WOMAN SCORNED: A NEW HISTORICIST EXPLORATION OF THE VIOLENT FEMALE IN LADY MACBETH

Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of BACHELOR OF ARTS in English Language and Literature

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I hereby declare that this project titled "Woman Scorned: A New Historicist Exploration of the Violent Female in *Lady Macbeth*" is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Jisha John, Assistant Professor, Department of English.

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Woman Scorned: A New Historicist Exploration

of the Violent Female in *Lady Macbeth*

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Throughout history women have been demarcated within the bounds of stereotyped goodness and naivety. This passivization of the feminine is often inclined to portray women as biologically incapable of anything that falls under the premises of the active masculine, including violence. The movie, *Lady Macbeth* challenges this trite stereotype in its portrayal of the character Katherine Lester who, unlike the popular Victorian archetype of women, murders and betrays those around her devoid of remorse or guilt. Though morally questionable, her actions are successfully presented as manifestations of her empowerment and agency because it is set against the restrictive climate of the Victorian Society. New Historicism, formulated by Stephen Greenblatt, is a branch of literary theory that analyzes the historical setting of the text, author and critic as primary meters in deriving its textual meaning. The project adopts a new historicist approach in its analysis of gender transgressions and morality in the movie to prove how the Victorian setting and the 21st century feminist media scene becomes instrumental in establishing Katherine's actions as empowering despite their vicious nature.

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Raina Chester

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“Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned" (Congreve 46); though written almost four centuries ago, a line none other than this could better summarize the character arc of Katherine Lester from William Oldroyd’s 2016 production *Lady Macbeth.*

Lady Macbeth is a British period drama based on the 1865 Russian novella *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* by Nikolai Leskov and has little to do with the titular allusion to the Shakespearean character of Lady Macbeth except for a woman of apparently similar persona at the focal point. Written for the screen by Alice Birch, the movie stars Florence Pugh, Cosmo Jarvis, Paul Hilton, Naomi Ackie, and Christopher Fairbank and shifts the setting from Leskov’s Russia to a rural Victorian England of 1865. The story follows the life of a young woman named Katherine, forced into a loveless marriage with a much older man, and her search for passion leading to devastating outcomes.

It is important to notice how movies become powerful tools for analyzing culture, offering a unique window into a society's values, beliefs, and norms. The Victorian era is a popular setting for movies and novels alike. Often seen in period dramas and adaptations of classic novels, this portrayal emphasizes the era's grandeur, elegance, and technological advancements with sweeping shots of stately homes, elaborate costumes, and bustling cityscape. In contrast, Oldroyd in his movie gives a much duller, less elegant, and more realistic version of the Victorian setting, using less color and fewer conversations. Minimal as it seems, the movie provides a detailed cultural insight into the Victorian era and delivers an academic compass into the moral complexities prevalent at the time. When it comes to the portrayal of the conventional

feminine, Oldroyd's *Lady Macbeth* adopts a different take on the subject altogether, dismantling the pre-existing notions of women, especially of the Victorian era, being passive and incapable of violence, let alone murder. Oldroyd's heroine rewrites the age-old concept of 'angel in the house' and finally lets the unapologetic madwoman out of the attic.

The character of Lady Macbeth was first introduced in the Shakespearean play *Macbeth*, believed to have been first performed in the year 1606. In the play, despite the ambitious drive, the woman is unnamed, is condemned as being mad and hysteric, and later succumbing to suicide. Nikolai Leskov, in 1865, adapted a similar murderous female character in the novel *Lady Macbeth* and names her Katerina. She is capable of heinous villainy though her actions are justified by her circumstances. She is also shown as descending into hysteria and desperation, and ends up killing herself. In the 2016 movie adaptation of the same novel, Oldroyd's Katherine continues about her life, remorseless and unbothered and thus rewrites the age-old doomed fate of the popular character.

