

Gender and Literature – Is Gender Gendered?

Female Protagonists in *Macbeth* (1606), *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and *A Doll's House* (1879) – Three Different Genres of Literature across Centuries

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Abstract—This paper examines how men and women have been conventionally portrayed in gender stereotypes in various genres among different cultures through centuries in world literature, with reference to the classical Shakespearean play *Macbeth* (1606) by the British playwright William Shakespeare, the Hollywood road movie *Thelma and Louise* (1991) directed by Ridley Scott and *A Doll's House* (1879) written by the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen. The research will explore the common themes embodied by the notion of gender almost in all literature work in the world which include patriarchy and order, masculinity and femininity, fabrication of identities, and binary opposition with the close textual analysis of the process of self-discovery and empowerment by the female protagonists, Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Thelma and Louise in *Thelma and Louise* and Nora in *A Doll's House* through the eyes of the male authors, namely playwrights and film director. By comparing the fates of aforementioned female protagonists in the three endings, the actual autonomy that women can take the lead in their life or act outside the normalized gender binaries is further studied. With the analysis of the literary devices and the depiction of the female characters' psychological change with the visualization of symbols and attires in the texts, the relationship between form and content is also investigated. There is also the discourse analysis on the use of gendered language through soliloquies and dialogues, implication of gender roles in society and culture and the consequences of these females in transcending the gendered roles.

Index Terms—Gender, patriarchy, stereotypes, women.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ongoing debates about the inherent nature of womanhood and the role of women in society—collectively known as the Woman Question—were also taking place in England at this time. These two areas converge in the writing produced by nineteenth-century female critics who used their criticism of Shakespeare's female characters to express their views about Victorian gender ideology. The critics who consider these characters use their analysis to explore the inherent nature of femininity, the validity of socially constructed gender norms, and the impacts of cultural practices, such as marriage, on women. Collectively, their work reflects an adherence to many basic Victorian precepts of femininity—gentleness, selflessness, and purity; however, these critics also question

the notion of many socially imposed gender expectations that govern and limit the agency of nineteenth-century women. Through their combined criticism of Shakespeare's female characters, these critics engage in the public discourse surrounding gender and demonstrate a growing tolerance for female autonomy, as well as a pronounced desire to recognize female intelligence and strength [1].

Different literature reviews are commonplace with reference to the comparative modern theatre adaptations across the globe from feminist and intercultural perspectives. It is found that Lady Macbeth has been presented, interpreted and analyzed in various theatrical performances in Korea and abroad, including Poland (2002), Japan (2008), China (2008), and Singapore (2010) [2]. Sexuality and Hollywood's fighting heroines are always explored in spectacular bodies in the genre of movies [3]. Nevertheless, seldom are there any multi-genre studies on comparative analysis and interpretations across different text types originated from the original scripts, especially the juxtapositions of Shakespearean written scripts of plays, linguistic and visual language in Hollywood movies and European written scripts of plays from the perspectives of both male and female authors.

This study mainly focuses on the original textual analysis of the representation of female characters, with the use of language and different genres of the texts, namely one of the British playwright William Shakespeare's darkest tragedies *Macbeth* (1606), the Hollywood film director Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991), and the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) from all the male authors' perspective in reading women across centuries, which also symbolize the critique over the gender stereotypes and patriarchy among societies and cultures.

II. LADY MACBETH IN *MACBETH*

Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's bloodiest plays in which female characters drive the plot development. The status of Lady Macbeth as one of Shakespeare's most devious and fascinating characters has been recognized in the proliferation of criticism on and adaptive works of *Macbeth* over the past 400 years. In particular, Lady Macbeth achieves her ambitions which advance her and her husband's political interests while working within a stringently patriarchal society [4]. Without Lady Macbeth and the three witches, Macbeth's commit to series of murders would not be possible,

