

MACBETH : AN EXPRESSION OF SHAKESPEARE'S IMAGINATION IN FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE**Dr. Neha Dhull**

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Abstract: Irrefutable unconventionality sets Macbeth in a specified category from the other tragedies of Shakespeare as it is wheeled on expensive imagination and is ornamented with peculiar literary sources. Although Shakespeare inhibits his interest in the spiritual and ethical aspects of his characters than in the political consequences of the tyranny which are delineated but not emphatically accentuated. In *Macbeth*, he crafts two characters contrastingly who depart each other by their uniformity and disparity. Both are miscreant and reprobate, targeting at the same spot; both have to overpower their innate hostility and both suffer the consequence of their immorality and wickedness. But both are divergently unlike in terms of their embark on the problems and situations and set apart from each other in their deviated ends. Hence both explore themselves similar but dissimilar to each other. Sometimes, it gives the impression that Macbeth is a tragedy of character but here, Shakespeare is emphatically intent on the exploration of depths of inner psyche below the level of physical virtues of character.

Introduction

The use of literary and rhetoric language retains an aura of mystery for instance its imagery repetition of some specific words like 'blood', 'fair and foul'¹ appear to be devised to create an ambience of panic, terror and of gloom and darkness intervened by flashes of happiness, light and colour. Great critics like Wilson Knight and L.C. Knights favourably and promptly explore that Shakespeare's plays thematically and allegorically are essentially structured in poetic form. Consequently, we find a wide range of contrasting opinions regarding the significance of allegories and symbols whether it is a handicraft of metaphysic of evil or it is a proclamation of heralded a winter spring down, but there is a large measure of consent that neither characters nor the plot rather it is the proper usage of symbols in the thematic strand that should be our prime concern "Macbeth, Lady Macbeth and Banquo are only parts of pattern, a design, images, and symbols."²

The very essence of the first scene of the play can be felt with the tincture of 'thunder and lightning', in 'fog and filthy air' that ends on a note of paradox: Fair is foul and foul is fair.³ Since the weather is surely foul the equivocation must refer to the moral enigma of life where good and evil are so inextricably intermingled that it is very difficult to say

what is fair and not foul and what is foul and not fair. Interlude of time incorporated with change of place is introduced in the midst of first and third scene where the appearance of Macbeth is shown and the witches start playing their perplexing and dirty game when they greet him with their enigmatic prophecies. His opening words – "So foul and fair a day I have not seen"⁴ are absolutely evocative of the witches "Fair is foul and foul is fair, and these words not only show his sensitiveness to nature but also some what unusual in a man of affairs who has psycho-spiritual strength of penetrating the mystery of life. His ensuing and subservient thoughts and talks give us a further due to the workings of his mind and soul. Since the prophecies made by the Witches are inconvincible, he says with his flair for rhetoric that the third stands not within the prospect of belief. The phrase 'Stands not within the prospect of belief exhibits not only his inclination for tautology but also his tendency to express abstract idea through forceful visual imagery. But if the Witches say something incredible, who is he, in Banquo's phrase, 'Wrapt withal', who does he urge them to stay and speak to him in greater detail and in more aspects, why does he not take them in the half-humorous way in which his friend takes them? Why is he tormented and

anguished by their speeches and the way of speaking?

The King's announcement of greater honour and of a new title for Malcolm, a sign of his failure to win the throne, ignites immoral, illegal, black and deep desire in Macbeth. Once again his tormented psyche expresses itself through striking visual imagery; the coronation of Malcolm as Prince of Cumberland is a stumbling-block which he must try to over-leap. He now definitely thinks of murder; only he cannot stand the sight of it. That is the form taken by his conscience which is dominated by his visual imagination. He is fearless and also a ruthless killer who unseamed MacDonald from the nave to the chaps and hung his head upon the battlements. It is only the moral aspect of the intended murder of Duncan that makes his flesh creep. It is interesting that his morality, like his imagery, is visual; if the eye can somehow wink at the hand, everything will be all right. His expansive imagination at once apostrophizes stars who must hide their fires so that his guilty ambition may fulfill itself in complete darkness.

