

The Role play of Gender, Ambition and Greed in William Shakespeare's works

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ABSTRACT

The paper brings to the relief the character traits as depicted in Macbeth and Faustus. The key argument which is advanced in the paper happens to be that of that the sentient sentiments and human frailties of the order of unbridled Ambition, greed and the gender perspective of the women characters play a seething and impactful role into transforming the narrative's characters and the plots. And, these developments are contingent upon the theme historicity and the ecosystem's political, social and economic circumstances of the times.

Keywords: Passion, unbridled, Ambition, Greed, gendered, perspective, narrative

INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare is an iconic writer and a playwright where in the general context of human passions ranging from Greed to pride and ambition find an eloquent rendering in his texts, stories and the narratives of his popular and appreciated plays. Plays of the order of Macbeth refers to and portrays the rigamarole of unbridled and uncontrolled ambition where in the larger context of naked and banal human passions of the order of power lust, physical lust, spiritual love and gender themes run as prominent undercurrents in the larger tracts of the plays and the narratives of the Shakespeare, the ace bard of England.

PASSIONS GALORE IN MACBETH AND FAUSTUS

The mainstay theme of *Macbeth*—the decimation brought about when ambition is unmitigated by moral themes—finds its most impactful and influential expression in the play's two main characters. "Macbeth is a courageous Scottish general who is not naturally inclined to commit evil deeds, yet he deeply desires power and advancement. He kills Duncan against his better judgment and afterward stewes in guilt and paranoia. Toward the end of the play, he descends into a kind of frantic, boastful madness."¹ The author further contends that, "Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, pursues her goals with greater determination, yet she is less capable of withstanding the repercussions of her immoral acts. One of Shakespeare's most forcefully drawn female characters, she spurs her husband mercilessly to kill Duncan and urges him to be strong in the murder's aftermath, but she is eventually driven to distraction by the effect of Macbeth's repeated bloodshed on her conscience."² As an attendant scenario in Macbeth's narrative, blatant and crass ambition, is aided by the treacherously prophetic, wily threesome of demented but learned and prognosticating witches—is what drives the couple to ever more terrible atrocities. The problem, the play suggests, is that once one decides to use violence to further one's quest for power, it is difficult to stop. There are always potential threats to the throne—Banquo, Fleance, Macduff.

One may argue that one of the seething and vitriolic metamorphosis and the key role-playing theme and undercurrent of the play, Macbeth happens to be that of demented witches emerging after the battle ends when Macbeth, the noble warrior has defeated and defrayed, the rebels, who were plotting and conspiringly heading towards the capital of Scotland to assassinate Duncan and bring about a violent, bloody and gory Regime change. The transition which permeates through the nook and cranny and the literacy corpuscles of the text of Macbeth is also about the transformation of the noble warrior and Gladiator, Macbeth into a greedy and vile maimer and assassin who does

¹ "An introduction to Shakespeare," URL: <https://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/macbeth/themes/> (Online: Web), Accessed on 10 May, 2026

