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Tragedy and Victimhood of Empowerment: A Select Study of Women in Shakespeare's Tragedies

Aditi Bhowmick

Academic Counsellor in
PGDJMC, IGNOU, Pathbhahan,
Kolkata, W. B., & Research
Scholar, University of Kalyani

Dr. Kuntal Chattopadhyay

Associate Prof. in English,
Narasinha Dutt College, Howrah,
West Bengal, Guest Faculty in
Bengali, University of Calcutta,
West Bengal, India

Abstract

Domestic women having the least little access to power and authority suffer maximally in the hands of patriarchy. But it is an irony that women who seek empowerment and manage to get empowered sufficiently in the patriarchal system also suffer a lot. That is to say, patriarchy never spares a woman, be she obedient and submissive or hyperactive and assertive. This paper aims to examine this ironic aspect with reference to some select women characters in the immortal tragedies of Shakespeare:

- a) Lady Macbeth: She stands beside her husband's 'vaulting ambition' by violating her natural feminine self, steps into the patriarchal world of conspiracy, murder, bloodshed, usurpation et al, suffers from guilt, gets estranged from her husband, develops mental degeneration, faints, sleepwalks, kills herself. She attempts to empower herself by sacrificing her femininity, but gets tragically lost in the labyrinth of patriarchal absolutism.
- b) Lady Macduff: A typical mother and a devoted wife, doesn't hanker for power/authority, likes to remain indoors as a protected housewife, but she gets killed with all her children.
- c) Cordelia: She refuses to satisfy the absurd demand of her old, choleric father and thus infuriates the patriarch in Lear who banishes her most loving daughter. Her refusal to

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please patriarchy in a sense empowers Cordelia. The king of France decides to marry her because of her courageous self-assertion. When later in the play the French army comes to rescue the destitute Lear from the clutches of his evil daughters, Goneril and Regan, Cordelia leads the operation only getting killed as a result of a dirty conspiracy masterminded by another degenerate product of power-hungry patriarchy, Edmund.

- d) Goneril and Regan: Lear's 'pelican daughters' please their authoritarian father to procure their portions of kingdom. They then betray Lear, drive him out on the storm-tossed heath; compete most lewdly for young Edmund. Both of them grossly manipulate patriarchy; become nasty embodiments of a degenerate patriarchy; both die most ignobly in the suffocating mess of patriarchy's mad dynamics of power.
- e) Ophelia and Desdemona: Both are very innocent and beautiful, and both are victims of patriarchal suspicion, jealousy, violence; both seek feminine fulfillment through love and marriage, but both of them are ghastly betrayed by their lover/husband.

Keywords- *Empowerment, Women, Patriarchy*

Empowerment of women is the sign of a modern and culturally developed society. It is thought that men alone can never carry the society along the path of progress and women must have equal share in all matters. Patriarchy is a gendered concept in which 'men' are thought to be the centre of power. Women have to be shaped and governed by the forces and instruments of patriarchy. Patriarchy never spares a woman to live in 'a room of her own', to live having equal power and liberty in thought, speech and action. The present paper aims to throw some light on some of the women characters of Shakespeare's tragedies—Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Cordelia in *King Lear*, Ophelia in *Hamlet*, and Desdemona in *Othello*. Incidentally, two of these four women—Lady Macbeth and Cordelia—are variously empowered even within their given patriarchal space. Lady Macbeth volunteers to join the power politics as an accomplice of her husband, Macbeth; Cordelia becomes the French queen and leads an army to rescue her old and abandoned father. On the other hand, Ophelia and Desdemona, comparatively submissive in nature, suffer vehemently at the hands of patriarchy despite their unstinted commitment in love. In each case, we are trying to put up at least one female character from the same text alongside the prime focused character to reveal the differentials of the potentially tragic struggle for self-empowerment and the pathetic submission to victimhood. Lady Macduff is a foil to Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*; Goneril and Regan are foils to Cordelia in *King Lear*; Gertrude is a foil to Ophelia in *Hamlet*; and Emilia is a foil to Desdemona in *Othello*.