In the movie, Katherine, a vibrant and composed teenager is forced into a smothering marriage with Alexander Lester, a dull man way too old to suit a seventeen year old girl. Trapped within the boundaries of his wealthy family's estate, a life of isolation, boredom and lovelessness is forced upon her. Alexander shows little care for her except for a detached voyeuristic sexual interest. She spends her days keeping to the house, until one day Alexander and his father, Boris, heads out for business. Left alone with the maid Anna, she becomes enchanted by a young farmhand, Sebastian, and quickly ignites a passionate clandestine affair, offering herself a forbidden taste of exultation and rebellion. Fully aware of the deadly consequences, Katherine ends up killing both Alexander and Boris for the sake of Sebastian's love. With the Lesters out of their lives, the couple lives unquestioned on the estate when, one fine day, a little boy named

Teddy appears at the door, claiming to be Alexander's illegitimate son producing legal claim to the Lester property. Threatened by separation, Katherine suffocates the already sickly child to death with Sebastian's aid, who soon breaks down and confesses, accusing her of all three killings. Katherine unflinchingly denies his accusations and, with the privilege of her position and by lucky coincidence, lays blame collectively on Sebastian and the maid Anna on the pretext of an alleged affair. The movie ends with Sebastian and Anna being taken away as convicts, with a pregnant Katherine left alone to inherit the Lester fortune for herself.

In an isolated setting, the actions of Katherine would be condemned as vile and inhuman with no positive connotation whatsoever. On the contrary, when placed in the Victorian setting with its uncompromising gender divide where women were considered nothing but passive, her actions become a symbol of agency and rebellion. This observation infers the presence of a New Historicist criticism at play, where historic setting becomes a determinant of the literary impact. Viewed from the socio-political scenario of 21st century feminism, Katherine's criminal instincts side with her self empowerment, given 'empowerment' strictly is anything that derives power and authority, which in the Victorian context, equates or rather elevates her to the realm of the masculine. This project, thus attempts a New Historicist study of the movie to prove how the suppressive currents of the victorian context is instrumental in Katherine's emergence as an empowered heroine despite her villainous manoeuvres.

The very first chapter, titled 'New Historicism: the Significance of Victorian Context in *Lady Macbeth'* gives a historical insight into the concept of New Historicism according to Stephen Greenblatt and analyses the Victorian setting and its significant application in the movie. The second chapter, "Unsex Me": *Lady Macbeth*'s Challenge to Gender Paradigms', deals with the gender space as projected in the Victorian age and analyzes how the movie effectively

deconstructs them with the focus set on the two primary characters, Katherine and Sebastian, and subverts the genderly archetypes, to portray Katherine as having a more conventional masculine core than Sebastian himself. The third chapter titled “Serpent Under't”: Exploring the Perverse Female in *Lady Macbeth’* explores the previously denied presence of violent drive in the female psyche. A brief analysis into the color dialectics of the movie also reveals the historic complexities of morality presented throughout the movie. The concluding chapter sums up the findings of the study to prove how the historic setting of the story becomes an inevitable tool in analyzing its literary content.

Chapter 1

New Historicism: the Significance of Victorian Context in *Lady Macbeth*

Historicism is a school of thought that advances reality as the outcome of the evolution of historical events. It explains social and cultural phenomena with respect to the historic context, where history serves as the background against which the literary text—constituting the foreground—plays out. Rejecting the formal approach of New Criticism, in the 1980s, New Historicism emerged as a movement in literary criticism with the efforts of Stephen Greenblatt, where one takes into account the entire historical scenario aligning with the work's advent to analyze how it reflects power structures and dominant discourses of the time. Greenblatt in his essay *Towards A Poetics of Culture* describes a work of art or a text as follows:

> The work of art is itself the product of a set of manipulations, some of them our own, many others undertaken in the construction of the original work. That is, the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society. (Greenblatt 12)

New historicism claims that literature, or any text for that matter, is not universal but rather a product of the author's time and cultural situation and that its interpretation is heavily influenced by the social and political factors surrounding the author as well as the reader. In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, M. H. Abrahms describes how "instead of dealing with a text in isolation from its historical context, New Historicists attend primarily to the historical and cultural conditions of its production, its meanings, its effects, and also of its later critical interpretations and

evaluations”(Abrahms 244). It treats history not as a background but as primary. It also unsheathes the underlying narratives to incorporate marginalized perspectives.

