

## EVOLUTION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SHAKESPEARE'S ROSALIND AND LADY MACBETH AND COLLINS' KATNISS EVERDEEN

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### Abstract

The paper looks at Rosalind of *As You Like It* and Lady Macbeth of *Macbeth* who are generally considered to be two of Shakespeare's strongest female characters. In the Shakespearean world, Rosalind assumes strength and power through her male disguise. Without the disguise, she is stripped of her power and is almost entirely a subjugated, obedient woman even though she always keeps showing signs of being the most talented person among all the characters- both male and female- in the play. At the same time, Lady Macbeth's strength relies on her husband's ambitious mind and works through his love for her. But the moment Macbeth's ambitions are fulfilled, distance grows between them and Lady Macbeth becomes a helpless and crazy woman. If this is the picture of women in the canonical literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this paper then turns its view towards the depiction of women in the literature of the twenty first century. It concentrates on the protagonist Katniss Everdeen of the trilogy *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins for detecting how far the depiction of female characters has evolved throughout centuries. Like Rosalind and Lady Macbeth, Katniss is a strong and influential character. But unlike Rosalind, she is never subjugated and although she is mentally shaken, her mind never gives in like Lady Macbeth. This paper attempts to show that in the literary world there is a continuous journey made by the women characters and at present they have come to the stage where the potential of Rosalind and Lady Macbeth are actualized into Katniss Everdeen.

**Key Words:** Evolution, women characters, power, strength, spirit, prowess, politics, patriarchy, freedom

### Introduction

There have been numerous research works on both Rosalind and Lady Macbeth and critics from different ages have analyzed them from different viewpoints. Among the critics, there is a marked distinction between the early critics like Cleanth Brooks, Jan Kott, Willaim Hazlitt etc. and the recent contemporary ones like Harold Bloom, Marilyn French, Terry Eagleton etc. regarding the way they look at Shakespearean characters. This paper makes a synthesis of the views of critics from different periods to reach its own conclusion. On the other hand, Katniss Everdeen has been established by Suzanne Moore as an influential character and a role model for the modern young girls ("Why The Hunger Games' Katniss Everdeen is a role model for our times"). Katniss' character has been scrutinized by Allison Layfield to determine the impact of reality television shows on the psychology of participants and viewers ("Identity Construction and the Gaze in the *Hunger Games*").

However, this paper is an attempt to make a comparative study of the depiction of the Renaissance English female characters and the twenty first century American female characters in pointing

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out their progress in personal, social and political spheres created by writers in fiction. For the limited scope of the paper, it has selected Shakespeare's two characters, Rosalind and Lady Macbeth and Collins' Katniss Everdeen. Although the three characters belong to different genres, that is, Rosalind and Lady Macbeth to theatre and Katniss to novel, there are important similarities in the disposition of these characters, and if viewed as characters of literature as a whole, we cannot but notice a continuous growth in the female characters at large in the complete bulk of literature from the sixteenth to the twenty first centuries. The paper responds to the characters from this particular angle and finds out that the characters are more similar than different in many of the aspects, and their differences arise from their attitudes to life and their particular societies' accepted ideas of women in general.

### **Materials and Methods**

The aim of this study is to compare and contrast the selected female protagonists, namely, Rosalind, Lady Macbeth and Katniss Everdeen in terms of the strength of their personality, the decisive power of their mind, and the magnitude of their action and influence. This research work is important to understand how much the depiction of women figures in fiction has changed throughout centuries.

For this research, materials solely from secondary sources, for example, literary criticisms provided by a number of prominent scholars from different periods have been consulted. Along with these criticisms, editorial reviews, newspaper articles and essays available on the Internet have been referred to in this study. Besides, the text books of *As You Like It*, *Macbeth*, and *The Hunger Games* trilogy have been used for tracing the main areas of similarities and differences among the chosen characters so that the evolution of female characters can be identified.