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Lady Macbeth is called the 'fiend-like queen' at the end of the play and she has been labelled as the 'fourth witch'. Allured by her husband's 'vaulting ambition' to step into the pitfalls of the typical patriarchal hunger for power, she assumes an iron-willed masculinity to stand by Macbeth. In the beginning, Lady Macbeth is shown reading a letter drafted by her husband. The letter comes bringing the news of the prophecies proclaimed by three witches for Macbeth. The germ of ambition of becoming the king of Scotland was inherent in the sub-surface of Macbeth's mind and after the prophecies made by the witches, it came to the surface. Macbeth wrote the letter with an intention to provoke his wife before he reached their castle. Lady Macbeth read the letter and hardened herself to be a devoted wife. She was apprehensive about the nature of her husband which was "too full of the milk of human kindness". She chastised Macbeth and taught him to "Look like th' innocent flower/ But be the serpent under't" (Muir: 1999: 32). Just before chastising Macbeth for killing Duncan, Lady Macbeth invoked the Dark to be 'unsexed' and prayed for filling her breasts with gall instead of sweet milk symbolic of motherhood and femininity:

Come, you Spirits/That tend on mortal thoughts,/Unsex me here,/And fill me,
from the crown to the toe, top-full/Of direct cruelty! make thick my blood,/Stop up th' access and passage to remorse:/That no compunctious visitings of Nature/Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between/Th' effect and it!
Come to my woman's breasts,/And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers,/Wherever in your sightless substances/ You wait on Nature's mischief! Come, thick Night,/And pall thee in the dunkest smoke of Hell,/That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,/Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,/To cry, 'Hold, hold'! (Ibid:29).

Again, we see her in another scene in the same act where she verbalizes the most unnatural mother's horrible wish to kill her child most ruthlessly. Lady Macbeth falls a victim to this very abominably grotesque notion of empowerment which goes against basic human nature, the basic womanliness of a mother:

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 pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,/And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn/ As you have done to this." (Ibid: 42).

But after the murder of Duncan, Lady Macbeth grows a sense of remorse and moves towards alienation and depression:

Nought's had, all's spent,/ Where our desire is got without content:/ 'Tis safer to be that which we destroy,/Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy. (Ibid: 81).

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Lady Macbeth gets distanced from her husband after his coronation. Macbeth also does not disclose his designs and actions to her. Perhaps that is the reason why Lady Macbeth becomes anxious about Banquo and Fleance as well as Lady Macduff and her child. In the pathetic state of somnambulism, she recalls, "The Thane of Fife had a wife; where is she now? (Ibid: 139).

"These deeds must not be thought/After these ways: so it will make us mad" (Ibid: 53) repeats heavily on the mind of Lady Macbeth. 'Little water' now cannot wash the smell of the blood as she repeatedly tries to wash and freshen her hand: "Out!, damned spot! Out, I say!- One; two: why, then 'tis time to do't." (Ibid: 139). Now she realizes 'Hell is murky'. In a broken state she now observes 'Things without all remedy' cannot 'be without regard'. Lady Macbeth speaking to herself "What's done cannot be undone" echoes Macbeth before the heinous murder, "If it were done, when 'tis done" (Ibid: 36). Her distress, deep-rooted agony and anguish for the misdeed lead her into a state of madness. The strong-willed woman who directed Macbeth: "wash your hands, put on your nightgown; look not so pale", who remonstrated him with ruthless confidence: "What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?" becomes helpless at the end in her sleep-walking: "Here the smell of the blood still" (Ibid: 140). Unnatural deed infects her mind and forces her to suicidal death.