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which is the main plot of the play. Macbeth's wife is represented to be a much more fearless, ambiguous and cruel character than Macbeth, who devises the demise of king Duncan right after Macbeth's news in the letter about the promotion to the thaneship of Glamis from Thane of Cawdor upon the winning in the battle. The prominence of Lady Macbeth's soliloquy visualizes how females are always conventionally associated as figures of femineity, wifhood, motherhood and femininity from the male perspective, with Lady Macbeth acts as a petit narrative to overthrow the male-dominated society especially during the Elizabethan time. In fact, *Macbeth* is just one among all Shakespearean plays who offers a contrastive identification of women from their traditional household images. Lady Macbeth appears to be much more manly and evil than Macbeth in the first half of the play, as portrayed from her ability to see through and manipulate Macbeth's character, who is regarded as "*too full o' the milk of human kindness To catch the nearest way*" (Act 1 Scene V). Lady Macbeth's psychological struggle and dilemma to survive under the patriarchal rule in the society is vividly exemplified from her awareness and internalization of women's social constraints to be as ambitious as men. Therefore, she calls upon supernatural power to "*Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull / Of direst cruelty!*" and "*Come to my woman's breasts / And take my milk for gall*" (Act 1 Scene V). From this, despite Lady Macbeth's boldness, it is obvious that her rejection to femininity and her internalization that females are always associated with the attributes of human kindness, fertility and nurture reflect of binary opposition of gender assumptions are constantly being reinforced and regulated by institutional forces and social norms. Her psychological consciousness to deny female stereotypes further reveals her understanding of manhood equates to power, which is clearly illustrated by her soliloquy again in Act 1 Scene 7 in which she picturizes the scenery that she can kill her own son even when she is breastfeeding to achieve her ambitions ("*I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me / I would, while it was smiling in my face / Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out*"). At one point, she desires she were a man so that she could commit the deed by herself and understanding of the hinderance from her female identity reveal the profound social norm and traditions that "*undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males*" (Act 1 Scene 7) have been cultivated for long across centuries and cultures through history. On the other hand, Macbeth also depicts Lady Macbeth as someone having a masculine soul inhabiting a female body. In addition, Lady Macbeth challenges Macbeth's manhood when he hesitates to murder king Duncan "*Are you a man?*" (Act 1 Scene 4). Subsequently, Macbeth feels he must prove his masculinity and authority when his manhood or his identification as a man is threatened, which interestingly demonstrates how the gender stereotypes project the notion that masculinity means power and authority, which has been entrenched ideologically among both men and women for long. It is important to note that both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth need one another to commit the first deed of murder of king Duncan. While Macbeth is not as lionhearted and aggressive as Lady Macbeth in characterization, Lady Macbeth can only

plot the murder in the hands of Macbeth due to her biological identity and socio-cultural constraints as a woman.

The reversed roles of masculinity and femininity between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth has been totally usurped and turned upside down as the play progresses to Act 1 Scene 5. Here comes the question what makes Lady Macbeth transform from someone filled with "direst cruelty" (Act 1 Scene V) to a vulnerable figure who is desperate to wash away her bloodstain and even commit suicide in her sleepwalking scene. Act 5 Scene 1 is a turning point in the entire play, which powerfully visualizes how ambition has rotten and contaminated Macbeth's soul more and more while guilt plagues Lady Macbeth strongly to her own suicide towards the end of the play. After knowing the wife and children of Thane of Fife have all died, she keeps mourning during handwashing:

"The thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now?—What, will my hands never be clean?—No more of that, my lord, no more of that. You'll ruin everything by acting startled like this."

"Out, damned spot! out, I say!--One: two: why, then, 'tis time to do't.--Hell is murky!--Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?--Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him." "Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!" (Act 1 Scene 7).

The images of her guilt-filled sleepwalking scene and later suicide register therefore serve as bodily signs of corruption and self-punishment for her aggressive gender transgression, which demonstrates a twist to her other side of contrastive duality of her seemingly fearless powerful urge of the tyrannical usurpation of the monarchy and the usurpation of control within marriage [4].

III. THE WITCHES IN *MACBETH*

The ending of Lady Macbeth in committing suicide upon her failure in defeating her consciousness of remorse further the limitations of women who are in fact not as powerful as men. The crafty female characters in *Macbeth* still need to rely on men to realize their ambition through the manipulation of men, who could be interpreted as victims to commit crimes under women's manipulation from the male perspective. In addition to Lady Macbeth, the three witches also plant the seed of ambition in Macbeth's heart with their prophecy that Macbeth will be king and father of succession. In some modern adoptions in films and theatre performance from *Macbeth*, the three witches, who are identically to be females, disguise themselves in male attires. Their evilness can be portrayed in the original script that they boil the dead bodies of animals and human organs; and how these cunning spirits enable the wordplay in prophecy to doom and lead to the downfall, and more importantly, the tragedy of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth with the psychological play of human ambitions. These three semi-human creatures wield human weaknesses to govern human beings to destroy themselves. A sense of pathos thus is created among readers and audience especially when Macbeth, such a valiant and adorable character established at the beginning of the play, has transformed into an opposite extremity of a demonic serial killer at the end of the play, due to the through misuse of potentials.

