

**Role of women in Shakespeare's Tragedies : Character study of Gertrude from Hamlet and Lady Macbeth from Macbeth.**

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**Abstract –**

*William Shakespeare, the dramatist of all the ages and world occupied dramatist and poet belonged to the later part of 16<sup>th</sup> century and the early part of 17<sup>th</sup> century has a big influence on the world drama. He in terms of his life and his literary work, is the most written about author in the history of western civilization. His literary production includes 38 plays, 154 sonnets and 2 long narrative poems. The first critical writing on Shakespeare was published after his death in 1623 by his two acting companions. Ever since then the works of Shakespeare have been studied, analyzed, interpreted and enjoyed as some of the finest masterpieces of the English language. Shakespeare's plays are but the presentation of philosophy of human life. His plays are about the relationships between men and women. Such a world dramatist has written near about nine tragedies in where women, he presented in a different angle, particularly, from negative side. The above mentioned two women are very important women from two tragedies viz, Hamlet and Macbeth, who are responsible for the tragedy of the two heroes Prince Hamlet and Macbeth. Gertrude and Lady Macbeth play the role of villain in their own life and the life of the tragic heroes.*

**Key Words :-** Tragedy, Woman psychology, adultery, ambition .

The present paper will attempt to know the two important women who are the root causes of the tragedy of the two tragic heroes, Hamlet and Macbeth, the two towering persons as Hamlet was the Prince of Denmark and Macbeth was the valour's valour, the Chief of the Scottish Army. The attempt is made to explore the psychology of these two women and their particular role in the tragedy of the two heroes and consequently the tragedy of their own. William Shakespeare, the psychologist, the master of human psychology the most learned man in the field of human mind has tried to present human psychology in his four world famous tragedies. He has written total 38 plays, but Shakespeare as a dramatist is known to the world for his four tragedies, though the other remaining plays are equally famous or important. They are *Hamlet Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth*. All are the exceptional personalities of their time. As Hamlet, was student of philosophy, a gentleman, calm and very simple who did not believe that the world is occupied by such immoral and cruel people. Even he does not think that there are people in this world who behave in such a inhuman and unnatural way. He is the young man who believes in the people and the things as they appear, very innocent and simple in thinking. He is the Prince of Denmark, the responsibility which comes on his shoulders in a very early age. The next is Othello, the Military General, a black moor acquires the high position in Army only with the help of his merit, his talent and his abilities. Othello deserves to his position and status which he gets. King Lear, the next tragic hero produced by Shakespeare, is the King of Britain, 'every inch a king', at the age of 80 he was ably ruling his kingdom with a competence. Macbeth, the Chief of Scottish Army is also such a brave soldier, the King's most trusted Army officer, who does not know defeat in war, is always victorious. But very surprisingly these all exceptional persons meet such a horrible tragedies in their personal life. The question arises that how and why such powerful

and towering personalities got ruined and met such a horrible tragedy, that no common man can also meet such a tragedy. Some students and scholars on Shakespeare has tried to answer saying that, 'character is destiny'. According to them Shakespeare's heroes are responsible for their tragedies, they are the sculptors of their own sculpture of tragedy, though the answer is right there is something hidden behind the truth, the truth of character is destiny. The another truth is that of women who are responsible for the tragedies of those all tragic heroes from the four famous tragedies by Shakespeare. The women are the causes of the ruin of these heroes, when especially we look into the two women characters, Gertrude and Lady Macbeth, though they are different from each other, are the main causes of the tragedies of the tragic heroes. It is said that behind every successful man there is a woman may be a wife, mother or any and it is absolutely true but here in these two plays, in the life of the two heroes, there are women behind their complete ruin.

