

**HUMAN SPECIES ACROSS THE AGES CONSIST ONE SPECIMEN:
A CHARACTER ANALYSIS OF SHAKESPEAREAN CHARACTER LADY MACBETH
AND THE CONFSSIONAL POET ANNE SEXTON**

Neelam Dasgupta

Dr. Jyoti Sharma

ABSTRACT

It is surprising to note that Shakespearean works have portrayed suicide and the suicidal tendencies of his most famous characters, more often than his contemporaries. Be it, the young lovers Romeo and Juliet in the play Romeo and Juliet or Brutus and Cassius in Julius Caesar or Othello who kills himself after killing his lover or Ophelia who commits suicide in Hamlet and above all, the play Antony and Cleopatra which ends with five suicides along with the death of both Antony and Cleopatra.

Although, the word suicide is of Latin origin, there are many instances of suicides in the Bible too. Romans committed suicide or self-killing to save guard their honour and pride and they earned great respect from their countrymen for their act. The aversion to suicide is definitely not Biblical, in fact, one of the first person to label self-murder was Saint Augustine who argued in his work 'The City of God' that God's command, 'Thou shalt not kill' (Exodus 20:13) must exempt a person to take his own life. My attempt is to draw a parallel between Shakespeare who wrote in the Elizabethan era and the Confessional poets who left the literary world in awe with their bold work in the twentieth century. It is an attempt to study the Psychological, the circumstantial, the historical, ideological and religious similarities between the two, during two diverse ages with special focus on the famous Shakespearean character of Lady Macbeth from the play Macbeth. The paper also attempts to answer if Lady Macbeth marked with her deep sense of guilt and her self-killing inclination, can actually be called the precursor to the confessional genre.

Keywords: Guilt, rejection, subjectivity, suicide, society, ambitions

INTRODUCTION

The universal appeal of Shakespeare's plays cannot be questioned. Most of his readers feel that Shakespeare has depicted a realistic picture of the contemporary society. A society, which was amalgamation of diverse people having different views and perspectives. Whether or not can we call Lady Macbeth a precursor and a champion of guilt and self-killing is a matter of great discussion. Some of the

critics call Lady Macbeth a subaltern who speaks an alternative discourse, which the mainstream cannot or do not hear, to their own peril. Shakespearean plays have often used madness as a trait to explain most important aspects of humans and human life. Strangely enough the sane characters behave insanely and the mad ones are most clairvoyant and truthful in Shakespearean works. They are given voice of sanity, warning and counsel. Thus Shakespeare exercised the power and ability to state the truth as it is, without fear or bestowing favour. The witches and the falstaff in Shakespearean plays are subalterns, that are considered to be scum of society and yet they watch the processes of history and the formation of the state at a distance. They grapple with the determining forces around them and in the process they present an alternative view to overpowering social structure. There are quite a number of similarities noticed in the writing styles of the Confessional poets of the Twentieth century and that of the Shakespearean plays. The confessional poets like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Snodgrass, and Anne Sexton etc shared the same suicidal and depressive tendencies just like many Shakespearean characters. No doubt there have been subjectivity found in Shakespeare's work and Shakespearean characters. Their thoughts have been rejected by the society and many a times these poets have been considered either mad or the borderline cases by their medical consultants. These poets have charted their feelings and experiences boldly through their poetry and have often told the blatant truths about life, society, love, family, sexual love, and childhood.

Striking similarities have been found while attempting to write this paper between Anne Sexton a confessional poet, winner of Pulitzer Award in 1967 for her work 'Live or Die' and Lady Macbeth, the second leading character in Shakespeare's play Macbeth written in 1606 . Anne Sexton in one her signature poetry 'Her Kind' specifically talked about how it was like for a woman to prove her worth in the selfish society. She revealed the fact that situations and norms of the society were different for a woman and a man. There was a stark gender bias. Anne Sexton was subjected to nervous break downs and had tried to commit suicide many times during her life time. She was admitted in a neuropsychiatry hospital for the treatment of depression and mental instability. Anne Sexton was familiar with staring eyes and judging minds focused on her. She did not stop herself from challenging the views and the old fashioned norms of the society. She blatantly called herself an outcast for this approach of hers.

