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# GUILT AS PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA: A CONTEMPORARY TRAUMA THEORY ANALYSIS OF LADY MACBETH

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## ABSTRACT

*Lady Macbeth remains one of Shakespeare's most enigmatic and multifaceted female characters. At once embodying boundless ambition and tragic vulnerability, she transcends conventional gender norms and emerges as a paradox of strength and fragility. Through a critical analysis of her behavior, it becomes evident that Lady Macbeth's trajectory in Macbeth is shaped by her manipulation of patriarchal structures, her psychological decline, and her ultimate confrontation with the limits of unchecked ambition. Employing feminist and psychoanalytic criticism, this essay interrogates the mechanisms of Lady Macbeth's power and the tragic repercussions that ensue.*

***Keywords:*** *Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare, Gender, Ambition, Power, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Tragedy, Guilt, Patriarchy.*

The deeds of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* instantly grab the audience's attention because of their intricate interaction among psychological complexity, deception, and ambition. She first comes out as a strong person, driven always to forward her husband to the throne. She is not interested in challenging and subverting the accepted gender norms in her culture at that time. Her well-known and disturbing demand to the spirits to "unsex" her is especially revealing; it emphasises her strong need to eradicate any seeming vulnerability connected with feminism in her relentless search of control. She is unrelenting in her quest of supremacy.

She shows stunning and interesting cold pragmatism throughout the play as she exhorts Macbeth to follow his darkest impulses. This helps to show her great impact over him. Strategic manipulation of Macbeth by Lady Macbeth not only highlights her ambition but also shows her grasp of the social power relations in action. Her formerly perfect and strong stance starts to change, though, as the story goes on and the terrible effects of their horrible deeds are more clear-cut. Her great regret finally drives her into lunacy as the weight of guilt and the psychological stress their evil actions inflict causes her fragile brain great anguish. This drastic change highlights her dual character: she moves from a figure who was formerly strong and well-controlled to a person who is finally overwhelmed with emotions of remorse and devaluation. Her sad fall reminds us of the terrible results of unfettered ambition as well as of the strong moral and psychological effects accompanying the search of power at any costs. Lady Macbeth's path therefore captures the core of tragedy and provides a fascinating analysis of the human brain and the terrible results that may follow from ambition allowed to spiral out of control. But whatever the consequences of her actions, she ultimately emerges as an extremely traumatized entity and her later behavioural patterns highly speak of her character's creator and indicates the deep knowledge Shakespeare possessed in psychology.

It would not be an overstatement to say that almost all contemporary literary and critical theories can be traced in the plays of Shakespeare, be it Postcolonialism, Postmodernism, Historicism, Ecocriticism, Cultural Materialism, Marxism, Feminism, Gender Studies, Queer Theory and so many more. The same stands true for the trauma theory, the evolution of which can be found in not one but many plays of Shakespeare. Lady Macbeth is one such character who gets traumatized, changes her behavioral patterns subsequently leading to her death. This forms the context of the present paper.

Lenore Terr in her first of its kind study done on trauma writes in 1990 that "psychic trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming, intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from outside. Traumatic events are external but they quickly become incorporated into the mind". The word "trauma" is etymologically linked to the Greek word "wound". It is derived from the verb which means to pierce. To understand it in layman's terms, in piercing, something comes to the body from outside the shield of protection. There is something that punctures the protective shield. Wounds have long lasting

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effects on organism. Puncturing leaves a mark on the organism. Basic psychoanalytical meaning of the trauma is that, it is an event, defined by first of all its intensity, secondly the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it. Thirdly, trauma leaves long lasting effects on psychic life of the subject.

In the earlier stages of Freud's psychoanalytical theory, trauma was basically seen as excessive influx of excitations (which is related to the economic theory of Freud, when excitation is very much, there is the traumatic effect). Trauma is a kind of breach or in other words, a puncturing. Freud's answer to how only few are affected by trauma as all of us are faced by troubling situations at one or the other point of time in our lives, lies in the concept of Ego. Ego acts like a layer, a shield that protects the psyche from external stimuli, letting in only right amounts. When the shield breaks, too much excitation comes in. (LM's first reaction is of self control and to control Macbeth due to this ego)**.** This is the basics of the traumatic theory or neurosis in the early Freud. In trauma, a pathological defense is settled; in the normal state of things when the psyche is threatened by excitation, healthy ego redirects the attention to something else. When organism cannot deal with it, the ego develops a pathological defense: Repression. The ego represses the excitation and this creates neurosis. For Freud, this is basically the traumatic theory of neurosis. Freud considers trauma as a triggering factor in neurosis.