Tragedy in a very simple term is a serious play, in where there is suffering, torture both physical and mental and at last the death of a hero of the play or the death both hero and heroine. When we apply this meaning to Shakespeare's tragedies then, his tragedies are of higher, exceptional suffering and there is a death of a sufferer. Shakespeare's idea of the tragic fact is larger. Tragedy with Shakespeare is concerned always with persons of high degrees often with Kings or Princes, if not with leaders in the state like Coriolanus, Brutus, Antony at the least as Romeo and Juliet with members of great houses, whose quarrels are of public moment. Othello himself is no were private person; he is the General of the Republic. At the beginning, we see him in the Council – Chamber of the Senate. Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark, King Lear is the King of Britain, Macbeth is the chief of Scottish Army. A Shakespearean tragedy as so far considered may be called a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man of high status or position. The calamities of tragedy do not simply happen, nor are they sent; they proceed mainly from actions, and these the action of men. In this tragic world, where individuals however grant they may be and however decisive their actions may appear, are so evidently not the ultimate power. The tragic world is a world of action, and action is the translation of thought into reality. We see men and women confidently attempting it. They strike into the existing order of things in pursuance of their ideas. But what they achieve is not what they intended. So is found in the Shakespeare tragedies. Here one thing to be noted is that though Shakespeare heroes are exceptional, they have some drawbacks also and the women exploited the shortcomings of the heroes. The women play very crucial part in the tragedies of Shakespeare, particularly Hamlet and Macbeth.

#### **Character Study of Gertrude:**

Women as intelligent, Machiavellian, and independent as Gertrude will also be portrayed, According to Pragati Das, "Gertrude is, more than any other character in the play, the antithesis of her son, Hamlet. Hamlet is a scholar and a philosopher, searching for life's most elusive answers. He cares nothing for this "mortal coil" and the vices to which man has become slave. Gertrude is shallow, and thinks only about her body and external pleasures. Like a child she longs to be delighted. Gertrude is also a very sexual being, and it is her sexuality that turns Hamlet so violently against her". Gertrude, is the antithesis of Ophelia. In contrast with Ophelia's personality, Gertrude is a very Machiavellian and powerful woman. The fact that she married to her husband's brother only two months after her former husband's death, shows her adultery and the importance that power has for Gertrude. In spite of being somehow in the shadows, she rules the kingdom at the same level as King Claudius. She wants to preserve the crown. Hamlet seems to be the only character who notices that and accuses her of being insensible, of being a stone. Hamlet makes a good analysis of Gertrude's personality and he refers to her as a corrupted and sinful character. He says, 'Frailty is thy name of

woman.' He further unable to trust in woman. Her sexuality is also very present in the play. Hamlet makes references to her lascivious personality, comparing her to a person with an animal instinct, not human. The fact that Gertrude as a maternal figure behaves in that sinful manner, affect the vision Hamlet has about women. There is a rejection because of the loss of confidence due to the events Gertrude is involve in: the passivity in the death of Hamlet's father, as Gertrude poisons her own husband, the coronation of his uncle Claudius as King and the marriage with Gertrude. These all aspects of her personality and mind are the causes of the tragedy of Hamlet.

### **Character study of Lady Macbeth:**

Introducing the three witches in the play is an approach of how they aligned with Lady Macbeth in Macbeth's fate. According to Robert Mighall's statement in his introduction to Macbeth, "If the sisters hook Macbeth with their riddling, Lady Macbeth reels him in with her reasoning and ridicule." And as maintained by Mighall "The way Lady Macbeth completes the weird sisters' work has encouraged her to be considered almost the fourth of their member". Further, according to some scholars, such as Daniel Albright, "Lady Macbeth is associated with the witches; and like the witches, who sound sometimes tame and frivolous, sometimes like incarnations of supernatural evil; Lady Macbeth hovers insecurely between roles: she is a hybrid of ambitious wife and agent of hell". Unlike Lady Macbeth, whose power and dominance dismiss, the witches' influence permeates in the entire play and they continue to create chaos and disorder through out to the very end.

From the moment in which the witches announce to Macbeth the three prophecies, Macbeth becomes entirely reliant on the words of the Weird Sisters. They predict he will be Thane of Glamis, then Thane of Cawdor but the last shocks him the most "all hail Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter" Thereby, to accomplish his desire he sent a letter to Lady Macbeth, addressing the three witches' prophecies. If Macbeth would have not sent the letter to his wife, the plan had not been accomplished. The witches' role in Macbeth is like the ghost in Hamlet, they incite Lady Macbeth into scruple mind, no matter whether the path is good or evil. Throughout the play, Shakespeare offers to the reader an insight into Lady Macbeth's character, at first glimpse, when receiving Macbeth's letter, she demonstrates an ability to control Macbeth, and holds an acknowledged degree of power over her husband. The letter that Macbeth sent to his wife, explores the greatest level of choice that she has.