A sharp contrast to Lady Macbeth is Lady Macduff, a low-profile and humble lady and a mother. She is very contented with what she has had. Her demand is very plain and simple. She wishes her husband to take care of her and her family. When Macduff flees away to England to motivate Malcolm against Macbeth, she accuses her husband for leaving her family in insecurity and distress. Macbeth sends hired killers to kill Macduff's wife and children. The motherly affection tries to protect her child but in vain.

Lady Macbeth in her bid to attain power defies her femininity and her motherhood, prays to the spirits to be unsexed, wishes her breasts to be filled with gall instead of milk, and exemplifies herself to be a killer of her child while feeding it adorably. All these are most horridly uncommon in a woman. She follows the rule of patriarchy, stands by her husband even in his most foul design, wishes for his success and paves the way to make him successful. But, she thus plays into the dirty hands of patriarchy and receives a painful extermination costing her honor, sanity and life. Fitting herself into the power-politics along with her husband, Lady Macbeth loses her power to sustain her life. Lady Macduff plays the role of a traditional woman. Interestingly enough, patriarchy does not spare even her.

Cordelia in *King Lear* chooses to empower herself in a way different from Lady Macbeth's. We meet Cordelia in the beginning of the play as consciously working towards some ethical positivity through a strong negation, negation to an absurd demand of bullying patriarchy. Lear decided to divide his kingdom according to the answers given by her three

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daughters as to how much they loved him. Goneril and Regan, two of his three daughters, appeased him with flattery but Cordelia denied. In the open court-room, Lear wanted to know how much the daughters loved their father. To Cordelia, it was humiliating. To her, 'love's more ponderous than my tongue' (Halio: 2008: 99). Lear continually pressurized her but she replied: "Nothing, my lord" (Ibid: 100). Outraged Lear proclaimed: 'Nothing will come of nothing....' (Ibid: 100). Cordelia still defied in a mild but steady way: "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave/ My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty/ According to my bond, no more nor less." (Ibid: 100). Her final words to Lear were not only an indictment of patriarchal whimsicality but also a self-assertion through repudiation of selfish appeasement of authority, of "that glib and oily art/ To speak and purpose not" (Ibid: 108). Lear banished Cordelia, but the banishment made her so very acceptable to the King of France for his queen. Later, thrown out of all care and concern, Lear could realize the truth of love and togetherness in life: "We two alone will sing like birds i'th'cage. / When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down, / And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live, / And pray, and sing, ad tell old tales." (Ibid: 244).

Cordelia is empowered as she is seen to lead a troop of army at Dover as the French queen. No other female tragic protagonist in Shakespeare's plays can be seen in armour, leading a troop of army in a battlefield. She does that only for the sake of her kingdom and obviously for her father who punished her for defying him in an open courtroom. Cordelia suffers and receives death because she challenges patriarchy. Cordelia leads the military operation only to be killed by another degenerate, Machiavellian mastermind of power-loving patriarchy, Edmund. Goneril and Regan flattered to please their authoritarian father. Then they betrayed Lear and drove him out on the storm-tossed heath. They became nasty embodiments of a degenerate patriarchal syndicate to end their lives in the suffocating mess of patriarchy's mad dynamics. Cordelia is not like her two other sisters, those 'dog-hearted daughters' (Casey: 2005: 41) of Lear who always crave for enjoying power and they are immoral. Their crooked mentality and gradual degeneration show the travesty of empowerment of women in the patriarchal set-up. We referred to Lady Macbeth as she invoked the evil spirits to 'unsex her'. Lady Macbeth in a sense sacrificed her feminine self at the altar of patriarchy. Here these two daughters of Lear show no sign of humanity and womanhood in their nature from the very outset. They play their dirty games according to the rules of male chauvinist power politics. Both these women flattered and cheated King Lear to grab his property; then conspired with Edmund against Lear, Cordelia, Fool, Kent and Gloucester; they cudged with each other for an illicit relationship with Edmund. But even patriarchy's own game-makers are not spared by the destructiveness of the system. Regan is stabbed by Goneril and she herself attempts suicide.