Lady Macbeth is a well known and an immortal character created or rather improvised by Shakespeare to bring to light his understanding of the human psyche, how it responds to certain troubling situations and how trauma effects the human mind, which if left unattended, can land the person under trauma, in a fatal situation.

Lady Macbeth is a woman of undaunted mettle who can bring forth nothing but men children only, as is acknowledged by her husband Macbeth in Act 1 Scene 7 of the play. She has a scheming mind and has also the courage and will to execute the plans made by the couple of killing King Duncan and acquiring the throne. The murder is committed by Macbeth, who is fearful of the act before as well as after it. He looks at his bloodied hands and says it's a sorry sight to which Lady Macbeth replies "A foolish thought to say a sorry sight". When Macbeth further narrates his horrible experiences immediate after the murder, Lady Macbeth asks him not to consider it so deeply and that these deeds must not be thought after these ways as it will make them mad. Macbeth is so repenting that he says "To know my deed, it were best not know myself" but on the other hand Lady Macbeth says "My hands are of your color, but I shame to wear a heart so white". This is the ego working in her.

What is the consensus about trauma? Everyone seems to agree that a traumatic event "overwhelm[s] the ordinary human adaptations to life," as Judith Herman, one of the pioneering clinicians in the field as well as a major player in the theoretical debate regarding trauma puts it. "Unlike commonplace misfortunes," she writes, "traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death" An encounter with death is there as we know that it is Lady Macbeth who goes into the chamber of murdered Duncan to smear the face of the guards with blood in order to transfer the blame of murder on them. But the question that arises is why a lady firm of purpose loses control of her mind after a cooling off period and ultimately dies. Why she succumbs to her guilt if it is guilt at all?

We have our answer in Cathy Caruth. Psychic trauma is generally defined as a reaction to an overpowering event resulting in psychological damage, but instead of understanding trauma according to event and/or response, Cathy Caruth – unarguably one of the key figures in contemporary trauma theory – has famously redefined it according to "the *structure of its experience*": "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" This line of thought corresponds with *Nachträglichkeit*,a German term given by Freud in his Psychoanalysis, translated as deferred action, retroaction, après-coup or to put it simply, afterwardsness" It has been suggested that it was Lacan who brought the term back from obscurity after Freud's death - his translation in the French language as the "après-coup". The reason for this afterwardness is in, as stated earlier in this paper, the ego shield that protects the puncturing of the soul by a traumatic experience. But when this shield shatters, trauma sets in. This answers the courage perceivable in the behavior of Lady Macbeth after the murder of King Duncan and even later but ultimately the falsity ends and she succumbs to the pressures of the traumatic images of death.

Kalí Tal in her study, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996), treats only trauma narratives written by survivors in her discussion of how individual traumatic experience relates to cultural representations thereof in regard to the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and sexual abuse, because she believes that literary representations of trauma "are mediated by language and do not have the impact of the traumatic experience"; because certain words tend to acquire a different meaning in survivor discourse, "the traumatic experience is re-inscribed as metaphor," and

only those writers who have experienced trauma directly as survivors know and can write the signs of trauma (1996: 15, 16). Therefore, she believes, only survivors have the right to narrate traumatic experiences and symbolic language needs to be eschewed in these stories because figuration functions in the hands of the powerful as a way of codifying and appropriating the experience. She is not the only one theorist who feels so. There are many others who find language limiting the traumatic experience and none mentions that the trauma is identifiable from the language of a traumatized person. Even Lacan was fond of saying that "the real is impossible,". It is impossible in so far as we cannot express it in language because the very entrance into language marks our irrevocable separation from the real. Caruth also in her pioneering 1996 work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* suggests trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language. Caruth's deconstructive criticism lays emphasis on linguistic indeterminacy, ambiguous referentiality, and aporia. Here, the Bard stands apart from them. He has used language as a tool to diagnose or identify the trauma within. It is beyond doubt a fact that Lady Macbeth suffers trauma after and due to the death of Duncan. The image of death is what gradually disturbs her to the extent of psychoneurosis and hysteria. Speaking psychologically, it is her encounter with death at some point in her past that had been repressed and which comes to the fore after the death of Duncan. But Shakespeare gives indicators to this trauma in the earlier speeches of Lady Macbeth that abound in horrific images of death and cruelty. Only an abnormal mind can think of and express such a thought "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," (Act i Scene vii)

Her statement that it is the eye of childhood that fears a painted devil is further indicative and symbolic of her childhood trauma as Kali Tal states that "the traumatic experience is re-inscribed as metaphor," and only those who have experienced trauma directly as survivors know and can write the signs of trauma.

