

The Subalternese in *Macbeth*: Aggressive and Subversive Strains

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Abstract: *Macbeth*, one of the great tragedies by William Shakespeare, is remarkable for its deft and ingenious use of language. Particularly, the words that Shakespeare puts into the mouth of Lady Macbeth are of prime importance. The present paper aims at analyzing the language in the play inasmuch as it reflects certain subversive strategies employed by the protagonists against the patriarchy, which includes usurping the throne of the monarch as well as masculinity and male domination as confuted by a woman rising from the subaltern status. The paper shall probe into the several connotations and suggestions in the semantic of the dialogues written for Lady Macbeth. The status of women as subalterns will be examined as presented in the play vis-à-vis position and condition of women in the contemporary society of England. The paper investigates the role of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as having the subaltern status and overridden by their ambition they tend to attain the power.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, Macbeth, Subalterns, Post-colonialism

Macbeth, one of the great tragedies by William Shakespeare, offers a rich field of exploration of the recent concepts of the subaltern. However, the notion of the subaltern, as employed by Antonio Gramsci for the groups subjected to the hegemony or control of the dominant ruling classes, especially in the Marxist terms of political and socio-economic disparity, oppression, exploitation and marginalization, cannot be applied as such to the analysis of *Macbeth*, but, at least, the subaltern as meaning 'subordinate or inferior rank or position' and as referring to a 'struggle for power' can be discussed for sure. In the present paper, I have used the term "subaltern" in its literal sense, as etymologically it denotes one who is subordinate or subservient or lower in rank. Antonio Gramsci as well as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak are only limited to a communist view considering socio-economic, exploitative and oppressive issues, and is, therefore, exclusive in its approach, but, to my view, that is not just with the term. I have tried to give judicious expansion, extension and (re)consideration to the term. Although considering socio-economic conditions, I have preferred the etymological view along with psychological factors associated with the term.

The central characters of the play, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, out of their ambition for power, turn violent and subversive and perpetrate the regicide. Although, both of them are sublime human beings but a slight temptation from the witches arouse their hidden yearning for rising

above their present status, which is inferior to a king to a position of total autonomy. Concomitantly, the role of Lady Macbeth needs to be investigated in the light of the patriarchal pressures of the day. She is a subaltern in the sense she has been depicted as fully consenting, loyally dutiful and subservient to her husband and always standing in his support, never defying but only assisting him, even though she has an inner urging for power. The status of women under domination of men, and the same as projected in *Macbeth*, is particularly the subject of the subaltern discourse. Macbeth, who remains loyal to the king, also reveals his subaltern consciousness and dormant wish in his subconscious mind to rise up to the position of power when promised an elevation of his rank by the witches. So, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth provide a matrix for the study of subalternity in the play. In my opinion, the sole inference of the subaltern approach to this play is that subalternity in the mind, when evoked or stirred up, can prove equally deadly as socio-political position of subalternity.

In the present paper, the term “subaltern” has been used to signify a subordinate or inferior or lower in rank or position. And as, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in an interview with Leon de Kock, uses this term in a more specific sense: “*subaltern* is not just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie ... In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern – a space of *difference* ...” (Spivak 1992) [italics mine]. Taking a cue from Spivak's notions of the term in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, at least, on a socio-psychological level, and in the post-postcolonial sense, it is the position of “difference” and the force of “desire”, which primarily shape the subaltern psyche. And such is the case in *Macbeth*. Both the protagonists have their inner desires quickened by a prophecy and both begin to struggle for power, which finally ends up in a tragedy.

Furthermore, *Macbeth* is remarkable for its deft and ingenious use of language, which is characterized by, as A. C. Bradley puts it, “a peculiar compression, pregnancy, energy, even violence ...” (Bradley 290). Particularly, the words that Shakespeare puts into the mouth of Lady Macbeth are of prime importance. The present paper aims at examining the language in the play inasmuch as it reflects certain subversive strategies employed by the protagonists against the patriarchate, which includes usurping the throne of the monarch as well as masculinity and male domination as confuted by a woman rising from the subaltern status. The paper probes into certain connotations and suggestions in the semantic of the doublespeak in the dialogues and soliloquies written for Lady Macbeth.