A study of the movie *Lady Macbeth* along the lines of New Historicism demands an analysis of the social structure of the place and period in which the movie is set—rural England of 1865, falling under the Victorian Era. The reign of Queen Victoria in England is often cataloged by historians as an era of drastic change as well as progress, stamped by industrialization, scientific advancements, and the expansion of the British Empire. The economic status of England saw great heights during this era as the colonial expansion maintained a steady and heavy flow of wealth into the land. Factories roared, spewing smoke into the sky, as Britain became the "workshop of the world." Railroads crisscrossed the land, revolutionizing transportation, though for many, this progress came at a cost - harsh working conditions and urban squalor plagued the working class. Inventions like the telephone, the light bulb, and the steam engine transformed daily life. Medicine saw advancements with anesthesia and germ theory, though healthcare remained poor for many.

Society during this period was at a state of constant turbulence as the people came face to face with the dawn of a new age and new ways of thought. The very social fabric of the era was interwoven with fascinating paradoxes .The warp, the strongest layer of this fabric, is undeniably the unyielding hierarchy that permeates every aspect of life. Class divisions were stark and unyielding, with the aristocracy occupying the opulent brocades at the top, followed by the bourgeois woolens of the middle class, and finally, the rough cotton canvas of the working class. Each social stratum meticulously upheld its codes of conduct, dress, and language, maintaining the delicate balance of power.

Victorian society was rigid and class-conscious. Rank and class were commanding factors of how one lived and sometimes even how one will live. Within this hierarchy, gender acted as the weft, further structuring relations. The cult of domesticity confined women to the private sphere of morality and familial duties, while men navigated the public arena with stoic fortitude, upholding the mantle of Victorian masculinity. Moral pronouncements from the pulpit and in drawing-room conversations upheld a facade of righteousness, often masking hypocrisy and hidden desires. People were expected to know their place and to behave accordingly. The upper class was not expected to socialize with the lower class, and there were strict rules about who could marry whom.

The religion of the time was a crucial societal indicator, and it wasn't a singular, monolithic entity but rather a vibrant and complex blend of various faiths and social currents. While Christianity, particularly Protestantism, held a dominant position, it was far from uniform, scarred by internal controversies, the rise of nonconformist denominations, and interactions with other faiths. The Church of England was the official state church, with occasional distribution of denominations such as Methodists, Baptists, and Congregationalists. These groups often emphasized personal conversion and emotional expression of faith, which appealed to many Victorians. *Gay's The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud* speaks of it thus:

> Religion served not only as a source of moral comfort and social cohesion but also as a bulwark against the growing uncertainties of the age… The faith of many Victorians rested upon a delicate balance between reason and revelation, science and scripture… For many Victorians, religion played a central role in their lives, providing them with a sense of meaning, purpose, and community. (Gay 25-27)

Church attendance was high, and Bible study was a common practice. Public displays of faith were encouraged, and religious holidays were strictly observed. Sundays were considered a day of rest and worship, with most businesses and leisure activities closed. Sunday schools and religious charities played a major role in educating the working class, hence inspiring a sense of moral obligation. Religious themes and imagery permeated Victorian art, literature, and architecture, reflecting both the piety and anxieties of the age. Though the religion was prone to contradictions and hypocrisy, its core was a “fundamental faith in progress, a belief that the world was getting better and that man was improving himself." (Gay 124) as stated by Gay in *Education of the Senses.*

Religious teachings emphasized the importance of self-denial, hard work, and moral purity. The Victorians believed in living a simple and solemn life, avoiding temptation and excess. Sexual abstinence outside of marriage was strictly enforced, and even within marriage, intimacy was primarily for procreation. Morality was a momentous derivative of the religion’s apparent call for purity. The moral sphere was a complex and often contradictory system of conduct, characterized by strict adherence to religious principles, a strong emphasis on family values, and a pervasive sense of propriety.

The Victorian era is distinguished for its enormous emphasis on morality. Any means of sexual expression outside of marriage was considered taboo and sinful, and there were harsh punishments for those who dared to break the rules. For example, women who were caught having sex outside of marriage could be ostracized from society or even imprisoned. Premarital sex was strictly forbidden, and even within marriage, sexual relations were expected to be procreative and devoid of pleasure. This led to a great deal of anxiety and repression around sexuality and contributed to the rise of double standards—one set of rules, generally lenient, for

men and another, of a stringent sort, for women. Overt displays of fondness were frowned upon, and homosexuality was criminalized. They believed in behaving in a way that was considered proper and respectable. This meant avoiding anything that was considered apparently vulgar or indecent, to the extent that it was deemed improper for women to show their ankles or to talk about anything that was considered too personal, with marital disillusionment topping the list.