In Shakespeare's Macbeth, Lady Macbeth and her husband together have committed the most dangerous crime of killing the king Duncan. She masterminded the plan and her husband executed it. Lady Macbeth's character gives us an insight into the society of the fifteenth-sixteenth century and reveals that the women then could have been as ambitious and cruel as men. The society denied them the means to pursue the ambitions on their own. The only flip side which was clearly projected was that women had

always been more sensitive and susceptible to consciousness pangs. The guilt of her actions in order to fulfill her ambition and desires plagues her more strongly than men afterwards. The witches in 'Macbeth' cast a magical spell upon Macbeth and initiate the dramatic action required for a high-volt tragedy. They are so powerful as to turn the 'fair' into 'foul' or vice-versa and are instrumental in Macbeth's downfall. Is Lady Macbeth the fourth witch who propels Macbeth towards his doom? This is the question which comes in the mind of many readers. Some critics say she is essentially a subaltern as she is outside Macbeth's hegemonic power structure. She is a minority voice, who is after a while insignificant completely. She is heard loud and clear when speaking Macbeth's power discourse and the moment she stops playing that role, she ceases to be heard; eventually moving into a space of complete silence. She is most audible while planning Duncan's murder, where she appears to dominate Macbeth completely.

"Come you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, and fill me from the crown to the toe top full of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood; stop up the access and passage to remorse, that no compunctious visitings of nature, Shake my fell purpose, nor keep the peace between the effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts, and take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers, wherever in your sightless substances you wait on nature's mischief! Come thick night, And pall thee in the dunnest 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!" (Macbeth, Act1, scene 5)

She manipulates her husband by questioning his manhood and his love for her. Initially, despite of not being able to sleep in the night because of her terrific dreams, she is able to maintain her sanity and composure during the day, even more than her husband. It is later that she feels the burden of her conscious and her physical and mental condition deteriorates. She starts walking during her sleep and madly tries to cleanse her hands of blood of Duncan and Macduff's family. Still in her sleep she asks "What, will these hands never be clean? Here's the smell of the blood still: All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand". (Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 1) Her act of washing the hands is a compromise for self-reproach and repressed experiences. Shakespeare has always given a remarkable insight into the workings of human mind. The doctor who comes to examine Lady Macbeth later clearly states saying "This disease is beyond my practice."(Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 1, line 59) Saying this he calls Lady Macbeth's symptoms as psychoneurotic and thus paves the path of the advent of modern psychopathology.

Lady Macbeth is not evil; probably she is an example of a split personality, which appears and disappears according to the oscillations of her mental level. In her normal, walking state, repression and her

assumed bravery are marked. In her sleeping state the repression gives way to free expression and her innate cowardice becomes dominant. In her waking condition, she shows no fear of blood but shrinks from it when in a state of somnambulism. Two shades in her character are distinctly seen. Her counsel to her husband while awake is that of an emotionless cruelty, while in somnambulism she shows pity and remorse. Although, a bold and ambitious worldly woman, she believes in witchcraft and the prediction of the witches about her husband's becoming king. Lady Macbeth requests the witches to unsex her. By this the gender and power relationship is clearly projected which seems to be existed ever since the evolution of the man on this earth.

Lady Macbeth is the human in the play as she is horrified by the events unfolding around her. She is unable to cope up with her weakness and is reduced to mere shadow of her former commanding self. Later she kills herself as she is unable to deal with the guilt of her and Macbeth's crime. She is unable to maintain her artificial hard and ruthless traits. And since she no longer support Macbeth's political ambitions and plans, he stops taking her into confidence and keeps her excluded.

