



FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN SHAKESPEARE’S MACBETH AND OTHELLO: A COMPARISON OF LADY MACBETH AND DESDEMONA.

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ABSTRACT :

This study examines the portrayal of female characters in Shakespeare’s “Macbeth” and “Othello”, focusing on a comparative analysis of Lady Macbeth and Desdemona. By analyzing their roles, characteristics, and interactions with male characters, the research reveals Shakespeare’s diverse depiction of women. Lady Macbeth is presented as a forceful, ambitious figure who defies traditional gender expectations, while Desdemona embodies virtue and obedience, ultimately suffering under a patriarchal society. This paper dredges into how these character portrayals reflect and critique the gender dynamics and societal norms of Elizabethan England. Utilizing feminist theory and historical context, the analysis provides insight into the complexities and significance of these characters within Shakespeare’s works.

Keywords- female characters, ambitious, virtuous, gender norms, feminist critique, power dynamics, social hierarchy, Lady Macbeth, Desdemona, patriarchy, gender roles.

INTRODUCTION :

William Shakespeare’s works are famous for their detailed characters and complex plots, giving us insight into the social and cultural world of the Elizabethan Era. Among his many plays, “*Macbeth*” and “*Othello*” are significant tragedies that explore themes like ambition, power, jealousy, and betrayal. At the heart of these stories are two important female characters: Lady Macbeth and Desdemona. Even with the limitations placed on women during their time, these characters play crucial roles in their stories, offering rich material for examining how women are represented in Shakespeare’s work.

In “*Macbeth*”, Lady Macbeth stands out as a powerful character, challenging traditional gender roles with her ambition and relentless pursuit of power. She shows traits that were usually reserved for male characters in that period. However, her eventual descent into madness highlights the dangers of breaking societal norms, giving us a complex view of her character.

On the other hand, Desdemona on “*Othello*” embodies innocence and virtue. She is deeply loyal and loving, which contrasts sharply with the jealousy and deceit surrounding her. Even though she may seem passive, Desdemona’s actions significantly impact the story, bringing attention to issues of racial and gender inequality. Her tragic end highlights the vulnerability and mistreatment of women in a male dominated society.

This paper aims to compare and contrast Lady Macbeth and Desdemona, exploring how Shakespeare portrays these characters to reflect and critique the gender dynamics of this time. By looking closely at their roles, motivations, and outcomes, this study seeks to reveal the broader implications of female agency and representation in Shakespeare’s tragedies. Through detailed analysis of key scenes and modern critical perspectives, this research will deepen our understanding of how Shakespeare’s female characters navigate the limits placed on them, enriching the discussion on gender in literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT :

1) THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ELIZABETHAN SOCIETY

In Elizabethan England women were expected to adhere to stringent societal norms. They were largely confined to domestic roles, with little to no autonomy in political or economic spheres. Their primary duties revolved around managing households and bearing children, with virtues like chastity, obedience, and modesty were highly prized.

Shakespeare’s works, however often presented women in more complex and varied roles, reflecting both contemporary views and his own imaginative interpretations. By giving his female characters depth and agency, Shakespeare subverted some of the rigid gender expectations of his time, providing audiences with nuanced portrayals that resonated beyond the stage.

2) SHAKESPEARE’S APPROACH TO FEMALE CHARACTERS

Shakespeare's female characters frequently navigate the constraints imposed upon them by society. While some like Desdemona, embody traditional virtues, others, like Lady Macbeth, challenge the defying gender norms. This duality allows Shakespeare to explore a wide spectrum of human experience, presenting women not just as passive figures, but as active agents in their own right.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS :

1. LADY MACBETH

Lady Macbeth is introduced as a powerful and ambitious figure, driven by a desire for power and status. Her initial appearance is marked by a resolute determination to see her husband ascend to the throne, even if it requires moral compromise. This ambition sets the stage for her pivotal role in the plays unfolding tragedy. Lady Macbeth's ambition is evident from her first soliloquy, where she calls upon the spirits to "unsex" her, seeking to rid herself of any feminine weakness that might hinder her ruthless pursuit of power. Her manipulation of Macbeth, challenging his masculinity and resolve, further highlights her formidable will. Through her actions, Lady Macbeth subverts the traditional passive female role, taking an active and dominant stance in the couple's quest for power.