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Ophelia in *Hamlet* is a tragic victim of Hamlet's wrath and suspicion towards his mother Gertrude in particular, and womankind in general. He found that his mother conspired with his uncle Claudius in murdering his father and subsequently becoming King Claudius's queen. Ophelia was suspected of infidelity for she happened to be crooked Polonius's daughter. Hamlet's madness and his indifference towards Ophelia led her to suicidal death. Ophelia was a simple girl endowed with innocence and love; she had full faith in Hamlet, and she loved the Prince of Denmark. The ups and downs in their love relationship were also due to her father, Polonius and brother Laertes' disagreement about her love-relationship with Hamlet. Polonius' death, Hamlet's madness, his indifference and suspicion towards her, all led her to the tragic end. Hamlet's anger against Polonius and anguish for Gertrude cumulatively affected Ophelia. She was charged of infidelity because Hamlet suspected Gertrude as infidel. His obsession for his mother dragged him to disbelieving womanhood irrespective of the nature of his beloved, of the emotional authenticity of the woman. Ophelia was accused of mistrust as her father Polonius was an agent of the mistrusted Claudius, the murderer and usurper.

Ophelia's two ballads sung in her grief for Hamlet show her agony. We feel pity and sympathize with her when she sings her first ballad "How should I your true love know" (Brooks: 2005: 31). Ophelia's calm resignation in accepting her death without any strong protest against Hamlet's ruthless mental torture reveals through her parting words: "I hope all will be well. We must be patient" (Ibid). This patience of a spontaneously emotive woman, who has been severely tortured for her affection and concern, is inversely a compulsive lesson of patriarchy. It preaches that a woman should be submissive, humble, gentle, mild, and patient and must accept the torture of her lover or husband in the name of love.

Desdemona suffers the same treatment from her husband Othello, the Moor of Venice and a valiant soldier who suspects her and kills her. Iago is just a mere agent who puts the seed of suspicion as regards Desdemona and Cassio in Othello's mind. The seed of suspicion, a typical suspicion of a patriarchal mind, was inherent in Othello as he remembered Brabantio's parting words of warning to Othello that Desdemona, his daughter, deceived him; likewise she might deceive Othello. Iago cunningly stole the handkerchief which was the token of the last sign of love and good-luck from Othello's mother. Othello handed the handkerchief over to Desdemona. Iago, to take revenge against Cassio and to satisfy his jealousy, stole it and made Desdemona a prey to Othello's suspicion. Out of anger and suspicion towards Desdemona, he asked her to produce that handkerchief which she could not. Desdemona was throttled to death. When Emilia, wife of Iago, disclosed the truth before Othello, he repented for his act of killing Desdemona and embraced death.

Like Ophelia, Desdemona also does not raise her voice against the patriarchal tyranny of a husband or lover, paranoid about his wife or beloved. She cannot think of any significant

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action against Othello for his wrongful attitudes. Like Ophelia, she also suffers for the sake of love; chooses to be patient and try to defend herself before Othello. But Othello is not ready to understand and she has to die. Interesting enough, here also we find that like Ophelia, Desdemona too accepts death 'without guilt'. Even at the time of death she blames none but herself.

All the four tragedies of Shakespeare thus deal with the tragedy and victimhood of women-empowerment. Our study primarily focuses upon Lady Macbeth whose empowerment is directly correlated with power-politics. But she has to succumb to patriarchal power-politics; she sacrifices her feminine self and dies a disconsolate death. We put up Lady Macduff as her contrary character because she does not wish to be empowered as per terms set forth by patriarchy. She does not bother so much for the 'outer world', makes herself contented with her domestic activities and performs her role as wife and mother pretty well. Still she has to die as a victim of patriarchal power. Empowered or submissive, Cordelia, Ophelia and Desdemona receive the same fate. Cordelia challenges patriarchy and receives death; Ophelia and Desdemona accept patriarchy and receive death.

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