Acute observations of familial values and social responsibilities were key features of Victorian morality. The Victorian family was seen as the substratum of society, and a strong emphasis was placed on the roles of men, women, and children within a familial unit. Men were expected to be the breadwinners and heads of the household, while women were expected to be and only be submissive wives and devoted mothers. Children were expected to be obedient and respectful to their elders. Victorians believed in the importance of social order and hierarchy and the social responsibility that sewed them together. The wealthy and upper classes were seen as having a responsibility to help the less fortunate, and charitable work was considered a moral duty. However, this sense of social responsibility did not extend to challenging the existing social order, and there was little tolerance for dissent or social activism.

In a lecture entitled "Of Queens' Gardens,' delivered in 1864 and published the following year as part of *Sesame and Lilies*, the Victorian sage John Ruskin famously articulated his view of the relationship proper between the sexes:

> By her office, and place, [the woman] is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in the open world, must encounter all peril and trial: to him, therefore, must be the failure, the offense, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded, or subdued; often misled; and always hardened. But he guards the woman from all this;

> within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offense. This is the true nature of home-it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home: so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lit fire in. (Ruskin 21, 22)

The man was supposed to be the adventurous one, the guardian, and the companion who had been tempered by life. His strength and readiness to be morally tarnished by conflict and corruption would give a woman a safe environment to do her tasks, which would include morally upholding the residents of the home as well as keeping it peaceful. When it came to the knockabout public realm, the home would serve as both a haven and an antidote—possibly even a way to change it—should the woman be successful in extending her domestic authority to support the state, as Ruskin had urged. If a home was made possible by a man's protection of his woman, then the woman would use the house she dominated to defend the man.

Oldroyd's *Lady Macbeth* shifts the setting of Leskov's Russia of the late 19th century to rural England during the 1960s. The movie follows a 17-year-old Katherine as she is moved to Northumberland in marriage to an older man, Alexander Lester, and is now living at the estate of his father, Boris Lester. The place houses just the three of them, Anna, a maid, and a few servants and helpers. The Victorian middle class was divided into two distinctive sections- the lower middle, comprising shopkeepers, clerks, teachers, artisans, etc., and the upper middle, with professionals like doctors, lawyers, engineers, architects, and businessmen. The Lester family, as

exemplified by various instances in the movie, belongs to the upper middle class, with the men of the house often away for business.

The movie provides generous instances that convey the Victorian attitude. Katherine is expected to stay indoors at all times, under all circumstances, despite her constant appeal to be out in the fresh air. Her human interactions, at least for the early half of the movie, are limited to her husband, his father, and her maid. She is married, or rather, sold to Alexander Lester as part of a convenient land deal, and he sees and treats her more like a possession than a wife. She is perpetually reminded by her father-in-law of her one and true purpose, which is to produce a child who is to be the sole heir to the Lester fortune. Another interesting instance is when the priest arrives at the house, inquiring of her presence being missed at the daily mass. He takes it upon himself to assume the reason for her absence to be her ill health, which is the only logical reason he could think of for a lady refusing to comply with the norms, especially those concerning religion. The scene provides an implication of the depth at which the indoctrination ran.

This backdrop illuminates the actions of the characters and the depth of their impacts. Though the story of Katherine appears too sinister to be real in such a setting, its fictional realization through the movie is arguably essential in questioning the archetype of the ideal woman of the Victorian Age. The destructive actions of Katherine yield the desired constructive effect only when placed against such a setting of stringent principles. The movie effectively uses this stark highlight to subvert the genderly paradigms of the age as well, which will be dealt in detail in the following chapter.

Chapter 2

"Unsex Me": *Lady Macbeth*'s Challenge to Gender Paradigms.

In Victorian England, being a newlywed woman in an upper middle-class family was indeed one of the most effortless places a woman could be. Apart from the very direct inequalities, unforgiving ideals, everyday objectification, and stringent expectations to fulfill, the rest of it was, quite literally, a walk in the park. Whereas being a man was quite challenging. He ought to provide and protect, not be gentle, be arrogant, and condescending, not cry, and participate in social events like hunts and races with his masculinity on full display. A clear partition in behavioral patterns could be distinguished, with soft and slow on the female premise, and violent and valiant on the male.