Trauma reflects in certain particular behavioural patterns and alterations that may be separated further into emotional, physical, biological, and cognitive. Trauma may cause quite different emotional responses, which are much impacted by the social background of the person. Other well-known trauma theorist Bessel Van Der Kolk claims that some trauma survivors struggle to control emotions like anger, anxiety, fear, grief, and shame - this is more so when the trauma has happened at a young age. In those who are older and functioning well before the trauma, emotional dysregulation generally lasts just a brief period and reflects an instantaneous reaction to the experience rather than a continuous tendency. This further strengthens the argument that Shakespeare wanted to highlight the fact that the excesses in the speeches of Lady Macbeth and in her behavior before and after the murder has its roots in her childhood. It appears as if Shakespeare created the character of the Lady after the evolution of the contemporary Trauma Theory. Her fear of the dark and the unknown is perceivable in Act 5 Scene 1 where the woman taking care of her, when asked from where Lady Macbeth got a candle, tells the doctor that "Why, it stood by her. She has light by her continually. 'Tis her command."

Repetition compulsion, according to Freud as mentioned in his article Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through, is a psychological phenomenon in which a person repeats a traumatic event or its circumstances over and over again. This includes reenacting the event or putting oneself in situations where the event is likely to happen again. This "re-living" can also take the form of dreams in which memories and feelings of what happened are repeated, and even hallucinations. In the famous sleep walking scene we find Lady Macbeth reliving her horrifying experience of Duncan's death. Her hallucinations are confirmed by the doctor who tells Macbeth that "Not so sick, my lord, As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies That keep her from her rest." Some other symptoms of trauma that the Adults may display are sleep problems, increased agitation, hypervigilance, isolation or withdrawal, and increased use of alcohol or drugs. Older adults may exhibit increased withdrawal and isolation, reluctance to leave home, worsening of chronic illnesses, confusion, depression, and fear as stated by Deborah DeWolfe & Diana Nordboe in their edited book in 2000 *Field Manual for Mental Health and Human Service Workers in Major Disasters*. Generalized anxiety, obsessive–compulsive behavior, and other anxiety disorders are also associated with trauma. Lady Macbeth keeps washing her hands which comes under the obsessive compulsive behavior syndrome.

Judith Herman in 1997 talks of Self-harm in trauma and can be defined as any type of intentionally self-inflicted harm, regardless of the severity of injury or whether suicide is intended. Often, self-harm is an attempt to cope with emotional or physical distress that seems overwhelming or to cope with a profound sense of dissociation or being trapped, helpless, and "damaged". Thus, Lady Macbeth ends her life to cope with her distress that is a result of her trauma.

It is surprising that Macbeth who commits not one but many murders and who is shown to be fearful and

hesitant in murdering Duncan, has hallucinations and all other symptoms of trauma, turns out to bear all the mental stress and trauma. I would like to add here that it is accepted that Macbeth is a warrior and has killed many in the war but the point to be noted here is that he gets troubled, feels guilty and hallucinates only before and after Duncan's death and not after coming back from the war. while Lady Macbeth who just goes in to smear the faces of the guards gets unnerved by the sight of Duncan's blood and ultimately falls prey to traumatic disorder. Shakespeare was much ahead of his times. He used language as a tool for many purposes. The speeches that he has attributed to Macbeth show the imaginative power of Macbeth. While on the other hand Lady Macbeth is not shown to be that imaginative. Shakespeare adds another dimension to his understanding of psychological trauma and that is that imagination is inversely proportional to trauma disorder, meaning the more the imaginative mind the less trauma it faces. It is because imagination helps the mind to develop a defense mechanism. The mind is able to imagine or realize the consequences of the wrong deeds hence preparing the psyche for the rough weather. This aspect has not been touched upon by the theoreticians and which needs a thorough investigation.

There are many other aspects and views of many other trauma theorists which coincide with what Shakespeare has presented in not only the play Macbeth but in many others as well. Hamlet is a known example but we need to explore many more of his plays on the basis of the current literary Trauma theories. Shakespeare's works are an ocean from which flow all the streams that lead to a complete understanding of the human mind and its development and all that which a human mind can ever think of. This is his universality but It seems as if we have fallen short of analyzing him completely.

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