they could get hold of the true story behind King Duncan's death. Macbeth's later game-plans were totally under his control; to be more precise, he didn't need any manipulator to execute his evil intentions. Macbeth becomes the sole master of his game.

These two legendary women have been charged for being inhumane too. Whereas Queen Cleopatra is portrayed as a woman charged with sexual passion bothers us, Lady Macbeth's "unsex"-ing herself unnerves us. In both ways, they turn out to be incapable of embracing "womanhood" or "motherhood" as their sole destination. Lady Macbeth's monstrosity devoid of any motherly or feminine instinct comes to the fore through her "unsex" speech in Act-I Sc-5. The image of dashing the head of the baby suckling at her breast just for the sake of keeping her words has aroused much controversy about her humanity as well as femininity. No matter what, a woman is destined to be a mother and it becomes obvious that all women are born with motherly instincts of selfless love, care and concern. But Lady Macbeth's speech has sent shockwaves across the globe shaking the very foundation of the age-old concept of motherhood. Shame upon her – cries the critics – she has disgraced the fairer sex. It is at this juncture where I would like to bring in some readings of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*. This classic of Rich tells the tales of "motherhood" without any tinge of romantic appraisal towards it. Motherhood is regarded as the final and sole destination of any woman all across the globe. It is here where her identity begins and ends. Adrienne Rich very subtly cuts across the romanticized myths and aura which have all these days been draped around this golden-cage termed "motherhood". When Adrienne Rich was once asked – "Don't you ever write poems about your children?" She had made it clear that – "For me, poetry was where I lived as no one's mother" (Rich: 31). A woman is first an "individual" and then her relationships extend to being a daughter, a sister, a wife, and finally a mother. But we tend to forget this reality in a woman's life and rant her whenever she fails to or neglects her ultimate mission in life – to become a mother. The experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have both been channelled to serve male interests; behaviour which threatens the institutions of marriage and motherhood, such as adultery, illegitimacy, abortion, lesbianism is considered deviant or criminal. Thus in the eyes of this male dominated world Queen Cleopatra is sexually promiscuous while Lady Macbeth turns out to be a monstrous mother. Both tend to threaten the institutions of marriage and motherhood and hence disparaged and disdained. Nonetheless they are individuals with humane attributes. Time and again, Queen Cleopatra is seen too concerned with the transfer of her empire and legacy to her own heirs. She even contemplates on betraying Antony just to assure the well-being of her successors – which we can very well assume to be her children. On the other hand in a fit of rage Lady Macbeth does think of dashing her child's brain; but in reality she is too full of emotions. The momentary revelation of her humanity becomes prominent when she dismisses to murder King Duncan while asleep. She asks Macbeth to complete the deed because the sleeping king resembles her father which arouses pity in her heart and she steps back from killing him. This act of her only proves that she is not totally devoid of human emotions. Irrespective of all evils, both these women possess the innate humane emotions of love, care and concern.

The final phase of the plays and this paper will call forth the readings of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Though this book looks at the literary tradition of female writers, but it also does portray a distinct character of an individual female. Gilbert and Gubar clearly illustrate how the "eternal feminine" is assumed to be a vision of angelic beauty and sweetness during all these centuries. The ideal woman is seen as a passive, docile, and above all a selfless creature. But behind the angel lurks the monster. This "monster woman" is the one who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own terms, who has a story to tell. In short, any woman who rejects and discards the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her, is labelled as "monster". Gilbert and Gubar mention characters like Shakespeare's Goneril and Regan, Thackeray's Becky Sharp, as well as the array of traditional mythical figures of "terrible sorceress-goddesses as the Sphinx, Medusa, Circe, Kali, Delilah and Salome, all of whom possess duplicitous arts that allow them both to seduce and to steal male generative energy" (Gilbert and Gubar: 34). To this entire trail are added Queen Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth. The monster woman is "duplicitous" and her consciousness is opaque to man. Hence, she is dreaded by the male authority. Anything beyond the reach of patriarchy is difficult for them to control and suppress and accordingly they tend to regard these women as "mad" and try to confine them. This is exactly what happens with Queen Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth. In Rome, Queen Cleopatra remains to be an enigma and when Caesar finally succeeds in captivating her he not only confiscates her wealth and power but even thinks of keeping her in Rome for the rest of her life. To inflate his pride and valour he plans to parade Queen Cleopatra through the streets of Rome and retain her in his country. Lady Macbeth meets a similar fate with a variation. After King Duncan's death she is confined within the four walls of her room in her own castle. Macbeth is seen desperate to confine this madwoman to prevent the divulgence of the truth of King Duncan's death through her incoherent mutterings. In both the plays, the male authority tries hard to detain femininity and keep them under vigilance and curb their female energy so as to perpetuate their own masculinity and power. Their very gest of confining these women only confirms the fact that the world perceives them as "madwomen" who are ought to be locked up in the attic. Unfortunately, both the authorities fail in their mission. Lady Macbeth and Queen Cleopatra, at the end, commit suicide, and break free from all sorts of patriarchal boundaries. Even in death they surpass all authorities, leaving them dejected and defeated; and they have and will continue to intrigue and puzzle our sensibility and remain as an enigma forever.

The great tradition has been to deem Queen Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth as culprits who are instrumental in the damnation of heroes like Mark Antony and Macbeth respectively. But this traditional outlook fails to realise that a human being hangs between in doubt of everything and is placed on the "isthmus of a middle state" of whether to prefer body or mind, to act wise or not, to be sceptic or stoic. An individual is an amalgamation of good and evil, positive and negative, strength and weakness and that's why Alexander Pope has aptly said that human being is "Created half to rise, and half to fall; / Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all; / Sole judge of Truth, in endless Error hurl'd: / The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!" These qualities are an integral part of every human being. Then why is it that when it comes to "woman" we always look at the grey shades of her being instead of looking at the

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brighter ones? In this paper I have tried to represent both Queen Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth from a different perspective with feminist approach and I believe that once we start scrutinizing them as “individual” instead of as “woman”, we will be able to render them as human beings with humane attributes. At the end everything is embedded in our own thought process; the person remains the same only our individual perspectives change; else why had Milton said that “The mind is its own place, and in itself/ Can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n”.

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