This polarity that existed between genderly duties is not only conventionally visualized but is also effectively reinterpreted in the movie. Even though other cardinal issues like race-class oppression are observable, this chapter focuses on the two primary characters- Sebastian and Katherine- in the context of their respective feminine and masculine definitions. It is important to note how Leskov names his work after one of the most important and sinister female characters of the English literary canon. The story exhibits zero common ground with Shakespeare's *Macbeth* except in its observation of a rigid class system and the employment of a strong female villainous character. Leskov's and Oldroyd's choice of title points to an intentional attempt at constructing a female character that is both empowering as well as destructive at the same time.

Right from the start, the movie establishes Katherine as an independent entity. It is customary for period pieces to place the female character in the context of her family, childhood,

and social class and portray her as a young woman full of dreams and passions so that each of her actions is justified. Instead, here, we have no background information on Katherine, her family, or the social rank to which she previously belonged. No trace of her childhood is evident, and most of what constitutes her inner world is hidden from the viewer. She is given a clean slate and ample space to grow into an outcome of her own choices rather than what she is born and sold into. The woman she becomes is what she chooses to be, be it good or bad.

The very first sentence out of her mouth sums up her character. “I am thick skinned,” (0:03:05) says Katherine and, through the course of the story, lives up to the statement. Two days into the marriage she realizes that her husband sees her as nothing but a property entrusted to his safekeeping and the very next day, both Alexander and Boris leave the house for business with strict orders for Katherine to keep to the house. Katherine, predictably, disobeys and ventures out. She in no way adheres to the notion of a wife being the “angel of the house” and lets the days pass by sleeping around or getting drunk. By this time, she also kindles a clandestine sexual affair with Sebastian. After Boris finds them out, Sebastian is beaten up and locked away. She confronts her angry father-in-law saying she has nothing to be ashamed of and demands he let him out, refusing which she poisons him. She then quits all efforts to keep the affair private and is uncaring of who notices. The news reaches her husband who returns to check on his wife and is murdered by her.

Katherine, despite her cruelty and crimes, remains calm and contained throughout the story. Unlike the titular Lady Macbeth, she does not succumb to guilt or hysteria. She is calculating and ready for action, a trait unmatched by her male counterpart. Katherine is portrayed as everything generally termed under the masculine instincts—she is unflinching, strong-headed, and intelligent. In great contrast to the ideal woman’s honesty, Katherine is

extraordinarily skilled at lying with a straight face. “That boy is like a child to me,” says Katherine with not half an hour passing between her suffocating him to death with her bare hands.

Interestingly enough, when it comes to breaking gender norms, the movie is successful in not just subverting the femininity of the heroine but also questioning and reinterpreting the masculinity of the men in the picture. The three men in the story provide three different vantage points for Victorian masculinity. Boris Lester is the man of the house, despite his age and declining health. Alexander, his son, is sickly, mostly drunk, and falls short of his duties. The third is Sebastian, the arrogant servant Katherine falls in love with.

Boris Lester is the very first male character shown on screen, in the opening scene of the marriage ceremony. He is or appears to be an embodiment of Victorian masculinity, looking down on women and servants, running the family business, and providing for the household. Alexander, later in the movie, articulates how his father “bought” Katherine as part of a land deal. He even seeks his father's approval for the most trivial of matters in his life. This projects the father's overbearance and the son's inefficiency, both unbecoming of their ideal roles. When it comes to Katherine, she does a clean job of eliminating both of them. She poisons Boris and blames it on his weak health, and she takes it into her own hands to murder Alexander in cold blood and proceeds to cover up traces of his arrival–two men in power killed, ironically, by an unflinching seventeen-year-old they themselves bought into the house.

With Sebastian, one is able to trace a gradual and visible transition from strong to weak, courage to cowardice, and hence, active to passive, or more conveniently, masculine to feminine. He is introduced among a group of farmboys abusing Anna, the maid. He also treats Katherine in

a condescending manner, despite her being his master's wife. He's arrogant, daring, and wild—exactly what makes him appeal to Katherine. He forces himself upon her and takes the initiative to start an illicit alliance. He wears her husband's clothes in his absence and even takesit as far as to sit at the head of the table, generally occupied by the head of the house. Right afterthe first killing, there is a shift in the status quo of power dynamics in their relationship.