"Hail, king that shalt be!  
This have I thought good to deliver thee,  
My dearest partner of greatness,  
Though mightiest not lose the dues of rejoicing,  
by being ignorant of what greatness is promised thee,  
Lay it to thy heart, and farewell." (Macbeth. Act I, scene V)

Shortly, after reading the letter, and before Macbeth's arrival, she invokes supernatural spirit, demanding the forces of evil to free her of gender, doing this; she admits to evoke a strong sense of evil, witch-like. Thereby, she accepts a more masculine identity into her life, in order to convince her husband, and to fulfil her desire of being queen. She renounces to womanly love for the spirit murder. And ultimately, that is going to be lady Macbeth's tragedy later:

Adelman points out that, The figure of Lady Macbeth is a representation of primitive fear about man identity and autonomy itself, about those looming female presence who threaten to control one's actions and one's mind" She says,

“Infirm of purpose!  
Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead.  
Are but pictures; it’s the eye of childhood  
That fears of painted devil”. (Macbeth Act II, Scene ii)

In other words, Macbeth is essentially a struggle between a world of influential maternal and female power. Macbeth comes under the control of Lady Macbeth and that leads him to his ultimate tragedy. Her obsession and ambition to be queen are the motives of her deterioration. She falls into periods of lunacy and sleepwalking, asserting this argument, Coriat Isador’s Lady Macbeth Hysteria, introduces Coleridge’s Statement: “She mistakes the courage of fantasy for the power of bearing the consequences of the reality of guilt. Hers is the mock fortitude of a mind deluded by ambition, she shames her husband with a superhuman audacity fancy which she cannot support, but sinks in the season of remorse and died in suicidal agony.”

Nonetheless, the psychological aspect of Lady Macbeth as Coriat emphasizes starts in the first soliloquy “ The first soliloquy is remarkable, it is her first dream of ambition, so strong and dominating, that she believes she possess what really she does not possess namely, brave, it is this imaginary wish fulfillment to be the queen which later causes the hysterical dissociation.” She becomes dominated by fixed ideas that later will cause her sleepwalking, or according to some scholars somnambulism. The idea of gaining sovereignty and power were set in her mind in an uncontrollable impulse.

After the deed is done and Duncan is murdered, there arises the first mental dissociation and suicide. Her fear horror has become so terrible, and according, to Coriat “She shrinks from the guilty secret, and here enters the first element of mechanism which leads to her hysterical dissociation”.

Despite the fact that she apparently comforts Macbeth’s fear, she prefers to repress her emotions. The overall occurrences of keeping the murderer and the wish to become the mother of the nation, Coriat claims that “here coincides with terror and excitement”. The most striking scene, where Shakespeare excelled at depicting the mental state of Lady Macbeth, is the sleepwalking, namely, a case of hysterical somnambulism. Once again Coriat attributed this to the predetermined by the existing, suppressed complexes. The first complex is linked to the murder of Duncan, demonstrating in the washing of the hands “a little water clears us of the deed.” (Macbeth. Act II, scene II). As she sleepwalks, she says, “ All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand” (Macbeth Act V, Scene I); here Lady Macbeth is confused, she is mixing feminine image with the crime she committed, and the two things together appear as a symptom of her madness and decline. The second complex is associated to the murder of Banquo “I tell you yet again, Banquo’s buried; he cannot come out of his grave”. (Macbeth Act v, scene I) in short, this scene shows the mental collapse of Lady Macbeth and everything that drives her is about her obsession of becoming queen, and gaining the highest womanly post. She is forced into acquiring more power, in order to raise her status, because she is living in a time, where women cannot have authority, and she has to do it through her husband, Macbeth.

### **Conclusion :**

William Shakespeare who gives a new meaning to the term tragedy as he did not copy of his predecessor, made a new concept of tragedy in where he made his heroes of tragedy responsible for their own downfall or ruin. But at the same time he presented women in tragedies from a very negative side. As the women play the role of villains in the life of their own men and are the causes of the tragedies of the such an exceptional persons like Hamlet and Macbeth. It is the adultery of Gertrude witch ruined the life of her son, Prince Hamlet If she could not have such illicit relationship

with her own brother-in-law Claudius, the next tragedy would not happen. In the same way, Lady Macbeth's over ambition to become a queen of Scotland, she forced her husband Macbeth, the valour's valor to do such an unhuman and unnatural deed. This the above mentioned two women are the causes of the tragedy of the two towering personalities. Their role in the tragedy of the two heroes could not be ignored.

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