The 60s was an era of various notable movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Civil Rights Act, regarding the racial discrimination against the Blacks, the Feminist Movement, the Vietnam War, and finally the Cold War. Undoubtedly, the postwar period altered radically people's lives and thoughts. People plainly tried to go after the pursuit of their personal freedom and self-expression Confessional poetry is that of suffering, as it highlights the emotional breakdown and paranoia of the writer. Anne Sexton used poetry as a psychiatric method in order to achieve a form of personal catharsis, to avoid mental disorders and her frequent inclinations to commit suicide. Anne Sexton's depression was something she referred to with warmth. She indulged herself in a dialogue about its immediacy and connectedness to her personality. She had compassion for the self that was defenseless against it. Sexton's metaphors have a special power to express the inexpressible. Depression, seemingly only an affective state of mind, was described by Anne Sexton as a sensory experience that had a physical quality. Sextons opens her signature poem 'Her Kind' saying "I have gone out, a possessed witch, haunting the black air, braver at night" Surprisingly, like Lady Macbeth, critics have also debated over if Sexton really a witch. Sexton describes the state as it is a possessed form of being, it is a matter of how and when does an act rather than what she does. She calls herself a witch as she moves frantically on the roads during the night time without any specific reason. She takes long journey in the night when everyone else is tucked in bed. This was something very unlikely for women during that age. Witches operate outside the bounds of 'normal' society and Sexton calls herself an outcast who cannot agree with the society's norms and the traditional life style. Her denial to act in

accordance with the men around her gives her the shade of a witch. Similar to a witch, her activities are unaccepted in the society. Hence, Anne Sexton calls herself “lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind. A woman like that is not a woman, quite.” ‘Her Kind’ reflects woman’s fascination with the blend of power and social disapproval that comes with the status of being a witch. Women who does not quite fit society’s mold are not women and people find ways to publicly kill them. This is the fate of every woman who walks on route different than the one lain by the society.

“A woman like that is not ashamed to die. I have been her kind.” Sexton is outright defiant here; she boldly states that she may be put to death. But she’s not going to back down from her beliefs or her sense of self. Diana Wood Middlebrook in Sexton’s biography *Anne Sexton: A Biography* has written “she was a poet who was frequently mentally ill and occasionally suicidal. Sexton is straight-up honest about the reasons why death might not be such a bad option, given the state of the society she lived in. Just like the witches in the olden days were taken and left out away from the human establishments and were banished completely so was the poet as she was sent off to the mental asylum though she was not insane. What she expected was little understanding, warmth of love and care when she needed them the most.” (Middlebrook. p.134) The poem brings out her expectation from society of being little welcoming, and understanding with her and all the modern women like her. In a way she appeals to everyone not to view the free spirited modern women with negativity. She urges that independence and being free spirited is actually a positive step for the whole society.

In another poem ‘The Starry Night’ Sexton emphasizes that she does not find suicide as a wrong deed. She glorifies it by calling it a way to connect with the sky. She goes on to the extent of expressing her desire to die under a star lit sky. She reveals that a person like her prefers sky to the town and the earth. She calls it to be the perfect place to die. With this desire she also expresses that she dislikes the silence and lifelessness of the town and admires the sound and action of the sky instead. “The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars”

In yet another collection ‘Live or Die’ and ‘Wanting To Die’, one of the earliest poems which was published in the award winning collection, *Live or Die* in the year 1966. Sexton conversations with God reveal that suicide for her is like an intense yearning which can neither be defined nor defied. This makes this poem a literary suicide note from the perspective of many critics. “Suicides have a special language. Like carpenters they want to know which tools”. Some of them feel that Sexton addresses this poem to her sympathetic listeners to whom she wants to explain the reasons of such irresistible thoughts. Impact

of Freud's theory of death-drive which refers to having a tendency to go from organic to inorganic state for a human can be established here.

CONCLUSION

The study brings out an evaluation, that over the ages society and his attitude towards the women has not changed much all across the world. Whenever women tried to make their voices heard they were suspected and were not given any support. The lack of response and support from her family and society made them prone to suicides. Their mental attitude was always under suspicion and was never recognized by any one. The feeling of lovelessness in the lives of these women made them worst then they were. Their leadership traits, their ambitions and their power to make the right decision had always been affected by the environment, their family members and the society.

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AUTHORS

Neelam Dasgupta

Research Scholar, Department of H&M
Manav Rachna International, Faridabad, Haryana

Dr. Jyoti Sharma

Supervisor, Astt. Prof.
H&M Deptt. FET,
Manav Rachna International, Faridabad, Haryana