Katherine emerges as powerful, determined, and ruthless, while Sebastian slowly deteriorates into guilt, repulsion, and confusion. He starts questioning his own feelings toward Katherine. It appears as if Sebastian was only in it for the rush and the sense of power derived from the subjugation and submission of a vulnerable woman. In his final confession, Sebastian lets out a desperate cry, accusing Katherine of suffocating and controlling him. He is visibly trembling and is hysteric, something historically attributed as feminine. He feels betrayed and used and slowly circles into a breakdown—not an ideal position the masculine man would find himself in. In a shaky voice, and out of breath, he testifies:

> "She killed the boy…. She killed him. She held a pillow over his face, and I held his legs. She killed Alexander Lester. She killed Boris Lester, poisoned him with mushrooms, and let him die. She… killed that boy. She killed that boy so… so that we could be together. And I thought I loved her. She suffocated me. She suffocated me and she hounded me, and then she never let me be. She's a disease. (1:20:20)

and as the tears gush down his cheeks, Katherine says he's lying, with nothing but a straight face. As Sebastian is degraded to a feminine and thus inferior stature, Katherine emerges as wicked and brilliant, and everything else considered masculine. She embroiders the narrative in such a way that it appears as if the killings were done together by Sebastian and Anna, whose secret liaisons were found out and threatened by the Lesters. She even adds that Anna is the one who

picks mushrooms every day and is more likely to poison Boris. Her sudden responses and quick counters make one wonder if she had it planned all along—a master plan played out to her advantage, at the end of which she rid herself of three abusive men and secured the entire Lester fortune for herself.

The characters of both Sebastian and Katherine project the idea of Victorian paradoxes through an intentional interplay between the conventional feminine and masculine. The film doesn't just challenge Victorian ideals; it actively deconstructs them. Katherine's defiance isn't simply disobedience; it's a deliberate unraveling of the expectations thrust upon women. She sheds the submissive "angel of the house" persona, embracing her dark desires and manipulating the patriarchal system to her advantage. This subverts the traditional male hero narrative, placing a complex, morally ambiguous woman at the center of the story.

Chapter 3

"Serpent Under't": Exploring the Perverse Female in *'Lady Macbeth'*

Morality is an elusive compass mankind used and still uses to navigate the challenging landscapes of living, guiding one through the choppy waters of right and wrong. This internal code, this sense of what is good and bad, often dictated the choices, relationships, roles, and ultimately, the kind of society built. The Victorian era is known for its observation of strict morals and its major tenets included respect, charity, faith, sexual repression, and family values. Even though the grips were tight, when it came to practice, there existed certain double standards to the advantage of men, keeping the moral lens magnified on women. The ideal Victorian woman was seen as the "Angel in the House," a figure of purity, piety, and domesticity. Her primary roles were to be a wife, mother, and homemaker, creating a haven of morality and order for her family. Women were expected to be submissive to their husbands and fathers, placing their family's needs above their own desires.

This assumed righteousness entailed with womanhood was inculcated so deep that women were not just surmised as inherently good but also incapable of anything evil. Deviant behavior in women was often labeled as hysteria and conveniently dismissed. There was a significant amount of hysteria circulating fictional women as much as there were real ones, too. Depictions appeared visually in a number of paintings, including several interpretations of Shakespeare's Ophelia – a famous character known for her madness and suicide – along with characters in novels of the period, most notably Bertha Rochester of *Jane Eyre* and *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins to name a few. This real and imagined presence of female madness plagued society's hive mind, manufacturing an image of women being more likely mad than bad.

While the perilous acts of murder, assault, and revenge were resorted for men, the evil in women was often assumed as limited to laziness, swooning, or in extreme scenarios, daring to ask for a divorce. Even if women were associated with crimes like murder, the means were apparently less violent. Even though ideas of the 'femme fatale' existed it merely belonged within books and myths. One of the major means of murder employed by the Victorian woman was poisoning. This too often shows a tendency to be justified on grounds of a traumatic childhood, religious obsession, physical illness, tragic events like loss of a child, or marital abuse. This not only reduces women to their stereotyped naivety but also denies the existence of females who murdered solely because they wanted to and not because they had to. When violence is a tool for the male, it is often depicted as a desperate female's last resort.