It appears from Macbeth's letter to his wife that he has made careful investigations about the Witches and it satisfied that 'they have more in them than mortal knowledge'. Lady Macbeth's hurries to give the joyful news about his 'greatness' to his wife who interprets it in her own way. Her mind is analytical, ratiocinative, and anxious 'to catch the nearest way'. She has contempt for what she mistakes for husband's holiness', for that milk of human kindness which she thinks stands in the way of greatness. She herself is no milksop. But being unimaginative and unintrospective, she understands herself even less than she understands her husband. She, too, is disturbed by the still small voice within and appeals to the forces of evil to unsex her and hopes that night might pall itself in the dunnest smoke of hell so that her seen knife will not see the wound it makes. This is her husband's manner which she adopts for the first time - and the last. Although in the white heat of passion, she communes with the forces of nature or with supernatural

agencies, her words and metaphors - 'dunnest smoke', 'peep', 'blanket' - are homely even 'mean'. The apostrophe to evil spirits and to thick night is, however, a confession that this matter-of-fact, cool-headed woman cannot by herself overcome her scruples, and if her milk is to be taken for gall, the assistance of murdering ministers will be necessary. But when she meets her husband, she relegates there fancies to the limbo of the unconscious. She puts on a blood front and greets him as 'the all-hail hereafter'. With her power of quick, unhesitating decision she has already set her mind on killing the King, and the prospects of getting the crown produces such an excitement that she feels the future in the instant and decides on taking the great business of the night into her own dispatch. Macbeth wants time for more deliberation and consultation. Obviously his mind has not worked as quickly or unhesitatingly as hers.

Where they hold further discussions we do not know and need not inquire. What is clear is that Macbeth's mind has begun to weave. When we meet him next, he is assailed by doubts and hesitations. He, too, is analytical, but in a way different from his wife. His imaginative mind looks before and after, contemplates possibilities and potentialities and weaves a network of subjunctives. It also revels in ornate phraseology - 'trammel up', 'surcease', 'chalice', 'courier' - which makes things look bigger than they are. When he comes to weight actualities, Duncan's virtues are magnified into trumpet-tongued angles, and this leads to the visualization of pity as a naked new-born babe, the symbol of innocence and helplessness.

'It is through these soaring fancies that Macbeth's conscience expresses itself, and these imaginative flights have also cathartic effect, for by giving figurative expression to his scruples he also overcomes them. His reverie is broken by the entrance of his wife, and to her he does not adduce any of the reasons of his wife, and to her he does not adduce any of the reasons that he has been urging in his soliloquy. True, he seems to have decided on not proceeding further in the matter, but on considerations that are more homely and

prudential. First, it would be ingratitude to kill a man who has showered honours on him of late. Secondly, he has won golden opinions from all sorts of people, and he should not risk his popularity so soon. These cautious, calculating arguments have no appeal for his wife whose mind is absorbed by the night's great business, which, she has already said, 'shall to [their] nights and days to come/give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.' While she is in this mood, his pedestrian arguments about gratitude and popularity seem to be only a mask for timidity. Her language shows her unimaginative, practical approach to a problem Macbeth has riddled with this conscientious scruples. Since she knows that her husband desires the crown which is rightfully not his, his objection to seizing it by violence makes him look like the poor cat in the adage, which lets 'I dare not wait upon "I would".' Since he cannot deny that he once broke the enterprise to her, he cannot back out now except on the ground that he does not dare do it. The unimaginative woman has shifted the issue, which is no longer one of conscience, where his imagination could conjure up horrid, but of courage and cowardice, and the greatest of soldiers has now to face the question whether he is being deterred by fear. He puts up a confused defence that he dares do all that becomes a man, and he that dares more is none. Under the mesmeric influence of his wife he cannot spell out what exactly he means, and Lady Macbeth retorts that in that case he was a beast when he made the proposal of killing Duncan. This is the finishing touch, and Macbeth's conscience is completely disarmed. His only concern now is about practical consequences. When his doubts are allayed by his wife's vigorous but specious reasoning, he bends up all his physical powers, which with his flair for rhetoric he calls corporal agents, to the terrible feat of murdering Duncan. Macbeth is now a changed man. Not only each corporal agent but also incorporeal imagination comes to his assistance. He sees a dagger before him, but instead of unfixing his hair, the horrid images only marshal him the way he was going. His expansive imagination also

derives sustenance from the surrounding darkness that helps others wicket people in their gruesome occupations - witches offering gifts and prayers to pale Hecate, their goddess, withered murderers called to action by the howling wolf and Tarquin stealthily advancing to rape Lucretia. These comparisons show a keen awareness of the immorality of the proposed deed, and this is further revealed in his invocation of the earth, which is sure and firm-set, that is to say, a symbol of stable values. Even when he is proceeding to commit the murder, he realized that he is violating fixed moral laws. All though his life there is mingling of his criminal ambition and the moral sense that seeks to curb it, and both these spill over into the moral verse around him. His imagination gives him this advantage that there is nothing hidden from him in the depths of the unconscious. Good and Evil are equally real and equally visible.

