

## **An Analysis of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* from a Feminist Perspective**

Feminism has been influential in various aspects of society for many decades. With the beginning of women's emancipation, humanity has progressed not only in political and social life but also in science, culture, and literary studies. A feminist standpoint in literature research points to the limited portrayal of the characters in literary works, which showed the world mainly from a patriarchal perspective. Women in these works often had only a complementary character, appearing as oppressed figures. Shakespeare (1810) himself declared, "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players" (p.34). Women were not players, because their roles were played on the stage of theaters by men. From feminist perspective, many Shakespeare's male characters can be considered misogynistic. The lines of the male heroes in Shakespeare's works that demean women do not speak in favor of misogyny, but rather of weakness brought on by emotion. The same characters worship women, and fall into grief at their loss. This suggests that Shakespeare's characters are psychologically finely weighted within his time, and female characters are presented with strong-willed qualities, including Lady Macbeth.

### **A Feminist Perspective on Shakespeare's Characters**

Feminist studies of Shakespeare's works began to appear as part of the second-wave feminist movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States. This movement gained popularity since the female image in English patriarchal society had distinct features in the works of Shakespeare. Speaking about Shakespeare, the authors claim that he "managed to persuade generations of readers that masculinity was not only the feature of a male character" (Amiri & Khoshkam, 2017.) Nevertheless, Shakespeare was neither a feminist nor a misogynist, but rather an observer, poetically reproducing reality. In order to maintain the authenticity of the author's ideas, it is important in feminist studies of Shakespeare's works to give attention to the nature of the

protagonists, and not only to focus on the inequalities of the society of the time. This will prevent a false justification of Lady Macbeth against the background of the repressive patriarchal society, which reduced the idea of women to a single role—the continuer of the race, the reproductive mechanism. However, one cannot deny responsibility for the crimes committed, because there are the personality and decisions behind them.

### **The Figure of the Woman in Shakespeare's *Macbeth***

In *Macbeth*, the problem of the lust for power is very explicit. It is what drives the whole story. However, it was not only Macbeth who desired power but even more his wife. Power can be considered as the ability to make decisions and do actions that others will execute to achieve the desired result. A woman in Shakespeare's era, endowed with the ability to influence and thus determine a man's actions, is seen as powerful. In modernity, this is not unusual, and a woman can make any decisions on her own, more and more often performing as a leader. Ferdous (2017) states, that Lady Macbeth “who being a female sometimes exhibits more masculinity than Macbeth” (p. 22.) In Shakespeare's time, such traits in a woman were a representation of masculinity and were considered unnatural.

However, Lady Macbeth desired power so much that she was ready to commit murder. On the one hand, this shows the greed and viciousness of the heroine. On the other hand, because men did not get power in the same way as women, it is possible to consider Lady Macbeth as a determined and ambitious woman. Had her power been directed in a different direction, her portrayal might have been comparable to the canonical images of the world's strongest women.

### **Relationship between Men and Women in *Macbeth***

Macbeth differs from other Shakespeare's characters. The marriage of two villains is in some way equal and, according to Smith (2017), "Macbeth engages with his wife as a partner and co-

conspirator" (p. 106.) She leads him to decisions, and he accepts her opinion as an equal. Their marriage corresponds, in relative terms, to the picture of the modern relationship model.

Nevertheless, all that both characters have done transcends notions of a normal relationship. Lady Macbeth's mental disorder, which led to her death, and Macbeth's greed in some ways make it impossible to assess their gender equality or inequality.

Shakespeare shows men and women both strong and weak, having emotions and their expression. Lady Macbeth even believes that her husband is too kind, which in principle contradicts the idea of man's strength and woman's kindness back then. The scholars point out other play characters, like Macduff, whose "demeanor of feeling places a wealthier meaning of man than only that of a male fit for determined bravery in fight" (Amiri & Khoshkam, 2017.) This suggests that the stereotypical, in modern terms, views of the relationships of Shakespeare's time, is described very profoundly, without relying only on the standard patterns in the description of genders observed at that time.

### **Gender Roles and Identity in *Macbeth***

Although Shakespeare understood the underlying nature of man and woman, he metaphorically portrayed the unnaturalness of such female power and strength, which Lady Macbeth acquired by renouncing her own femininity. Shakespeare (2016) poetically wrote about loss of her feminine denial: "unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top full / Of direst cruelty" (p.17.) The beards of Witches also indicate their gender uncertainty, because they have supernatural powers, Lady Macbeth's "thickening of blood and elimination of menstrual cycle" (Ferdous, 2017) starts after her wish to become strong and cruel. These metaphors connected to excessive female power are associated with masculine features.

The unhealthy desire for power leads Lady Macbeth first to insanity, then to loss of feminine

traits, and finally to death. Her plea to replace the milk in her breasts with poison, as Ferdous (2017) states, “do not allow this woman to be considered as a human being” (p.23). It is possible to interpret this metaphoric form as Shakespeare's assessment of the image of the woman. Playwright does not deny her strength, but her excessive desire for power leads both her and Macbeth to madness and death.

### **Conclusion**

To summarize, *Macbeth* is very controversial from a feminist point of view. On the one hand, Shakespeare describes gender in a non-stereotypical and subtle way, but on the other hand, he sees the excessive strength of women as being unnatural and presents it as a sign of masculinity. This play should be interpreted ambiguously because everyone can draw their own conclusions, which may not be in line with the author's original idea. It is important to remember that feminist evaluations often forget the tragic events associated with the atrocities of both characters, and consider only the social background of society at that time. Nevertheless, feminist literary criticism of Shakespeare's works has opened up many important issues of the social history of the Elizabethan era, contributing to a better understanding of many details of the behavior and relationships of the characters in Shakespeare's texts. Author's work is imbued with a humanism that presupposes a priori equality between people regardless of their gender identity.

## References

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