IV. THELMA AND LOUISE IN *THELMA AND LOUISE*

The Hollywood film director Ridley Scott's production *Thelma and Louise* (1991) is a feminist road movie which features how the two female protagonists Thelma and Louise have undergone the process of self-discovery from the confinement to the transgression of gender boundaries imposed by institutions of marriages and agencies of patriarchy in the contemporary society under westernization. The title of the film is a proclaim of women's urge for female autonomy in self-actualization with the feminist voice. In the filmic production, both Thelma and Louise are not content with their heterosexual relationships. Thelma is firstly introduced to the audience as "insane" by Thelma's husband, Darryl, who reveals that the best place for women is kitchen. He is confined to his sofa set watching football, ordering his wife to prepare for food. Meanwhile, Louise is a waitress and has issues with her boyfriend, who is always busy with his music career. In addition to the choice of words in the linguistic dialogues among characters, the usage of visuals for symbolism is also powerful to imply the will of these two female protagonists in transcending the binary opposition of masculinity and femininity in the patriarchal hegemony. Their embarkment on the journey of deviation from their assigned gendered roles can be visualized from their change of attires. The process of masculinization of Thelma and Louise is suggested by their change from feminine costumes to casual wear. Furthermore, gun is a phallic prop which signifies male power and violence, which is appropriated by the female protagonists here throughout their journey of escape. Every gender has its form of drag, a set of behaviours covered in a costume that performs in social contexts [5]. In this regard, the design of the choreography also pushes the two women (who are supposed to be vulnerable) to protect themselves from rapes and dangers with the appropriation of guns (which are supposed to be male weapons). On the other hand, the actions of driving the car to transcend the speed of the truck and destroying the phallic symbol reveal the heroines' attempt at triumphing over the male oppressors. However, what begins as a flight from the law soon turns into an epic odyssey of self-empowerment, in which women's lives are lived in confining, uncomfortable, yet familiar and somewhat protecting roles to the desert wilderness. This dessert is also dominated by men, a world of aggressive motorcyclists and thundering trucks. Nonetheless, Thelma and Louise find that they can compete and survive in this sweeping desert landscape and the highway, are bathed in a soft, golden light that covers everything visible, intensifying the atmospheric mix of nature and culture and suggesting a strange, hyperreal space in which almost anything seems possible [6]. All these suggest the two protagonists seem to invite troubles by themselves, exposing themselves to estrangement and vulnerability from the getaway to a terrain of danger and attack without the protection from domesticity under the male terrain at home.

By the mockery of Darryl over his transformation into a housewife of all manners after the elopement of his wife, Thelma, the strong sisterhood and female bonding to form a counter-culture genre to empower women and the celebration of feminist spirit in embracing female freedom are glorified. Ironically, similar to Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* aforementioned, Thelma and Louise's usurping of the male

power eventually leads to their self-destruction. The housewives are marginalized into criminals, refugees and victims by the end of the film. Thelma and Louise's attack on the traditional patterns of male chauvinist behaviour is at the expense of law breaking and even death. While Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene to murder herself is imagined and picturized through soliloquies, the sense of pathos towards Thelma and Louise is further intensified visually and vividly in their struggle, responding with the statement that "Let's not be caught. Let's keep going" (Scott, 1991) in the final shot, in which they are besieged by the male police. Knowing they will die if they continue to drive towards the canyon, their helplessness yet strong determination to refuse to surrender towards male dominance reinforces the fantasy that eternal freedom can only be granted in heaven, as male hegemony is the law of nature and females are only able to empower themselves temporarily at the expense of being punished for their transgression from any assigned gender roles.

V. NORA IN *A DOLL'S HOUSE*

The Norwegian play *A Doll's House* (1879) by Henrik Ibsen is a classical European feminist play which was written between the Shakespearean time and the contemporary Hollywood, and its famous door slam scene to end the play has formed a controversial discourse towards marriage and divorce, bringing feminine taboos and social issues into spotlight in Europe during that time. Like the men and women in *Macbeth* and *Thelma and Louise*, all the characters are abided by the conformity to gender expectations normalized by different social institutions and agencies. At the beginning of *A Doll's House*, Nora is portrayed as doll-like yet she is completely happy in her association with the household identity as a wife and a mother of trophy. She responds affectionately to her husband, Torvald's teasing, speaks with excitement about the extra money his new job will provide, and takes pleasure in the company of her children and friends. Interestingly, Torvald talks down to Nora almost as if she were his puppet which needs to be educated, and this is exemplified by the dehumanization of Nora into "my little squirrel fussing about in there", "Miss Sweet-Tooth been breaking rules in town today" and "sweet little skylark" (Act 1). In their mundane life, Torvald is shown to have been calling her nicknames rather than her real name which should be the identification of her self-autonomy instead. As a bread-winner, he completely controls her spending, dictates what she is allowed to eat, tells her what to wear, and even at one point refers to her as a child. Rather than absolute obedience to the husband, Nora is shown to defy Torvald in by eating macaroons and then deceiving Torvald towards the financial situation. She also swears, apparently just for the pleasure she derives from minor rebellion against societal standards and patriarchy of the husband. As the drama unfolds, and as Nora's awareness of the truth about her life grows, her need for rebellion escalates, culminating in her walking out on her husband and children to seek independence by divorcing with the family, knowing this would be a big scandal and taboo in the society by then. It is argued that Ibsen paints a bleak picture of the sacrificial role held by women of all economic classes in his society.

Apart from Nora, the other female character, Mrs. Linde, acknowledges the necessity to abandon Krogstad, her true but penniless love, and marry a richer man in order to support her mother and two brothers. Likewise, the nanny abandoned her own child to support herself by working as Nora's and then as Nora's children's caretaker. In general, the play's female characters reinforce the belief that even though men refuse to sacrifice their integrity, "hundreds of thousands of women have". Similarly, without Lady Macbeth, Macbeth can hardly be the king of Scotland yet he is shown to be merciless towards the death of his beloved wife.

VI. ENDINGS OF THE FEMALE PROTAGONISTS

With thousands of texts of different genres featuring female autonomy from gender bias, it is worth to investigate whether these aforementioned female protagonists - Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Thelma and Louise in *Thelma and Louise*, and Nora in *A Doll's House*, are successful in overturning male patriarchy. With a close examination on the endings of the aforementioned three texts, it is obvious that these runaway women reveal the paradox of females' dream and fantasy of empowerment of themselves in fact result in disempowering themselves in actual circumstance and even risking their own life. While Lady Macbeth commits suicide in the sleepwalking scene due to the overwhelm of guilt and remorse, Thelma and Louise are finally caught in suspense in the air in the frozen frame in the final shot. The contrastive boundlessness of the Cliff of Grand Canyon creates an illusion that the two heroines are swallowed by the landscape, foreshadowing their fate would be either imminent death or imprisonment upon the punishment for the refusal to stay in their fixed gender binaries. The revolutionary attempt at overturning patriarchal hegemony can only be partially successful as any deviation and freedom attained by escaping from the assigned gender roles is transcendental yet transient. Meanwhile, for Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, her eternal freedom from righteous conscience can only be granted in heaven upon her death. She is a character who defines and defies what means to be a female villain and the plotter of the first murder. Paradoxically, she is also the one who leads to her own death, implying the transgression from male rule of fathers is transient and impossible. In contrast, *A Doll's House* ends with an open-ending yet it started with a controversy in Europe during the time of 19 century:

Nora: That is just it; you have never understood me. I have been greatly wronged, Torvald—first by papa and then by you.

Helmer: What! By us two—by us two, who have loved you better than anyone else in the world?

Nora: You have never loved me. You have only thought it is pleasant to be in love with me. (Act III)

Nora realizes that her husband does not love her as the woman she is but that he has an idea of what Nora as his wife is supposed to do and think in the form of a possession so that the husband can identify himself as a man. Her definition of freedom is to be autonomous from familial obligation. Nora, while saving her husband's life, has jeopardized his career

and social standing through her debt and unwitting felony. Perhaps more significantly, she has jeopardized his manly self-reliance as he discovers that he owes his recovery and health to her years of labor and management. In Torvald's eyes, Nora has suddenly ceased to be an ingenuous girl and ideal wife and become "a hypocrite, a liar ... a criminal" and "an unprincipled woman" (Act III). The romantic marriage ideal, in short, can no longer be the template for their life narrative, and the marriage must consequently either be dissolved or continue on some other models. Torvald, priding himself on his upright respectability, can envision no alternative but a retreat behind the marital proscenium in a hollow limitation of their old ideal married life [7].

VII. CONCLUSION

In general, all these female heroines, Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* (1606), Thelma and Louise in *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and Nora in *A Doll's House* (1879) represent one of the female pioneers in world literatures in attempting at overthrowing the patriarchal hegemony in gender relations and binarism across three different generic texts through centuries and cultures. Nonetheless, all the final destiny and sacrificial roles of these women in order to uphold male dominance at the expense of female subjectivity and autonomy, illustrating the female success in disturbing the gender hierarchy is at most partial and temporary which may be subjected to a breakthrough one day in future with the continuation of debates, movements and revolution.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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