It is a historical fact that in Shakespeare's age, despite the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the status of women was much inferior to that of men in every way. Women were marginalized socially, politically and economically as well as in terms of religion and gender. Shakespeare's plays have a number of remarkable women characters who have been depicted either living in conditions of inequality and subjugation under

the domination of men or participating only self-consciously in affairs primarily handled or overseen by men. These female protagonists including Cordelia, Portia, Isabella, Volumnia, Paulina, Jessica, Kate and Lady Macbeth are somehow suppressed by the male pride and have the position of subalternity. However, in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare has delineated Lady Macbeth as full of ambiguities and inconsistencies, probably to describe the ill-at-ease position of woman in the Elizabethan society. In the beginning she has been depicted as an overbearing wife, dictating her husband, even reproaching him for not acting manly, but in the later part of the play, she is completely subdued by her husband and in her loneliness turns hysterical and obsessed with guilt. Even Macbeth turns penitent. In such a depiction, Shakespeare clearly shows the dire consequences of the transgression of the norms by the subalterns.

Holinshed, whose *Chronicles* was the major source of Shakespeare's plays, reveals the status of women during the times of the actual historic King Macbeth of Scotland along these lines:

... in the daies [days] also the women of our countries were of no lesse [less] courage than the men; for all stout maidens and wives ... marched as well in the field as did the men, and so, soone [soon] as the armie [army] did set forward, they slve [slay] the first living creature that they found, in whose bloud [blood] they not onlie [only] bathed their swords, but also tasted thereof with their mouthes [mouths]. (Asp 158)

Thus, women during the times of actual Macbeth enjoyed full freedom and participated in all such activities as were considered befitting for men including warfare. But, Shakespeare, conversely, takes liberties with the source and creates a world of his own where it is unnatural for women to engage in fighting. In fact, he tries to examine male and female stereotypes and keeping in view the societal conditions of his times, seems to establish what the consequences are like when the natural order is contravened. Shakespeare ventriloquises the specific gender roles for men and women and thereby edifies middle class values to be upheld in conformity with the existing social setup.

Lady Macbeth is depicted as having all feminine attributes as prescribed by the societal norms of the day, and also as endorsing the elements of manliness as desired by the contemporaneous society, but she turns subversive when driven by an ambition to become the queen. Her language bears overtly angry, aggressive and subversive tones, while consciously repressing all feminine virtues at the same time. In his portrayal of Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare is sometimes labeled as misogynist, but, in point of fact, he seems to be very subtly specifying the gender roles for men and women. Through several instances from Shakespeare's language assigned to characters, it is evident that the delineation of Lady Macbeth is not exactly misogynistic, but she rather aids / prompts the man to be manly while she herself conforms to the feminine role with all loyalty and fidelity toward her husband. As

Macbeth shares the witches' prophecy with Lady Macbeth, his "partner of greatness", he himself ignites in her an ambition of "rejoicing greatness", seeing her husband as the future king and herself as the future queen. It is this very conception or anticipation of "rejoicing greatness" in the minds of those in subaltern position, which, in fact, prepares the ground for the moral degradation of the protagonists. Macbeth's resorting to the support of Lady Macbeth makes her feel important and preferred and she turns assertive in pushing her husband into the transgression for the regicide. Being a subaltern, Lady Macbeth now finds an opportunity to play the first fiddle. And this assignment of the manly role of decision-making, which was otherwise the prerogative of the man, to her, makes all the difference. She goads him on to killing the king, even by accusing him for his weakening manliness. While she endorses what witches promise Macbeth, she analyses his inner nature, which might not allow him to go ahead:

Yet do I fear thy nature;

It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness ... (Act I, scene v)

She fears that Macbeth being of compassionate nature, and being loyal and devoted to the king, may get swayed by his innate "kindness" or emotionality and may falter in perpetrating the act of killing his master. The expression "milk of human kindness", here, refers to the innate feminine side of nature of Macbeth, which he has sucked from his mother's breasts. Lady Macbeth seems to be ruing and denouncing the mother for weakening the son with her feminine care, while, at the same time, extolling woman to be the repository of kindness. But, in fact, overridden by her ambition to become a queen and to see her husband as king, she wants Macbeth to be inhuman enough and absolved of all pity to kill the king. She sees kindness as a kind of illness in him, which needs be cured:

Thou wouldst be great,

Art not without ambition, but without

The illness should attend it.

