

Psycho-Literary Analysis of Lady Macbeth's Madness: Attachment, Trauma & Feminist Approaches

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Abstract

Traditional critical readership has ascribed Lady Macbeth's madness to a feeling of homicidal guilt on her part. However, her gradual and certain descent into madness can be read through Attachment Theory, Trauma Theory & Feminist Theory which adds deeper psychological perspectives to her case. The study aims to read her character through these intersecting theoretical frameworks. The paper foregrounds the fact that her descent into madness is more a combined result of insecurities arising due to her attachment, repression of her psychological trauma and gendered manipulations. Hence, her character is also a result of tragedy inflicted by both personal distress & societal constraints.

Keywords: Gender, Psychoanalysis, Repression, Trauma, Shakespeare

Introduction:

"O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!" (Act III, Sc II): These lines adequately and vividly capture the trauma and torment of a mind rife with the diabolic presence of scorpions, thereby, referring to the psychological distress

that the act of regicide has brought about for Macbeth. But perhaps Macbeth's shocking exploration of his own mind in these lines serve as a categorically vivid lens to understand Lady Macbeth's state of mind too. Critics have, since the first performance of the play around 1606, often delved into the psychological sinking of Lady Macbeth into madness.

A certain case can be made under these theoretical approaches by claiming that the root cause of her trauma lies in certain unresolved trauma and her almost obsessive need for control and her desperation to control an event in which she or her husband has little control over. This unresolved trauma can be said to be rooted in early attachment disruptions. Attachment Theory can be said to be the experiences derived and emerging from early relational experiences of a person which leads to their emotional regulation being influenced into certain coping mechanisms (Bowlby 1969; Burke et al. 2015). Trauma Theory on the other hand highlights how an individual suffers from repressing their trauma and anguish which ultimately leads to dissociation (Bettmann 2005; Herman 1992). Lastly, when reading the play under Feminist Theory, we may contextualise Lady Macbeth's struggle as a means to deal with the situation under patriarchal control where she is denied autonomy over her ambitions (Showalter 1985; Gilbert and Gubar 1979).

The study attempts to provide a multidimensional analysis of the character of Lady Macbeth by integrating the feminist theory, trauma theory and attachment theory - perspectives that have been largely ignored in traditional literary criticism. While feminist scholars have investigated the rejection of femininity of Lady Macbeth as a function of disregard against patriarchal norms, they often do not consider the psychological cost of this rejection. Similarly, Macbeth's psychoanalytic and trauma-centred readings are largely

focused on Macbeth's crime and moral decay, ignoring how trauma and psychological repression has shaped the collapse of Lady Macbeth. By incorporating the novel theoretical angles, her insanity can be seen from a novel vantage point, moving away from the traditional view of only her guilt.

In addition, the application of Attachment Theory provides information about how early relationship patterns and emotional contingents contribute to the inability to process the crisis in a healthy way. More broadly, this study contributes to literary psychology and feminist criticism, indicating how gender expectations and psychological repressions work in shaping the fate of a character. It also opens up the way for interdisciplinary approaches in Shakespeare's studies, showing how psychological principles can deepen our understanding of literary characters. Ultimately, this research underlines the implications of the real world of gender trauma and suppression, which makes it not only relevant for literary studies, but also leads to varied discussions in psychological consequences of mental health, gender identity and social expectations.

Lady Macbeth's psychological crumbling isn't always merely an effect of guilt over murder. However, it is also a result of the repression of her femininity, the trauma imposed by way of patriarchal gender norms, and deep-seated attachment insecurities. Trauma theory similarly explains her descent into insanity, as her compulsive behaviours such as sleepwalking and obsessive hand-washing

manifest unprocessed trauma and repressed guilt. Additionally, attachment principle offers perception into her emotional detachment and control over Macbeth, suggesting an insecure attachment style that forestalls her from processing distress in a wholesome manner. By integrating feminist theory, trauma principle, and attachment concept, this paper attempts to give a more nuanced analysis of Lady Macbeth's tragic downfall, demonstrating how the intersection of mental repression, gendered trauma, and emotional detachment leads to her ultimate self-destruction.