This deviant behavior in women remained unnamed or rather, was not discussed enough to be named, until the late twentieth century. In 1992, consultant psychiatrist Estela V. Welldon coined the term 'female perversion' to refer to women who commit violent physical crimes directed at themselves or others. By strict definitions, the term 'perversion' meant "something that improperly changes something good" and was used to refer to instances of human behavior that deviates from what is considered orthodox or normal; and since murder fell far out of the formulaic feminine domain, it too was rounded up along with the various instances of perversions, or rather deviations in women like Munchausen Syndrome, eating disorder and self-harm.

According to Freudian psychoanalytic theory, aggressive drive was exclusively associated with the phallus and hence perversion was specific to men. Welldon contests this idea in her book *Madonna, Whore: The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood* and contends

that women are also capable of perversion where instead of the aggressive acts involving a penis, they use their whole body.

> The reproductive functions and organs are used by both sexes to express perversion. Perverse men use their penises to attack and show hatred towards symbolic sources of humiliation, usually represented by part-objects. If perversion in the man is focused through his penis, in the woman it will similarly be expressed through her reproductive organs. While man pursues his perverse goals with his penis, woman does so with her whole body, since her reproductive organs are much more widespread and their manifestations are more apparent. (Welldon 40)

In 2001, Anna Motz in her work *The Psychology of Female Violence: Crimes Against the Body* theorized how the acts of violence committed by women against themselves and their children are attempts at expressing pain or anger. She concludes that women are more likely to kill intimate family members than strangers and attributes these provocations to an induced pattern of helplessness followed by depression and then by violence.

Most of these theories, again, come in acceptance with the essentialist claims of women being inherently incapable of violence and only forced into it by traumatic experiences or a lack of alternatives. Against such justifications does the movie set the unforgiving portrayal of Katherine Lester. She is neither haunted by a traumatic childhood nor is she subject to physical or verbal abuse from her husband or his father. None of her crimes are in self defense and her reasons are mostly unjustifiable. She is presented as an instinctive killer. She murders Boris Lester because he locked up her lover and refused to let him out. She only confronts him once about his release, but her uncanny behavior is evident when one notices how she poisoned his

food even before this dialogue occurs. When her husband demands she keep herself from indulging in shameful affairs, she appears unbothered and even goes as far to make love to Sebastian right in front of her husband. She successfully provokes him, who attacks them both and is killed by Katherine in cold blood. She kills the child, Teddy, just because Sebastian is offended by his mastery. Another gruesome instance of Katherine's anomalous behavior is evident in her sexual arousal right after the killings, when she leans in to kiss her lover with the blood on her hands that is not yet dry. Here, Katherine kills because she wants to and not because she has to, thus countering the conventional narrative of women's lack of innate capacity for violence and placing herself as a brutal and vicious villain.

New Historicist analysis of the text sheds light on its subversion of traditional narratives. In the movie, this subversion also operates through the semiotics of colors used in the movie. It is to be noted how the movie specifically uses a minimalistic setting, fewer words, and prolonged silences to present an atmosphere that is eerie and claustrophobic. There is a consistent use of mute colors so that even the minute specks of bright colors are given a spotlight to act out certain covert implications. iIn The Architectural Digest featuring the movie Mitchel Owens says:

> "The furniture is brown wood, the fabrics are drab, and walls are either tobacco-color paneling or painted a dirty ivory. Even the air seems similarly tinctured. There's absolutely nothing for the main character, the frustrated teenage bride of a sexually disinterested older man, to admire or delight in.' (Owens 3)

The colors hold meaning and are often used as a material tool to imply Katherine's gradual transformation from heroine to villain. She is introduced as wearing white, not just for the wedding but also for a few successive nights. This, in a way, conveys the idea of a tabula rasa,

picturing Katherine as a blank page devoid of any previous markings. The white may even symbolize the conventional mark of purity. Further into the story, Katherine is shown wearing her signature blue dress gown, which, when placed in the Victorian context, harbors numerous meanings. Katherine starts wearing blue in time with the beginning of her marital disillusionment. From there, she resorts to wearing either blue or black. Even though at first one might easily be tempted to associate the blue of her dress with her sadness or desperation, the plot of the movie calls for another, much more relevant, interpretation.