What thou wouldst highly,

That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,

And yet wouldst wrongly win ...

Here, "without / The illness" implies Macbeth will have to be without any sense of remorse or compunction in order to achieve the coveted end. Lady Macbeth would like to perform the act of murder by herself, but her biggest flaw is that she is a woman. She feels incapacitated. She wishes desperately to get rid of her feminine attributes as is evident from her soliloquy, which is rife with her repression and regret for being incapacitated as a woman to act in the way she wants in the world of men. Act I, scene v apparently present her subaltern status as she finds her womanhood as a barricade in the way to fulfillment of her ambition. With an invocation to the demoniac spirits, she speaks up her mind, divulging her repressed feelings, in the following way:

Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
 And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
 Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
 Stop th' access and passage to remorse,
 That no compunctious visitings of nature
 Shake my fell purpose ... (Act I, scene v, ll. 40-46)

Her singular expression "Unsex me here ..." amply describes the sociopolitical as well as psychosomatic condition of woman under male subjugation in the Elizabethan society. It clearly mentions how a woman implores to the spirits, as it would not be possible to accomplish in a world of men, to "unsex" her, thereby accentuating her desire to get riddance from her feminine self. She wishes to acquire manly prowess so as to enable herself to perpetrate the act of transgression of what was considered unnatural for women. Here, "cruelty" has been regarded as a masculine trait. Her urging for thickening of her blood also stands for the insensitivity, which was again a trait defined of men. She markedly wishes to choke all natural scruples and feelings of remorse or compunction in order to be firm at her "fell purpose" of killing the king. At the same time she is apparently nervous and apprehensive of the "compunctious visitings of nature", which has been described by Freud as the periodic menstrual cycle in a woman caused by nature, making her anatomically unlike man. (La Belle 1979). Here, Shakespeare clearly puts forth his bioteterministic viewpoint that men and women are different, in the body as well as in the mind. Nonetheless, Lady Macbeth acts a man in her mind, but lacks the bodily constitution of maleness to act self-assuredly, and this sense of lack of manly physiognomy is well pronounced in her soliloquy. She wishes madly to masculinate herself so as to execute the murder herself and really act a "partner of greatness" for her husband and aid him in rising above their position of subalternity, seeing him as king and herself as queen.

She further invokes the demoniac spirits, the "murd'ring ministers", to suck up her breasts and fill her with "gall" (or bile), which is a bitter fluid, that she direly requires for *bitter* inhumanity as contrary to the *sweet* "milk of human kindness" in her. She needs to have harshness and anger in order to do away with all womanly weakness in her and achieve her coveted aim. As a woman, she finds it hard to carry out the regicide, and for that reason, she wishes for the "thick Night" and the "smoke of hell" so that she is able to use freely and brashly her "keen knife", which can "see not the wound it makes" and "Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark, / To cry 'Hold, hold!'" (Act I, scene v, ll. 50-54). She needs darkness to act, for in the daylight she would lose all her courage and confidence, as the act she is planning to commit is unbecoming of a woman and defiant of the societal norms. Shakespeare depicts the jingoist Scottish society, where women have a subaltern position, as Carolyn Asp puts it:

Women are subordinate to men and divorced from political influence because they lack those qualities that would fit them for a

warrior society. (Asp 158)

However, Shakespeare delineates the newly emergent middle class of his times, in which some women were trying to act according to their free will and, were, thus, breaking with the norm of the society. These women have been depicted as “witches”, and Lady Macbeth has been depicted as a typical middle class wife, devoted to her husband, trying to help him in fulfilling his aspirations. She cannot tolerate her man losing his manliness, as it is evident from her use of language at the moment she finds Macbeth losing his self-confidence and dwindling and detouring from his aim and ambition. In Act I, scene vii, as Macbeth tells her “We will proceed no further in this business. / He hath honoured me of late ...”, Lady Macbeth starts castigating him with direct references to his manhood and (sexual) prowess:

Art thou afeared / To be the same in thine own act and valor
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would',
Like the poor cat i' the adage? (Act I, scene vii)