His imagination with its command of gorgeous phraseology paints the deed and its consequences in lurid colours, but, as will appear, by thus thinking 'brainsickly of things', he also attains mastery over them. Violating all moral laws, he has killed a sleeping man, and he fears that he has forever murdered sleep which he visualized as knitting up the ravel'd sleeve of care, as a soothing balm and as a nourishing second course in life's feast. These images, although taken from ordinary life, by their profusion, present the simple phenomenon of sleep in a most unusual light. It is not so with his wife. Completely unaware of what is happening in the depths of her own soul, Lady Macbeth says that a little water will wash Duncan's blood, a filthy-witness', from Macbeth's hand but he himself magnifies his blood-stand hand to something supremely diabolic:

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will
rather

The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.⁶

Here his expansive imagination roams beyond the concrete realities of our limited, everyday life - tangled skeins of unwrought silk, nourishing food or medicinal herbs - and surveys limitless vistas of multitudinous seas completely incarnadined, and not simply tintured, by his crime. How command of languages not only reflects but also forms characters may be realized if we compare this famous passage about Macbeth's blood-stained hand with Devenant's rendering of it:

Can the Sea afford

Water enough to wash away the stains?

No, they would sooner add a tincture to

The Sea, and turn the green into a red.⁷

Macbeth says that he would have been a happier man if he had 'died an hour before this chance'. After this all is but toys and there is nothing serious in mortality. One might read here an unconscious anticipation of the murder of Banquo and of Lady Macduff and her children whom he will kill without compunction almost as a child breaks his toys. The metaphor at the end shows how his imagination works from the particular to the universal from the common place to the sublime. Life has lost all its sweetness, and what remains now is life the dregs left over in a cup after the wine in it has been drunk. The mention of wine leads to thoughts of the vault of a cellar and then to the image of the vaulting sky that covers the earth. When Macduff soon question him about the wisdom of murdering the two grooms, "he pours upon the amazed assembly a torrent of rhetorical verbiage, stilted, pompous and yet expressive of genuine emotion."⁸ It is natural that Macbeth, who was it first deterred from murder by a consideration of Duncan's virtues, contemplates Duncan's silver skin as laced with his golden blood, and the daggers of the murderers appears as most inappropriately covered with the blood of such a holy man. Never was rhetoric more artificial and yet more natural, and never were sincerity and simulation better fused.

On the other hand, if Shakespeare really attached any importance to this dynastic motive, he would have introduced Macbeth's son, like Baquo's into the play. What is

significant is that this supreme vividly describes through a number of striking metaphors. Destiny has placed a fruitless crown on his head and a barren scepter in his hand, and he imagines himself as being wrenched from his throne by some unlineal hand. That a son of his own will not succeed him comes as an appendix to his diatribe against the unfair dispensation of Providence. Thus he persuades himself that he has justice on his side when he decides on killing Banquo and Fleance, for its was morally wrong of the Witches to tempt him to evil and to reserve the fruits of his crime for the children of Banquo who has not defiled his mind or sold his soul to the devil. The forceful metaphor of a hand wrenching something from its proper place vividly express the depth of his conviction about the rightness of his cause. For him now foul is, indeed, fair and fair foul, and by thus mixing up right and wrong, he acquires a new sense of power with a new sense of freedom. In his imagination "he thinks of himself and Fate as two combatants fighting out their battle to the last extremity."⁹ It is this mental resilience that now separates him from his dearest partner of greatness, who has neither his command of imagination nor his power of introspection. Lady Macbeth is not troubled by the 'sorriest fancies', which begets a mood of passive acceptance of what has happened. She is afraid to ruminate on the past and shrinks from looking forward to the future:

Her language is unadorned, pithy and pointed, but its simplicity comes from timidity and nervous exhaustion. Even, when she uses metaphorical expression - 'In them nature's copy's not eterne', for example - she is too tired to elaborate her views or to go into practical details, as she did after the murder of Duncan. Her husband sees all this and no longer takes her into confidence, for although he has planned the murder of Banquo before Banquo arrives at their hosue, he deceives her, saying;

Let your remembrance apply to Banquo;

Present him eminence, both with eye and tongue:¹⁰

Macbeth, who has no psychological inhibitions, views the situation after Duncan's death more clearly than does his wife and presents it more decoratively. Even when there is basic similarity in their attitudes, his thoughts and feelings are more elaborate and expansive than hers. She sums up their predicament paradoxically, but the paradox is concise and without obscurity :

'Tis safer to be that which we destroy
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.