Fig 1. The Lady of the House, (*Lady Macbeth* 00:36:35)

Again to place the color usages in a historic context, a walk back into history brings one to the Renaissance era when painters, especially those like Da Vinci, preferred to paint their idealized women shrouded in blue, the major specimen being the Virgin Mary, as seen in the painting *Madonna of the Rocks.* Down the timeline, we have colors like Marian blue, Virginal Blue, etc that inevitably link back blue to the ideals of purity, loyalty, etc. Katherine is wearing a very identical blue at the start of the movie, which could be a signifier of her chastity. She soon switches to a dark shade of maroon and then to a solid black. The complexity arises in the final

scene, where she is shown wearing the initial blue again—strangely but strikingly similar to the virgin Mary. Alone but determined, she sits there—the child in her womb not of her husband—with only three murders and an adulterous affair to distinguish her from Mary, the epitome of purity.

Fig 2. *The Virgin of the Rocks*

This placement of Katherine in contrast to Mary is a manifestation of the ethical discrepancy between the moral and immoral and hence accounts for a daunting attempt at questioning, or rather countering, the conventional codes of righteousness. From an ethical point of view, Katherine can definitely be ruled out as evil, but an analysis devoid of moral judgment

would place her as an empowered woman, a competent enemy, and most importantly, a mastermind.

Moving forward from the historical time stamp of the story and its sources, the 21st century cinematic scene is witness to various instances of female characters asserting their autonomy through means of violence. Though extremely rare, the presence of murderous women in cinema has well established the presence of violence within the female psyche, countering the essentialist claims. The intrigue of relevance here is how these characters serve not to normalize violence but rather to create an aperture through which women reclaim a domain previously held out of their reach—the domain of savagery. While the Shakespearean character of Lady Macbeth was frowned upon and received as inhuman, Katherine, here, is welcomed regally as a feminist icon. If under a different social climate than that of 2016 into which the movie was released, such a positive reception of her actions cannot be guaranteed. The social-cinematic scene of 2016 was in a way made ready by those movies with murderous female leads that came before—Gone Girl (2014), Crimson Peak (2015) to name a few—to receive the character of Katherine as intended, marking a paradigm shift from violence only being done to women, to violence also being done by women.

Conclusion

One of the momentous steps taken in modern cinema in tearing down conventional narratives can be observed in its adaptation and portrayal of classic stories– novels or even fairy tales for that matter–from previously unexplored vantage points. Popular among these adaptations would undoubtedly be those movies that proffer a feminist light to period pieces where women often were confined to the sidelines or if at all given the spotlight, were portrayed as nothing but the stereotyped good and gentle. While many modern productions refashion the classics in order to defend women's rights, rarely do we come across a movie, like Oldroyd's *Lady Macbeth*, that intentionally defends women's wrongs as well.

The movie provides a groundbreaking heroine who, at the end of the movie, is revealed to be villainous as well. The titular allusion to the Shakespearean character, Lady Macbeth is relevant here. Lady Macbeth's transformation from ambitious manipulator to guilt-ridden soul raises questions about the performative nature of gender roles and the societal pressures that shape female behavior. Her descent into madness can be seen as a critique of the limited options available to women in a patriarchal society, projecting the idea that a woman committing a crime has no choice but to give in to guilt and eventually insanity and suicide.

While the movie portrays Katherine in a villainous and remorseless light, the project attempts to present the heroine as a skilled opponent, quick in her responses who does anything and everything it takes to keep herself in power. She is unforgiving, bold, and resilient and is finally successful in employing her plans to full effect. Katherine, hence, becomes a counteract to the traditional image of the battered and betrayed woman who is forced to kill and provides a strangely fascinating image of a woman who kills and gets away with it, just because she can.

Though her actions are questionable and a strictly moral prism would condemn them as unethical, a contextual reading proved them as instrumental in establishing an often-forgotten or conveniently ignored sinister female persona. The portrayal of Katherine disproves the typically accepted notion of women being nurturers and caretakers and against Freudian ideas of violence as exclusive to the phallus, claims the existence of brutality within the bounds of the female psyche. If the movie was set in a 21st century urban setting where women are accepted equals of men, where women exercise authority and freedom, the actions of the heroine would only be frowned upon as morally corrupt. It is the repressive climate of the Victorian Era that justifies her actions to be empowering, where the only way for a woman to own a fortune was to inherit it— either by birth into a family or by the death of a family.fsd Thus the apt historic setting of the story becomes an inevitable factor to analyse the implications of its literary content.

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