Here, she refers to a proverb about a cat that wanted to eat fish, but didn't want to get her paws wet by dipping them into the water to catch the fish. She understands the psychological conflict of Macbeth and tries to persuade him. And she is sure about the power of her language, which she describes as “the valour of my tongue”. There is a hidden suggestion that language or speaking was ascribed to men, and silenced in women, but finding the opportunity, Shakespeare proves that the subaltern can speak, and can speak with aggressive and subversive strains. In the first two acts of the play, Lady Macbeth has been depicted as silencing her man with her wily and persuasive tongue. Even though she speaks in a self-conscious manner, being mindful of her subaltern status, with lots of equivocation and ambiguity, yet she succeeds in mesmerizing her man. The same Macbeth, who acts so valiantly in the battlefield, seems cowed under Lady Macbeth's “battlements”.

Shakespeare seems to make an allusion to the *gynophobia* of the sixteenth century England when certain women were domineering and, taking on a leading role in the society, defied / confronted conventionality, and were labelled as witches and were viewed with fright and skepticism. According to Stephanie Chamberlain, fright of the female power was a strong force in early modern Europe. Women could wield control over patrilineage in ways men could not. Women could be unfaithful in marriage, thus changing the lineage, and a husband could be duped into raising another man's child. Women could pass on traits, both wanted and unwanted, through nursing, rearing of children, and neglect of children. It was feared that women could commit infanticide even, as Lady Macbeth speaks of in Act II, scene vii. (Samuel). Keeping in view the weakness, confusion, hesitancy and indecisiveness of Macbeth, she

seems to take charge of the situation and tells him straightaway, "Only look up clear; / To alter favour ever is to fear. / Leave all the rest to me." (Act I, scene vii, ll. 72-74). And also she advises him to "look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't ..." (Act I, scene v, ll. 65-66). While she compares Macbeth's behaviour to a flower, yet she wants him to go on with the deadly plan in a wary way. In Act I, scene vi, she brings her strategy into play when before the King she avows quite modestly, "We rest your hermits". She pretends to be servile and like holy men offering prayers to the King, but ironically she refers to the homage to be tendered to him after his death. She is well determined herself. And, in Act I, scene vii, her language changes considerably. She clearly tells Macbeth: "But screw your courage to the sticking place, and we'll not fail." She takes control of things and begins to attack his manliness such that she makes him feel vulnerable and in this way she gets what she wants. She tells Macbeth that he will be a man only if he kills Duncan and does whatsoever is needed to be a monarch:

When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man. (Act I, scene vii)

She turns even more aggressive when she sees Macbeth diverging from his undertaking. She shames him by telling him that she would rather kill an innocent child than break her word as he has done. She shows no feeling of compassion or love for a child even if she would have fed him:

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 plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this. (Act I, scene vii)

The critics have censured Lady Macbeth for her dire cruelty and inhuman nature towards a child. Her language is even more detestable. Shakespeare's vocabulary fed into the mouth of Lady Macbeth is emblematic of the extent to which the subaltern can go in order to achieve their coveted targets. Some critics infer that a lack or infirmity of the paternal power leads Lady Macbeth to the malevolent deed with irreverence towards the motherhood as well. Her talking about the infanticide also bears reference to the fright of women as weird witches, (up)rising from their subaltern positions to subvert the very structure of the patriarchal social setup. According to Stephanie Chamberlain, "Perhaps no other early modern crime better exemplifies cultural fears about maternal agency than does infanticide, a crime against both person and lineage." (Chamberlain 3). In Act II, scene ii, Lady Macbeth, when she finds Macbeth all distraught again and shirking to take the daggers back, goes to do it herself. She upbraids him for his feebleness: "Infirm of purpose! / Give me the daggers." Thus, by taking the daggers herself she acts man, and, in a vicarious manner, fulfills her wish to

undertake tasks manly into her hands.