² Ibid

not think twice before killing King Duncan at the craving of power and repeated assertions and insinuation of a moribund, Lady Macbeth. The Elizabethan period mostly reflects the silent key features like thirst for unknown knowledge, rationalism, secularism, humanism, individualism etc. as this age is also considered as the golden age of English literature because of its huge development, stability, harmony and peace. Power and ambition are two central themes in both Shakespeare's Macbeth and Marlowe's Doctor Faustus. In Macbeth, we witness the rapid transformation of a noble and loyal warrior into a ruthless and power-hungry tyrant. The play delves deep into the corrupting nature of ambition, as Macbeth's desire for power overwhelms his moral compass. Likewise, in Doctor Faustus, we follow the journey of a scholar who makes a pact with the devil in exchange for limitless power and knowledge. It can be argued that, Driven by his insatiable ambition, Faustus bargains away his soul, only to realize the devastating consequences of his choice. Marlowe's plays explore the 'will to power' in various characters, highlighting the importance of politics and power in shaping human destiny. These two plays not only delve into the personal consequences of power and ambition but also examine broader societal implications. They raise questions about the nature of authority, the corruptibility of individuals in positions of power, and the moral price one must pay for ambition's fulfillment. ³ “The exploration of the themes allows us to reflect on our own desires, the potential consequences of pursuing them single-mindedly and the moral dilemmas that arise in our quest for power. When examining the theme of power and ambition in Shakespeare's Macbeth and Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, it is important to consider the impact of decision-making on the characters' ultimate fates.”⁴ The enigmatic, fearsome and sympathy prone character of Faustus too falls a prey to uncontrolled and unbridled storm of bullish and neanderthal ambition and a thirst for lustful power grabs and ungotten ambition. The manner in which the character of Faustus leaves his welfare credentials of being a dutiful and honest Doctor and how he enters into a demented pact with the Satan, depicts the presence of a fake calling for ill begotten glory and power fief. One may argue that the vile and satanic pact with the Evil consumes the life blood of the main protagonist, Faustus, whom losses existentially in a mad cap hurtling for unfathomed glory, social status and monetary goodies. The dressage, life styles, the pomp and splendour of the royalty along with the grime of the masses, all seem to have been deciphered in a larger way as far as the Mass Media, theatrical and Cinematic depictions of Shakespearean works⁵ have been treated and managed by both the elitist literary traditions and even the popular culture and pop cannon in a post modern depiction of “Simulacra”. Paromita and Poonam write that, “Diverse filmic genres, starting from the earliest silent cinema, to diasporic films made for global audiences, television films, independent films, and documentaries, thus expanding the very notion of ‘Indian cinema’ while also looking at the different modalities of deploying Shakespeare specific to these genres. Shakespeareans and film scholars provide an alternative history of the development of Indian cinemas through its negotiations with Shakespeare focusing on the inter-textualities between Shakespearean theatre, regional cinema, performative traditions, and literary histories in India.”⁶ Thus, in a manner a banal Shakespearean analysis premised upon the astute de rigueress of sentiments and attributes of the order of uncontrolled ambition, greed for ;political power and the transitory mystique and the diabolical tinge of the “gendered” facet, invite the connoisseurs to attempt and strive for more.

ABOUT AMBITION AND THE GENDER STEREOTYPE.....

The sentient sentiment of fear is the germinating core of the “Les troubles” in the context of the dark shadowy and Gothic world of Macbeth and a few other plays written by William Shakespeare. The narrative ekes out the gendered passion of Lady Macbeth who is a ruthless, cruel and bestial women who exhorts Macbeth to change from a noble Guardian of the Scottish Galaxy into a blood thirsty and venom spewing tyrant. The manner in which the masculine traits are displayed and depicted in the narrative of the play qualify the sentiment which Thomas Hobbes writes about in his classic tome, Leviathan, that, “Fear and I were born twins” which was very true about the fear of rebellion,

³ Sayadda Mahfuza Habib, “The exploration of the study of power, ambition and corruption manifested in Shakespeare's Macbeth and Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, World Journal of Advanced Research and Review, (24 (3), 2024

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Poonam Trivedi, Paromita Chakravorti, “Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas : Local Habitations,” New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004

⁶ Ibid

political violence and political skullduggery which became a threat and harrowing menace for the citizens and the royalty of England. The times were best reflected and portrayed by the works of the literary giants of the order of William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe.

Lady Macbeth in her lesser feminine and overtly masculine character avatar where in she makes mockery of the personage of Macbeth as he according to her fears and loathes to get rid of the life of an aging Duncan. She is the one who exhorts Macbeth to turn from a noble warrior to a slayer in an brutal enunciation of her ruthless gendered self where the quintessential characteristics of the, “Feminine” are relegated to the royal backburner and a kind of reincarnation of the opening scene three witches, she convinces Macbeth, the royal parson of a person to commit .