Review of Literature

Lady Macbeth has been known for rejecting traditional notions of femininity by feminist and literary critics. She has been hailed as a woman who dared to play dangerous power games, and as a character, her figure triumphs on the Elizabethan stage where she goes hand and hand with her male counterpart to secure a place in the power structures. However, contrary to this, there has been several scholars and feminist critics who believe that Lady Macbeth's ultimate descent into madness and her ultimate defeat is nothing but an eye wash and merely is one of the methods by which patriarchal norms are legitimised where in transgressing, women and bold women like Lady Macbeth are punished for their ambition. Roy (2024) claims that the stunningly charismatic figure, and powerful figure of Lady Macbeth is nothing but an anomaly who rejects conventional feminine ideals, and manages to double in the power politics with her husband thereby challenging the conventional ideals of

femininity and patriarchy.

Her powerful soliloquy where she expresses her desire of grading cruelty, strong-headedness, aggression, and ambition is her clarion call to renounce tenderness, love, and nurturing instincts, which make up a woman's worldview. And in doing so she denounces the role that society puts on her, and rather becomes almost like an equal to her husband's struggle and ambition for the throne (Roy 2024).

In fact, this is the moment when Shakespeare is announcing a woman character who is challenging the entire idea of Elizabethan worldview. Knowingly or unknowingly, Shakespeare was engaging within the complexities of female agency. In effect, Lady Macbeth at certain points and junctures in the play, seem to dominate over her husband. Her methods of teasing, taunting and almost insulting Macbeth and his masculinity – “When you durst do it, then you were a man” (Act I, Sc VII) is her unique method of using Macbeth's insecurity to force him to commit the act of regicide. Neely (1985) claims that Lady Macbeth's ultimate fall is a reminder, a cautionary warning that women who transgress will ultimately be defeated. Her confidence and defiance in the beginning of the play sharply contrast with her later hallucinations, bouts of fear and violent hand-washing. Perhaps, this is a reminder for viewers that as a woman she feigned confidence and defiance and self-assertion but in reality she was never capable of handling the pressures of power struggles (Roy 2024).

Several other critics believe that her ultimate fate reflects the fact that women can or are not suitable for political success and that the ultimate result of her assertion will be met with punishment.

But at the same time, Lady Macbeth's character makes us think if Shakespeare was just reinforcing his patriarchal norms of the days or whether he was showing how women clicked on to whatever agency they received within the patriarchal structures, and in this way was exposing the inherent injustice related to patriarchy. Whatever might be the case, her ultimate fall, and her tragic end, only serves to establish male supremacy. However, her character remains memorable for her defiance of societal expectations. In fact, she is the only reason why Macbeth became the king. Nabhan proclaims that Lady Macbeth's undermining and subverting her own husband's masculinity leads to her questioning her husband's courage, power, and strength. (Nabhan 2020) Therefore, what this means is that in a way, Macbeth masculinity is being equated with his guts to kill the king and seize power. However, after seizing power, Macbeth goes on to become even more defined and ruthless and strong, whereas Lady Macbeth goes towards her downfall.

Nur et al. (2023) holds the view that after seizing power, Macbeth does not give importance to his wife's advice, and seems to disregard her in all the actions that he will commit later on in the play. Her influence on her husband is lost after Macbeth gains power. Therefore, this idea and this aspect clearly

demarcates the fact that there are limits to the power, whatsoever it might be, given to women. Therefore, this critical feminist interpretation shows the limits of Lady Macbeth's position and her power within the patriarchal framework. This is because once she had fulfilled her purpose, she is now not needed in other pressing, immediate and difficult consultations regarding power and the royal kingdom. For such matters, her advice is not needed and therefore she serves as Macbeth's consort only till he achieves his ambitions. Therefore, in a male dominated world, any subversion of gender role will only be tolerated if it serves some purpose in the patriarchal framework. In this case, the purpose was served with the seizure of power and hence Lady Macbeth's advice is no longer needed.

Also, the consequences of Lady Macbeth's acts have also been taken by feminist criticism. There is an argument that there is a psychological reason for Lady Macbeth's descent into madness & that is her vain attempts to practice traditionally masculine traits (Nur et al. 2023). The mental degeneration that Lady Macbeth goes into, such as her sleep walking and her obsession with washing her hands, clearly demarcate a degenerated mental breakdown and an internal conflict which has befallen her upon committing a supposedly masculine act, that is, of homicide. So, therefore, there are some critical viewpoints which believe that her downfall is a cautionary tale and a word of precaution to keep women under check that they should not venture into

the territory of the males.

However, her rule in defying traditional gender roles has always been at the centre of feminist interpretations with Lady Macbeth's status, dangling between her image as an empowered woman or her image as a losing figure. In this case it has been analysed that Lady Macbeth's inclination towards violence is a method of defiance and also it reinforces and upholds the patriarchal system which she is trying to survive (Reyes & Kenny 2020). They argue that her call to "unsex" (Act I, Sc V) herself shows her desire to abandon femininity only to see her husband becoming the king, and therefore she does not seek power for herself, but rather for her man. And in doing so, she is placing limitations on her own female agency and wants to channel her ambition through Macbeth only.

Eubanks (2024) has built upon this discussion by exploring Lady Macbeth's rejection of her maternal identity. She famously proclaimed that she can sacrifice her own child in Act I Sc VII. However, at this point of time, it appears that she is willing to sacrifice and give up and destroy all traditional femininity and wants to programme herself as a ruthless Empress. However, Eubanks also believe that her position of rejecting femininity and rejecting motherhood is short-lived and ephemeral because despite her strong proclamations, she is ignored acutely by Macbeth once he seizes power. Eubanks also suggests that her exclusion from the later decisions by her own husband, Macbeth reinforces the patriarchal notion that women will not be able to sustain in

the male territory.

Keini (2020) in this case, presents with a psycho analytical perspective through the Freudian theory. Keini suggests that her actions are basically a symbol of her deep-seated psychological repressions where she's trying to repress her emotions, her moral constraints and her femininity which is associated with women in general.

Eubanks (2024) also discusses that Shakespeare deliberately blurred the lines between masculinity and femininity. According to Eubanks, she is fragile in the face of authoritative male territory. So she begins as an instigator of violence, but later on is completely relocated and ignored once the purpose is solved.

Lady Macbeth: A Psycho-Literary Perspective

Many critics emphasize the role of Lady Macbeth, whose manipulation of her husband and eventual descent into madness serve as a counterpoint to Macbeth's unchecked ambition. Showalter (1985) argues that Lady Macbeth's psychological unravelling is deeply intertwined with gendered anxieties, as her transgression of traditional female roles particularly as the instigator of murder ultimately leads to her mental collapse. This reading aligns with Freudian psychoanalysis, which posits that ambition is not only a reflection of individual desires but is also shaped by societal constructs, including gender norms. Freud (1923) suggested that when ambition is unregulated by the superego, it can destabilize the ego,

leading to neurotic or psychotic symptoms.

Expanding on this psychoanalytic lens, contemporary clinical psychology explores how societal expectations of gender influences mental health. Shields (2008) highlights that ambition in women, when constrained by rigid social norms, often manifests in psychological distress, including anxiety and depression. Lady Macbeth embodies this tension, as her rejection of maternal and submissive roles grants her temporary power but ultimately results in profound psychological deterioration. Her sleepwalking and compulsive hand washing symptoms often associated with trauma-induced obsessive-compulsive disorder serve as physical manifestations of internalized guilt and repression. The disintegration of her mental state thus reflects both the psychological cost of violating gendered expectations and the broader implications of ambition when detached from moral and emotional regulation.

Analysis and Discussion

Lady Macbeth: Attachment Theory & Analysis

Attachment theory can be traced back to object relations theory, from which it evolved while challenging traditional psychoanalytic perspectives. According to Bowlby (1969), an individual's attachment experiences shape their internal functioning and can have a lasting psychological impact. This theory brought a groundbreaking perspective on human relationships, leading to significant changes in social policies concerning child welfare and

early parental separation (Gomez 1997).

Attachment theory, first introduced by Bowlby, explains how young children naturally seek closeness and comfort from a trusted caregiver when they feel scared, anxious, or vulnerable. This bond helps them feel safe. Bowlby based his ideas on evolution, believing these behaviors developed to help children survive and eventually reproduce. So, the focus wasn't really on parenting at first, it was more about how the child's bond with their caregiver works from a biological and survival point of view. Later, Ainsworth et al. (1978) added to this by observing how children react in a setup called the Strange Situation. Their work highlighted clear differences in how children form attachments, which brought more focus to the role of parenting. There are four persistent styles of attachment that can be reliably recognized in the Strange Situation in even at-risk populations of infants or young children globally: secure, insecure-avoidant, insecure-resistant, and insecure-disorganized. (Fearon & Roisman 2017)

It is particularly interesting how Bettmann & Jasperson (2007) extend attachment theory beyond traditional psychotherapy, demonstrating its applicability to adult therapeutic settings. They highlight that internal working models of attachment continue to shape emotional and relational responses throughout adulthood (Bowlby 1988).

Attachment theory has broad applications across various fields, one notable example

being Bettmann's (2005) study on understanding adult depression through the lens of attachment theory. Her findings indicate that early attachment patterns significantly influence the development of depression in adulthood. Individuals with insecure attachment styles are at a higher risk of experiencing depression and often struggle to form and maintain close relationships. This study provides valuable insights for therapists, helping them better understand and treat individuals with depression by addressing underlying attachment-related issues (Bettmann 2005). Similarly, other studies have explored the application of Attachment Theory in understanding psychological disorders, using it as a foundational framework. Attachment Theory offers an alternative perspective to the traditionally accepted diagnostic model, enabling therapists to examine the origins and progression of clients' mental health challenges more comprehensively (Burke et al. 2015).

There are numerous studies on Lady Macbeth's ambition, guilt, and descent into madness. However, applying Attachment Theory allows us to delve deeper into why she behaved the way she did. This framework takes us back to her psychological roots, exploring how her patterns of attachment may have shaped her actions. While *Macbeth* does not provide detailed information about her childhood or family relationships, analyzing her behavior in the play offers insight into the possible origins of her emotional struggles. For instance, her need for control, emotional suppression, and

ultimate breakdown may stem from unresolved wounds from her early life. Studies suggest that insecure attachment is linked to emotional dysregulation and an increased risk of psychopathology (Burke et al. 2015; Bettmann 2005). It is possible that disrupted relationships in her formative years contributed to her insecure attachment, making her character more humanized, depicting her not merely as a ruthless villain or someone consumed by power, but as a psychologically complex individual shaped by past trauma.

Lady Macbeth's instant reaction to Macbeth's letter calling upon spirits to "unsex" (Act I, Sc V) her demonstrates a shielding rejection of her emotional self, reinforcing the idea that she views vulnerability as a liability. Her manipulation of Macbeth into committing regicide also aligns with worrying-preoccupied attachment styles, wherein a character exerts hyper-control to hold closeness and prevent abandonment (Burke et al. 2015). This oscillation between emotional detachment and coercion highlights the instability feature of disorganized attachment, frequently stemming from unresolved relational trauma (Bettmann 2005).

As the play progresses, Lady Macbeth's attachment defenses disintegrate, revealing the effects of attachment trauma and mental repression. Studies on adult attachment and psychopathology suggest that suppressed emotions and unprocessed trauma can take place in intrusive thoughts, compulsive behaviors, and dissociative states (Burke et al. 2015). Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene in

which she obsessively reenacts the murder and tries to scrub away imaginary blood demonstrates the resurfacing of repressed trauma. In attachment terms, this represents a failure of her inner working version, as the mechanisms she relied upon to hold control (emotional suppression and detachment) do not feature. Research indicates that unresolved attachment trauma can result in a sense of inner fragmentation, wherein the man or woman struggles to combine past experiences into a coherent identification (Bettmann 2005). Lady Macbeth's suicide can therefore be visible now not simply as an act of guilt, however as the very last outcome of a delicate attachment machine breaking down beneath intense psychological misery.

Lady Macbeth: Through Trauma Theory

Ferenczi defines trauma as a psychological split in the self, causing a person to lose touch with their emotions and spontaneity. A trauma victim often feels as though a part of their identity has died, leading to the emergence of a new, altered self. Ferenczi also discusses how trauma survivors adopt the behaviours and traits of their oppressors as a means of survival. In doing so, they suppress their true emotions, struggle to express genuine feelings, and internalize the oppressor's perspective, resulting in self-repression and submission (Frankel 1998).

Additionally, Ferenczi highlights how trauma can lead to compulsive repetition in various forms. Victims unknowingly engage in extreme behaviours as a way to maintain a sense of

control. It is also crucial to recognize that trauma survivors may develop a submissive relationship with pain and suffering, often perceiving themselves as guilty or responsible for what has happened to them. This distorted self-perception can cause them to reject emotions such as pleasure, softness, or any qualities associated with vulnerability (Frankel 1998).

When applying trauma theory to Lady Macbeth's character in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, her psychological struggle becomes evident through a Ferenczian lens. Her plea to be "unsexed" can be understood as an extreme psychological defence against societal gender roles. Ferenczi's concept of suppressing the "hurt child" self-aligns perfectly with Lady Macbeth's transformation, she actively represses the aspects of herself associated with nurturing, emotion, and dependence in favour of a hardened, aggressive persona (Frankel 1998).

In a patriarchal society where power is equated with masculinity and only men are permitted to wield authority, Lady Macbeth identifies with the oppressive forces that seek to limit her. To navigate this world, she embraces cruelty and domination, mirroring the violent men around her as a means of asserting control. Understanding Lady Macbeth's breakdown is crucial. Initially, she appears composed, forcefully suppressing her guilt and fear to maintain control. Notably, she does not show immediate signs of psychological distress after Duncan's murder. Instead, her breakdown occurs later, demonstrating a delayed trauma

response. This delay suggests that her initial emotional repression allows her to function, but over time, the unresolved trauma begins to manifest. The cognitive dissonance of desiring power while knowing that murder is morally wrong eventually gives rise to psychological symptoms such as sleepwalking, obsessive hand-washing, and hallucinations. These symptoms expose the fragility of her repression, revealing that it was only a temporary defence. Her eventual collapse, particularly in the sleepwalking scene, signifies the resurfacing of deeply repressed trauma, which she had desperately tried to dissociate from but could no longer contain.

Lady Macbeth: Female Subjectivity & Feminist Theory

Feminist theory, as discussed by Crawford and Marekake (1989), critiques traditional scientific epidemiology, which claims to be objective and fair, arguing instead that knowledge is socially constructed and often reflects androcentric biases. The social constructionist approach challenges static perceptions of gender, conceptualizing it following West and Zimmerman (1987) as an ongoing social process rather than a fixed biological trait. The integration of intersectional perspectives, particularly through Patricia Hill Collins' (1986) Black feminist thought, underscores the need to incorporate diverse experiences into feminist epistemology. Ultimately, feminist theory seeks to redefine knowledge production, challenge androcentric structures, advocate for inclusivity, and emphasize the situated nature

of all knowledge (Crawford & Marekake 1989).

Lady Macbeth's descent into madness can be understood not merely as personal guilt but as a collapse under the weight of gendered expectations and repressive psychological structures. Drawing from Angie Voela's (2011) feminist-psychoanalytic reading of femininity, Lady Macbeth can be viewed as someone caught within what Voela terms the "scripts of heterosexuality" cultural narratives that prescribe "recipes of compulsory happiness" and idealized feminine performance (p. 10). In striving to suppress her vulnerability and embody masculine ambition as per her plea to "unsex me here" (Act I, Sc V), Lady Macbeth represses core aspects of her subjectivity, much like Voela's heroines who "embark on a journey which bears similarities to the psychoanalytic process," (Voela 2011) confronting idealized identifications and silenced desires (p. 9). According to Voela (2011), such repression is not passive but enforced by internalized gender roles that eventually erupt in fragmentation and crisis. Lady Macbeth's hallucinations and obsessive hand-washing "Out, damned spot!" (Act V, Sc I) may be read, then, as the return of the repressed, a Freudian unraveling of the rigid, masculine script she attempts to inhabit. As Voela (2011) highlights, femininity in late modernity is "an ongoing exploration which ever so often hits the wall of impossibility and changes direction" (p. 13). This impossibility resonates with Lady Macbeth's tragic arc: her performance of power through silence, control, and ambition ultimately collapses, and her final

silence her offstage suicide can be read not only as despair but as a symbolic refusal to continue performing within a patriarchal drama. Echoing Voela's (2011) argument, this silence may suspend "the trivialization of femininity" (p. 13) and reopen space for interpreting her madness not as weakness, but as a feminist metaphor for resistance.

The Repression of Lady Macbeth and the Social Construction of Gender

According to feminist philosophy, gender is not a permanent biological fact but rather a socially produced performance (West & Zimmerman 1987). It is possible to interpret Lady Macbeth's well-known "unsex me here" (Act I, Sc V) soliloquy as an attempt to reject the socially enforced femininity she associates with weakness and instead represent a masculine-coded type of strength. But as feminist scholars have pointed out, rather than being a genuine expression of autonomy, this internalized rejection of femininity is frequently a sign of patriarchal conditioning.

Shakespeare continuously challenges gender norms by depicting Lady Macbeth as someone who actively tries to eradicate her femininity in order to get political power, according to Eubanks (2024) in *Subversion of Traditional Gender Roles in Macbeth*. Her spiral into insanity, however, indicates that this change is ultimately unsustainable since it results in a significant psychological conflict between her aspirations and the position that society has placed on her as a woman.

From the standpoint of feminist psychology,

gendered psychological suppression is the reason behind Lady Macbeth's collapse. According to Crawford and Marecek (1989), women are put in a difficult situation by traditional gender norms because they must repress their feelings and disassociate themselves from their gendered identity in order to express their ambition, but doing so comes at the expense of psychological stability. According to feminist ideas of gendered distress, Lady Macbeth's obsessive handwashing and sleepwalking may be seen as symptoms of suppressed trauma.

Objectives of the paper

To examine Lady Macbeth's madness as a result of intertwined psychological and societal factors using Attachment Theory, Trauma Theory, and Feminist perspectives.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative psycho-literary design to interpret Lady Macbeth's character using attachment theory, trauma theory, and feminist criticism. Lady Macbeth's character was analysed using these three lenses. This approach helps in understanding how Shakespeare marks madness both as psychological and socio-cultural phenomena. The primary source of data is Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1623, First Folio version).

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Lady Macbeth's descent into madness is not solely

the result of guilt but rather a consequence of psychological repression, gendered trauma and attachment insecurities. Attachment Theory and its application reveal how early relational experiences and emotional detachment contribute to her inability to process distress in a healthy way. Trauma Theory reveals and explains her repressed emotions and internalized suffering which gets manifested through compulsive behaviours, such as sleepwalking and obsessive handwashing. Lastly, Feminist Theory contextualizes her downfall within a patriarchal structure that forces women to reject their femininity to access power, ultimately leading to psychological fragmentations.

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