Macbeth's letter to his wife does not bear any plan of any criminal attempt to hasten the realization of the oracle. But, Lady Macbeth cannot wait on good fortune to crown her as Queen. She prefers "the nearest way", that of prompt and violent action. Although, as yet, she does not see any obstacle which the proclamation of Malcolm as heir apparent may put in the way of Macbeth becoming the king, yet the only obstacle she sees is in the disposition of her husband. He is ambitious but is unwilling to play false to attain the object of his ambition. Yet she is so sure of her influence over him and is confident of inciting him to action and driving out any scruples that may bar his way to the crown. She takes the matter into her own hands, and with quiet determination assures him that Duncan will never leave their castle alive, and that she will arrange everything. Macbeth is astounded by her decision. He has, indeed meditated the murder of his master; but he has by no means decided upon it. Although the promise of kingdom overwhelms him, yet he cannot dare yield to the offensive thoughts of subversion arising within. Nevertheless, in the following aside, in his crucial conflict, he tends knowingly to turn responsibility over to destiny:

If chance will have me king, why,
chance may crown me without my stir ...

Notwithstanding, Macbeth too makes a clear choice of acquiring the crown, and in doing so deceives himself rather than being deceived, as it is evident from his willful neglect and disregard of Banquo's counsel that evil forces often mess up things by making trifling statements and ruining those relying on them: "And often times to win us to our harm / The instruments of darkness tell us truths." (Act I, scene iii). Macbeth ignores him and, in his ambiguous utterance, plans subversion of the kingdom:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success
Commencing in a truth? I am / Thane of Cawdor.

In point of fact, Macbeth wants to believe that there is "good" and "truth" in the prediction of his kingship, and for that reason, he plans the murder. The witches have not suggested murder; they have only predicted that he will be king, not how it will transpire. It is Macbeth's own repressed desire and subalternity in his subliminal mind that make him ambitious and lead him to treason. The language full of suggestions, justifying the evil designs inside the protagonist's mind, represents well the hidden / inner fears, conflicts and dilemmas of a person having subaltern position. Shakespeare has portrayed Macbeth as blindly answering to the call of elementary passions. The very thought of power corrupts / perverts his subaltern mind. No doubt, Macbeth is not a hardened offender, but he gets overpowered by the perverse suggestions of destiny speaking through the three witches, and by the entreaties of his wife, who has been sometimes regarded as the fourth witch.

On his personal level, Lady Macbeth's constant attacks on Macbeth's masculinity further weaken his stability. The reversal of gender roles has been shown as having horrible consequences. As Macbeth fails to accomplish the task, Lady Macbeth takes the reins, taking on the masculine role, making her him the epitome of femininity. Macbeth has been depicted as combating his feminine attributes in an attempt to mark out and (re)define his own self, and, at the same time, battling with the mutually conflicting propositions from those with whom he is too close – Lady Macbeth and Banquo. In public, he is a man of honour and courage; as a warrior and leader, his masculinity is not questioned; but, in his private sphere, as a husband, he is tugged between his wife's sarcastic and derisive remarks and his inner emotional and ethico-moral turmoil. On the other hand, Lady Macbeth, who takes on the masculine role, turns rueful at her malevolent itinerary and concedes to her feeling of guilt. A slight temptation by an external agency brings out the *hidden demonism* of both the protagonists. And the transgression of the natural order by both of them leads them to a tragic fall. Shakespeare wants to ascertain the dreadfulness of the consequence of a man or a woman attempting to “o'erleap” the roles that has been defined for them in society. In other words, Shakespeare seems to be advocating the patriarchal family as it is enforced by the Christian Church as a value to be espoused piously by men and women. Asp's view that a society that reverses the manly quality of violence also suffers for it underscores another significant point about the reversal of roles - that of a crisis of masculine prowess needed for resistance and protection of society (Asp 1981). The subalterns de-subalternised end up in a catastrophe. To my mind, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are subalterns, struggling for power. Macbeth strives for usurping the monarch, while Lady Macbeth toils for taking over the patriarch. It is, in fact, a struggle between their real self and temporary self, which leads them to perpetrate the offence. The subalternese employed by both the protagonists is characterized by a sense of inner turmoil, ethico-moral dilemma, confusion, fear, aggression, apprehension, equivocation and ambiguity, and as well the syntax is too complicated and varying, and diction is replete with inversions, ellipsis, antithesis, periphrasis and use of metaphors, probably conveying the conflicting opinions about the reversal of gender roles with the rise of independent women (symbolized by “the witches”) in the contemporary society. Aggressive and subversive strains in the subalternese bespeak of the subalterns' “valour of [the] tongue” and ruthlessness towards achieving their targets. Hence, given an opportunity, the subaltern *can* speak; *can* roar; *can* retort; and *can even* subvert the system.

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