Before Macbeth arrives back at the castle, Lady Macbeth worries that although he is ambitious, he isn't nasty enough to kill King Duncan. Therefore she'll have to talk him into it. She uses a *metaphor pour my spirits in thine ear*, as if what she has to say is like a potion that will make him do her bidding.⁷

LADY MACBETH

Hie thee hither,

That I may pour my spirits in thine ear⁸

Act 1 Scene 5

- she knows her husband won't want to murder the king so she manipulates him. She plans the murder and takes control of events when Macbeth loses the plot.⁹
- Cruel – she is violent, cold-blooded and happy to be a part of the murder. She ridicules Macbeth when he won't join in with her cold-blooded plans.
- Two-faced – she welcomes King Duncan warmly even though she plans his death. She advises Macbeth to be two-faced too.¹⁰

Lady Macbeth is friends with:

- Macbeth - they share a terrible secret and she supports him until her untimely end. The gender roleplays are imaginatively displayed in the Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*. The win female characters of the order of Lady Macduff and Lady Macbeth are depicted and written about as the gender opposites of each other where in the gender perspective utilised to weave and hew the character of Lady Macbeth borders on the line of being a negative super villain who is ruthless, string and ill willed and a destroyer of lives and royalty. “Lady Macduff is depicted as a devoted wife and mother, but all of the other women in the play are shown as strong-willed and willing to put aside traditional roles in the quest for power. The males in the play view women as the weaker sex, which is ironic considering the power assigned to women in *Macbeth*.”¹¹

The author further argues that “In many cases, gender roles are subverted in *Macbeth*. Only one woman, Lady Macduff, exemplifies traditional gender roles for women. The male characters in *Macbeth* are sometimes presented as crying in grief and hesitating to commit murder, yet their daily lives are spent in the political and military arena.”¹² The author further

⁷ Macbeth's Character Study, “British Broadcasting Corporation,” URL: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/z8nj7yc#zdsq2v4> (Online : Web), Accessed on 10 May, 2026

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid 1

¹⁰ Ibid 1

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Christa Reaves, “Gender in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: Performances and Performativity,” University of Alabama Publication, 2014

comments and highlights the gendered perspective as its engendered in the Play Macbeth where the deus ex Machina akin to the three hoary witches destabilises the peace and royalty appellation in the historic and iconic play, Macbeth.

The author contends further that, "Women, on the other hand, are expected to be less violent yet they are behind much of the violence in the play. Lady Macbeth desires power as much as her husband does. She directs and participates in Duncan's assassination and the cover-up that follows, something unexpected of women traditionally. Women like Lady Macduff represent the stereotypical role of women as wives and mothers. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, proves to be a calculating and intelligent woman who urges her husband to kill the king and seize the throne for himself."¹³ The other women in the play are the witches, who are also depicted as manipulating Macbeth through cunning."¹⁴ Thus, it can be reiterated that both the sub set of the witches and Lady Macbeth weave a narrative trajectory of similar gendered roles which play a pivotal and plot changing role in the play.

CONCLUSION

When one skims through tragedy then human passions and character traits of the order of passionate and unbridled ambition, greed for usurpation of political pelf, pelf and the distortion in the character trait of the, "Feminine" become the order of the day in the Shakespearean narrative. Most of the characters including the key protagonists suffer, undergo miserable trials and tribulations while they transit from being the 'Hero' to the, "Ant-hero" or the arch antagonist. Harold Bloom too contends that Shakespeare invented the modern conception of humanity through his literary constructs. Still, limiting the reading of Macbeth and other plays will be a grave injustice to the nom de plume of William Shakespeare to his vast panoply of emotions and passions engendered by him in his work. A new "Humanity" and eclecticism which goes beyond crass and banal themes of the order of passion, royal entourage, unbridled ambition, greed for political power along with the stereotype and the quintessence of gender and the, "Feminine," need to be revisited with new analytical and literary rigour.

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¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid