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**Dr. Anupama Rajoria**  
Assistant Professor, Govt. SS  
College, Mahapura, Jaipur,  
Rajasthan, India

## Lady Macbeth: The indomitable courage

**Dr. Anupama Rajoria**

### Abstract

Lady Macbeth is one of the most strong willed characters created by Shakespeare. She is stronger as compared to her husband Macbeth and forever tries to fulfil her duty towards her husband in thick and thin.

**Keywords:** Strong, courage, Macbeth, play

### Introduction

Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's remarkable tragedy involving a lot of action following regicide. Written in 1603-07 the play revolves around the quest of Macbeth's inordinate ambition and his subsequent doom. Apart from the tragedy's various thematic nuances, it is Lady Macbeth's character which highlights and dominates the play. Lady Macbeth is Macbeth's wife who is not only an antithesis of her husband in terms of moral courage, but also antithetical to society's concept of the weak female psyche.

Lady Macbeth's character has two very striking shades which dissolve with time and action of the plot. As a wife, she epitomizes all those qualities which she is supposed to observe. She is a dutiful, devoted and loving better half of Macbeth. Another hue to her personality is her possession of phenomenal traits like indomitable courage coupled with iron stability of resolve. She is equipped with a formidable determination too.

As a wife, Lady Macbeth is completely committed to Macbeth. She deeply and ardently loves him, finds fulfilment in him, lives only for him and for his greatness. Macbeth too acknowledges her allegiance, loves her and respects her. He values her vices and in their companionship imparts her an esteemed status. He addresses her as "my dearest partner of greatness". Lady Macbeth's assertive role in her husband's life, helps him to achieve all that he wants. Not only this, but Lady Macbeth has great influence on her husband who shares all his personal and professional details with her. She is the only person whom Macbeth trusts to narrate his meeting with the witches, to reveal his inordinate ambition. The Thane, by showering trust and love on his wife, treats her equal in terms of gender milieu, because generally the patriarchs never considered their wives capable enough to trust upon. Macbeth even respects her advice and treads on the path shown by her to him. When he feels feeble at the time of Duncan's murder, he draws strength from her. A 'valiant soldier' is seen seeking help and support from a woman---and why not, Lady Macbeth is courage personified by Shakespeare.

Lady Macbeth is obedient towards Macbeth and prompts him to live up to his social status. Her co-operation with Macbeth is instinctive. On his word, she promptly, and efficiently manages for King Duncan's stay and dinner under her settlements. She proves to be a good host and an impressed Duncan compliments her by saying that she had proved to be a "noble hostess" and "honoured hostess".

She loves her husband from the fathoms of her heart, yet there is no obvious display of affection in the play. It certainly does not intend that the couple is not romantically inclined. Yes, there are certain genuine glimpses of love visible in the play. Lack of visual expression of love was perhaps an act of deliberate dramatic concealment by Shakespeare because the other nuances had to be highlighted and also because the intricate plot of the play did not allow romance to be shown.

Lady Macbeth was a woman as efficient as a psychologist who could expeditiously analyze the mental agitation of her husband.

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Dr. Anupama Rajoria**  
Assistant Professor, Govt. SS  
College, Mahapura, Jaipur,  
Rajasthan, India

Understanding Macbeth's weak willed temperament she considers her supreme duty to help and support him at the hour of distress. She infers "Your face my Thane is a book where men may read strange matters" and consults him to "beguile the time, look like the time, bear welcome in your eye." She diagnoses the "germ" in Macbeth's mind and also anticipates his infirm will, and thus stimulates him for Duncan's murder. On confronting with Macbeth's coward attitude she swiftly switches to the role of a motivator and diligently brings her morally weak husband out of his own fears and hallucinations. "Screw your courage to the sticking place and will not fail."

Lady Macbeth with commendable expertise employs verbosity as a staunch medium to galvanize her husband. She provocatively jeers at him "And live a coward in thine own esteem", "Like a poor cat in the adage?" "What beast wasn't then, That made you break this enterprise to me?" Such harsh and castigating words are definitely bitter at the auditory level, but for the soul of Macbeth, they act like a fast relief medicine which when administered promptly rejuvenates Macbeth, who musters all courage to murder Duncan. Lady Macbeth's unforgettable words and her imperious will thus become the driving force which keeps in check Macbeth's dithering. This powerful shade imparted to a woman, was possible only through Shakespeare's quill. The maestros use of female verbosity in an affirmative manner, was the Bard's own rebelliousness against the patriarchal conventions of female reticence, and his tribute to the versatile quality of the feminine sensibility.

Even after Duncan's murder when Macbeth returns in a trembling and terror stricken state, Lady Macbeth on the other hand exhibits a remarkable presence of mind. She readily controls all her feelings and takes immediate charge of the situation. When Macbeth looks at the blood stained, dagger in his hand and says "It is a sorry sight", Lady Macbeth consoles him by replying "A foolish thought, to say a sorry sight." She asks him to wash his hands "Get this filthy witness from your hand." Still, the weak Macbeth is unable to control himself; on the other hand, Lady Macbeth actively and courageously gives completion to the act. She takes the dagger from his hand and smears the grooms cheeks with Duncans blood, and places the dagger by their side. The control with which Lady Macbeth takes charge is remarkable and worth admiration and her role in comforting and consoling her weak husband is incredible.

The thematic sequence of the play depends on the inordinate ambition, but this aspiration is Macbeth's alone. It is Macbeth who had for years secretly cherished the desire to become the King in the recesses of his mind, that is why the witches choose Macbeth and meet him and it is Macbeth in whose psyche they provide the apt atmosphere for the "germs" to be activated. Had Lady Macbeth also reared the analogous ambition, the witches would have definitely chosen the stronger one to act upon. Lady Macbeth has no ambition of her own. She solicits only her husband's welfare, and consequently, she only helps him to achieve his goal. She never speaks of her own elevation nor has a quench of power, whatever she does is for Macbeth, by Macbeth and of Macbeth. She exists only for Macbeth's exaltation.

Though Lady Macbeth is a woman embodying indomitable courage, yet on occasions when she feels that she needs some extra power and impetus to enter the game and chamber of gruesome acts, murders and deaths, she tries to

get nerved by the unnatural access to ferocity and consequently, she invokes the spirits of the dark world and demands for that extra power from them.

Her act of praying to the spirits and demanding power is not unusual, and our literature is full of such exemplum where when a mortal feels weak he seeks powers from supernatural agents or fierce elements of Nature. Had not Shelley the great lyricist demanded that extra power from the "Wild West Wind?", in his eponymous poem "Ode to the West Wind".

For a long time, Lady Macbeth's unnatural ferocity and passionate courage have invited critics to claim her as the third witch in the play. Such attempts have only been done to downplay the indomitable courage and other unique qualities of this unusually strong woman. When analyzed with a deeper sensitivity and myopic precision, Lady Macbeth appears not only an awesome and commanding woman in the arena of men, politics and power, but also as one of the most sublime creations - the heroine of Shakespeare.

The supernatural witches in the play, appear foul, act foul and play foul. They instigate Macbeth "shalt be king hereafter" by prophesying monarchial powers to him. Lady Macbeth is a soft, delicate and beautiful woman and never does she appear foul, nor does she ever instigates Macbeth for anything foul. She just "spurs" her husband's conscience to act for which he has already planned. Secondly, had she been a witch why would she have the need to unsex herself? Witches have no sex, they are just elements. Thirdly witches are in themselves all powerful and do not need strength from any other external source. Had Lady Macbeth been a witch why would she have had the need to look upto these exigencies?

Even Macbeth's society never tagged Lady Macbeth as a witch because in no manner had she actively and openly challenged the patriarchal order. According to a study conducted by Marianne Hester in "Lewd Women and Wicked Witches: A Study of Female Dominance" she suggested that witches were articulated as empowered women who were celebrated for their non-conformity, defiance and empowerment. They challenged patriarchal authority and hierarchy by specifically threatening hegemonic sex and gender! (52)

Lady Macbeth does not conform to any of the above articulations, never asserts, challenges or establishes her own aspirations. Whatever she had done, she did only for her husband Macbeth, and she had only followed unconsciously the path trodden by Macbeth. Loi Toyson too defends her and says "Women invest themselves.... in the accomplishment of their husbands and sons"(97).

Lady Macbeth's investment of her strength for Macbeth results in her own tragic illness and end. Her illness in form of O.C.D. "Obsessive Compulsive Disorder" coupled with somnambulism [night walk] evokes a cathartic feeling in us and has a purging effect. The "Sleep Walking Scene" showing Lady Macbeth in a pathetic condition is perhaps one of the most sublime and celebrated scenes in the world, and is of a very exalted aesthetic quality. In spite of being the Queen of the powerful King Macbeth, she suffers from a sleeping disorder. Unable to sleep peacefully, she often gets up at night and walks with a taper and seems to be frightened by darkness and night. Her gentle spirit is broken by the reactions of the moral self-violence. She walks in sleep but her eyes are wide open, blank and full of tears and

remorse. She is troubled with hallucinations and fears of blood and its smell, and in this state of low consciousness, she repeatedly performs the activity of washing hands. "Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh! Oh! Oh!" Her act of washing hands repeatedly is a psychiatric disorder, a medical condition that results in repetitive behaviour like counting, checking, cleaning or washing hands endlessly. And witches definitely do not have any medical ailments.

Her illness and mental disorder are definitely a direct result of her husband's inordinate ambition. She even speaks about all the secret crimes done by her when she is not awake and conscious. Her walking in sleep is the recoil of her revolting efforts she had made for her husband's desires. "What's done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed," She visualises the physical horrors of the scenes of the fatal night as the hallucinations, and these memories become uncontrollable in sleep. Her sense of failure and frustrated hope and especially the bitterness of the isolation from Macbeth, whom she had ardently loved and sacrificed all for, results in her wraith like figure of despair. It is a pity to watch an iron-willed lady in a pathetic state. We are ourselves astonished to observe and question- Is this the same woman who was supreme in her will and single minded in pursuit of her ambition? A hard hitting woman who had disintegrated her supreme will by saying "A little water will clear us of this deed" could have never ever imagined that one day she will have to replace these very words with a helpless cry. "Will these hands never be clean?" The same reversal is evident when she had at one time said "What's done cannot be undone" and now says "What's done is done". We too wonder when we see that a lady who had been the controlling power of the play and the hero is today unable to control herself. Yes, her suffering is due to her husband but, guilt, remorse and above all separation from Macbeth becomes the prime reason behind her psychiatric illness. Over the time Macbeth loses confidence in her, does not confide in her for his further plans and no longer loves her. He has in addition become a brute and tyrant which Lady Macbeth never approves of, and in this condition, the bond of love between the two slackens, and it is Lady Macbeth who suffers.

Suffering it seemed had been her companion of life. She had initially suffered at the death of her child for when she says "I have given suck and know, How tender' tis to love the babe that milks me....." She confirms that she had experienced the supreme joy of femininity- motherhood. But later without any other child, it seems that forever she suffers with the pangs of secondary symptoms of infertility. Feminine she had always been, but her feminine sensibility is unusual for she is a rare woman who denies herself the comfort of her own femininity, for the unselfish and deep love of her husband.

Throughout her life, and even in her death, Lady Macbeth had remained dutiful, devoted and faithful as a wife. She had suffered all her life due to her husband. Her fate in all its terror of long drawn torture and inglorious death stirs sympathy in us, but we also hail this indomitably courageous woman, who by supporting her morally weak husband mocks at the issues of gender stereotyping and of the conceptualisation of women being morally inferior to men. Juliet Dusinberre claims in one of her articles "In the sixteenth century the idea that women had conscience which

might operate independently from men's, might even judge and oppose the male conscience, was revolutionary." Through the delineation of Lady Macbeth's character, Shakespeare himself salutes the iron-willed conscience and indomitable courage of a woman. We hush our breath, bow our head and salute Lady Macbeth for her outstanding qualities and her image of a dutiful wife, and her supreme sacrifice.

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