Her character is a stark contrast to the conventional portrayal of women in her time. She exhibits traits typically associated with masculinity, such as assertiveness, aggression, and a strategic mind. Her famous lines, "look like th' innocent flower, but be the serpent under't," encapsulate her cunning and duplicity. However, her subversion of gender norms comes at a great personal cost, leading to her psychological unraveling.

As the play progresses, the consequences of Lady Macbeth's actions begin to weigh heavily on her. She experiences intense guilt and starts to lose her sanity. Her sleepwalking scene, where she tries to wash imaginary blood from her hands, reveals her deep remorse and mental unraveling. Her psychological decline is a powerful commentary on the destructive effects of unchecked ambition.

2. DESDEMONA

Desdemona is one of the central characters in Shakespeare's play "*Othello*". She is portrayed as a beautiful, virtuous, and strong-willed woman who defies societal norms by marrying Othello, a Moor and a general in the Venetian army. Throughout the play, Desdemona's character embodies innocence, loyalty, and moral integrity, making her a stark contrast to the jealousy and deceit that ultimately lead to her tragic demise.

Desdemona's innocence and purity are fundamental aspects of her character. From the beginning, she is depicted as a loving and faithful wife who genuinely cares for Othello. Her love is pure and unwavering, and she remains loyal to Othello even in the face of his growing mistrust and irrational jealousy. Desdemona's innocence is further highlighted by her interactions with other characters, where she consistently displays kindness and compassion. In *Othello*, Desdemona is often associated with light and goodness. Her white handkerchief, which becomes a significant symbol in the play, represents her chastity and fidelity. This handkerchief, given to her by Othello as a token of his love, is manipulated by Iago to incite Othello's jealousy.

The handkerchief's symbolism of purity and trust underscores the tragic irony of Desdemona's fate as she becomes a victim of false accusations and misplaced jealousy. Desdemona's character is also marked by her defiance of societal expectations. In the context of Elizabethan society, where women were expected to be obedient and subservient, Desdemona's actions are particularly bold. She chooses to marry Othello against her father Brabantio's wishes, demonstrating her independence and strong will. This decision highlights her courage and determination to follow her heart, even when it means challenging the norms of her society.

Comparison of Lady Macbeth and Desdemona :

Desdemona and Lady Macbeth are two of the most notable female characters in Shakespeare's works. Despite their contrasting personalities and roles, both characters play crucial parts in their respective plays, *Othello* and *Macbeth*. Desdemona embodies innocence, virtue, and loyalty, while Lady Macbeth represents ambition, power, and manipulation. This comparison will help us to know about their character traits, roles in their narratives, interactions with male characters, and the themes they represent. The various comparisons between these two characters are:

- 1) Desdemona is portrayed as pure, loyal, and compassionate. She defies societal norms by marrying Othello, a Moor, out of genuine love. Her innocence and virtue are highlighted throughout the play, making her tragic end even more poignant. Desdemona is characterized by her kindness and steadfastness, remaining devoted to Othello despite his growing jealousy and eventual violence. In contrast, Lady Macbeth is ambitious, ruthless, and manipulative. She is driven by a desire for power and is willing to go to any lengths to achieve it. Lady Macbeth is initially portrayed as strong and resolute, urging Macbeth to murder King Duncan to fulfill the witches' prophecy. Her famous plea to the spirits to "unsex me here" reflects her rejection of traditional feminine qualities in favor of traits she associates with power and cruelty.
- 2) Desdemona's role in "*Othello*", centers on her relationship with Othello and her victimization by the male characters around her. Her love and loyalty to Othello drive much of the play's action, but she becomes a tragic victim of Iago's schemes and Othello's jealousy. Desdemona's character highlights themes of innocence and the destructive power of jealousy, emphasizing her vulnerability in a male-dominated world. Lady Macbeth's role in "*Macbeth*" is pivotal to the play's exploration of ambition and power. She is the driving force behind Macbeth's ascent to the throne, manipulating him into committing regicide. Her character embodies the corrupting influence of unchecked ambition and the psychological consequences of guilt. As the play progresses, Lady Macbeth's initial strength gives way to madness, underscoring the moral and psychological costs of their actions.
- 3) Desdemona's interactions with Othello are marked by love, trust, and ultimately, tragedy. She defies her father and societal expectations to marry Othello, demonstrating her independence and strong will. Despite Othello's growing suspicion and jealousy, Desdemona remains loyal and loving, pleading for his understanding and forgiveness. Her tragic death at Othello's hands highlights the destructive power of jealousy and the innocence of her character. Lady Macbeth's relationship with Macbeth is characterized by manipulation and ambition. She challenges Macbeth's masculinity and resolve, pushing him to murder Duncan and seize the throne. Her influence over Macbeth is profound, shaping his actions and the course of the play. However, as Macbeth becomes more consumed by his ambition and paranoia, the power dynamic shifts, and Lady Macbeth becomes increasingly isolated and tormented by guilt.