(III. ii. 6-7)¹¹

Macbeth's language is much more figurative and shows a wide ranging mind that surveys death as a passage from turmoil to peace, from time to eternity :

Better be with the dead,
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to
peace,

Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave;

After life's fitful fever he sleeps well;
Treason has done his worst : nor steel, nor
poison,

Malice domestic, foreign fevy, nothing
Can touch him further. (III. ii. 19-26)¹²

With his expansive imagination he views himself as a man caught in the midst of a vast sea of blood, and this is his justification for further crime.

When Lady Macbeth finally collapses, all that lay in the deepest recesses of her mind is brought to the surface, ironically enough, in sleep which she thought of as a protection—'season of all nature'—against the doubts and fancies that disturb the waking mind. Her language retains its simplicity and acquires a new piercing effect, because she is too tired now even to use the decoration of verse. All her admonitions, fears and agonies come out with the hopelessness of absolute surrender. The one ornate expression she uses—'All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand'¹³—is suggestive of her character and reminiscent of her normal habits. Even in the days of her strength the sight of blood was disconcerting, and her reference to it as a 'Filthy witness was only a meiosis for what was too horrible to contemplate. When she proceeded to smear the Chamberlains with

Duncan's blood, she did not realize what a violent revulsion it produced in her submerged self. Indeed, the very flippancy of the comment she made on rejoining her husband—'A little water clears us of this deed. 'Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?' She has been continually going through the process of washing her hands in order to clear them of the smell of blood, but in vain. Her helplessness she expresses through a hyperbole that is concreted with her daily life, for as woman and queen, she has been accustomed to costly exotic perfumes. Great Neptune and his ocean are beyond the range of her vision which is confined to things she has seen or known. 'It is', as Bradley says, 'the direct appeal of the facts to sense that has fastened on her memory.'

It is in this mood that he hearts of the death of his wife, and he is conscious that the news does not touch him as it ought to do; he has not only forgotten the taste of fears but lost the capacity for feeling anything deeply. If she had died some time later when he, an incorrigible optimist, had recovered his power of emotional response, he would have been able to mourn her death in an appropriate manner. Or, what is more likely, in his present mood of callousness, he looks upon her death as a part of the inevitable course of events; it would have happened, if not now, sometime later, and his imagination at once pictures life itself as only a slow, creeping march towards death. Man's vaulting ambitions and his short-sighted endeavours are follies comparable to flickering candles lighting this brief but tedious journey to an ignoble death. The images of lighting and a walking shadow make him think of the stage where actors bustle and rant for a brief while in assumed roles that have no substance. These images are also reminiscent of Lady Macbeth walking in sleep with light by her continually'.

He has hardly finished his epitaph on his wife and his mournful commentary on the meaninglessness of life when he receives the news that Birnam wood is, indeed, coming to Dunsinane! And then Macduff makes the crushing revelation about the extraordinary

process of his birth for which he could claim exemption from the Witches' dictum that none born of woman would be able to assail Macbeth. Here the wheel comes full circle. The play started with the paradoxical statement of the Witches that fair is foul and foul is fair, and now their fair prophecies have proved to be foul is fair, and now their fair prophecies have proved to be foul delusions that have tempted Macbeth to evil deeds that lead him to total damnation. He sees the truth behind the delusions and exclaims in utter frustration and disillusionment :

And be these juggling fiends no more believ'd,
That palter with us in a double sense;
That keep the word of promise to our ear,
And break it to our hope.¹³

We may sum up the above discussion by saying that *Macbeth* is in a double sense the tragedy of imagination which at the same time reveals and obscures truth. Although 'Symbolist' interpreters have urged that to credit Macbeth with the poetic imagination which is really Shakespeare's is to confuse drama and life,¹⁴ most critics think that the distinguishing feature of Macbeth's character is his command of poetic imagery, his capacity for seeing 'visions' and hearing 'voices, and Bradley convincingly draws a distinction between Macbeth's imaginative susceptibility and Lady Macbeth's 'comparative dullness of imagination.' But what has not been made sufficiently clear is how Macbeth's imagination and his wife's almost total lack of it explain their divergent tragedies. Macbeth's imagination gives a concrete shape to his hopes and fears so that nothing is pushed below the level of the conscious self, and not only does his better nature incorporate itself in his images but these images also act as a safety valve through which his conscientious scruples vanish into thin air, and after the pressure on his mind is thus relieved, he becomes a hardened criminal. Modifying Bradley's language, we may say that his imagination is at the same time the best and the worst of him. It appeals him by drawing dismal pictures of his crimes, but by visualizing the horrors, he also conquers them. His imagination is thus a two-handed

engine which at first enervates and then strengthens him. It is not so with his wife. Her tragedy springs from her inability to pry into the turmoil raging in her own soul and to grasp the significance of the visions that at the same time tortured and relieved her husband's conscience.

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