4) Desdemona represents themes of innocence, virtue, and the vulnerability of the good in a corrupt world. Her purity and unwavering loyalty to Othello highlight the tragic consequences of jealousy and mistrust. Desdemona's character serves as a poignant critique of the destructive power of false accusations and the tragic impact of malevolent influence. Lady Macbeth embodies themes of ambition, power, and the psychological consequences of moral transgression. Her initial rejection of traditional gender roles and her ruthless pursuit of power highlight the corrupting influence of unchecked ambition. Lady Macbeth's descent into madness and eventual demise underscore the inescapable burden of guilt and the ultimate futility of their quest for power.

5) Despite the turmoil around her, Desdemona remains emotionally steady. Her love for Othello and her moral integrity never waver, even as she faces wrongful accusations and violence. This emotional steadiness contrasts sharply with the psychological unraveling seen in Lady Macbeth, highlighting Desdemona's strength in virtue. Lady Macbeth's psychological complexity is marked by her rapid decline from a position of strength to one of profound mental instability. Her initial ruthlessness and manipulation give way to guilt and madness, as evidenced by her sleepwalking scene and obsessive hand-washing. This decline underscores the psychological toll of her actions and the moral consequences of ambition.

6) Desdemona largely conforms to the traditional gender roles of her time, embodying the virtues expected of women, such as obedience, chastity, and loyalty. However, her decision to marry Othello against her father's wishes demonstrates her independence and courage. Desdemona's strength lies in her moral fortitude and resilience, even in the face of adversity and false accusations. Lady Macbeth actively rejects traditional feminine qualities, seeking to adopt traits she associates with power and masculinity. Her invocation to the spirits to "unsex" her highlights her desire to shed any perceived weakness and embrace ruthlessness. Lady Macbeth's subversion of gender norms is a central aspect of her character, challenging the expectations of women in her society.

7) The handkerchief in Othello symbolizes Desdemona's fidelity and Othello's misguided trust. Its loss and misinterpretation by Othello, manipulated by Iago, become the catalyst for the tragedy. The handkerchief's symbolism highlights themes of jealousy, trust, and innocence. The imaginary blood on Lady Macbeth's hands symbolizes her guilt and the irreversible nature of her actions. Her obsessive attempts to wash away the blood reflect her overwhelming remorse and the psychological impact of her crimes. This symbolism underscores the themes of guilt and the moral consequences of ambition.

Conclusion :

The representations of Lady Macbeth and Desdemona in *Macbeth* and *Othello* provide rich insights into Shakespeare's exploration of gender and power. Lady Macbeth's embodiment of ambition and her challenge to traditional gender roles contrast sharply with Desdemona's portrayal of innocence and loyalty within societal expectations. Through these characters, Shakespeare not only reflects the gender dynamics of his time but also provides timeless commentary on the complexities of human nature and relationships. This comparative analysis reveals how both characters, despite their different approaches and outcomes, serve as pivotal figures in their respective narratives, offering profound insights into the roles and representations of women in Shakespearean drama.

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