The comparative technique has been applied in the paper for analyzing the characters to find out the distinct changes in portraying a female character in the twenty first century from that of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

### **Discussion**

Before comparing and contrasting Rosalind, Lady Macbeth and Katniss Everdeen with a view to detecting the evolution of female characters in literature, the three characters are introduced briefly along with short synopses of the books in which they appear.

Rosalind is the beautiful, intelligent and romantic heroine of *As You Like It* (1600) and is one of Shakespeare's most celebrated characters. She is the daughter of the banished Duke Senior and niece to the usurper Duke Frederick. Later she falls in love with Orlando who happens to be her father's loyal friend late Sir Rowland de Boys' youngest son. At one point, to evade her uncle's rage, Rosalind leaves the court disguised as a boy, named Ganymede and continues living in the Forest of Arden till she reveals her true identity to her father and would-be husband.

On the contrary, Lady Macbeth is a powerful antagonistic character in Shakespeare's tragic play *Macbeth* (1603-1607). She has drawn the attention of the critics for the last hundreds of years for the commotion and disruption of ideas associated with masculinity and femininity in her character. Throwing away feminine instincts of kindness, motherhood and meekness, she leads her husband, Macbeth, to commit regicide in order to accrue absolute supreme power. Her single mindedness in seeking royal position and power in the early two acts of the play contrasts with her guilt-tormented self in the later acts. The conflict and ambiguity in her character shed light on the accepted gender roles beginning from Shakespeare continuing to the present age of literature.

Finally, Katniss Everdeen is the protagonist of the futuristic dystopian series of novels *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. There are, in total, three books in the series, consecutively called *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010). The trilogy can be looked at as a bildungsroman of Katniss who begins her journey as a quiet, indifferent citizen and ends it with the demolition of the autocratic system of her country, Panem. In the first book, she stirs the whole country when she volunteers for her younger sister, Primrose Everdeen to take part in the annual Hunger Games, a reality television show where teenage kids fight to death until only one remains alive. In the games, she survives through remarkable aptitude, level-headedness, and bravery. In the following two books, she becomes the symbol of the rebellion against President Coriolanus Snow's government.

All the three heroines, namely, Rosalind, Lady Macbeth and Katniss Everdeen possess multitudes of skills and prowess to preserve themselves against all the odds that they face in their respective life. For Rosalind, who is a romantic heroine, her greatest assets are her intellect and wit. She is not shown to have any deadly or malicious talent but possesses a great control over words and is often a loquacious person. When her father, Duke Senior loses his power and is banished from the court, she is intelligent enough to evade the banishment or worse punishment for a long time. She uses words in a way that gives only a controlled expression to her grief of being separated from her father and over her father's duchy's usurpation by her uncle.

But no matter how much intelligent and capable a woman was the Elizabethan and Jacobean world did not allow a lady to roam at her will without proper masculine protection. Celia gives an exact description of the ambience of her age when she says, "Alas, what danger will it be to us, / Maids as we are, to travel forth so far! / Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold" (1.3.103-5). So, when the time comes to flee the court and live in the forest, Rosalind cloaks herself as a man to protect herself and Celia from all the vulnerabilities that a female identity intrinsically renders to girls.

But Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth refuses to use lady like charms or mask of a man to get what she desires. Like Rosalind, she is a woman of sharp intellect and uses words expertly to serve her purpose instead of being a woman who obeys her husband in silence. She wants her husband to be the king and she believes he also simultaneously wants to be the king. Going against the feminine role of an advocate of morals and piety that the Renaissance patriarchal society dictated for women, she goads her husband to be a king-slayer. Critic Marilyn French opines that Macbeth's world or Scotland was a heroic world full of bloodshed and brutality. In a world like this only sustaining life was paramount and manly qualities were valued and womanly virtues were scorned. Lady Macbeth understands and accepts the state of her world, and within the masculine/feminine polarity, she adheres to the masculine morals and principles (14-16). Once she makes up her mind, she declares:

Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,

And fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full

Of direst cruelty. (1.5.39-42)

Thus, she rejects her feminine side because that side is full of weaknesses according to the measure of her time and unworthy of the battle-torn world of Scotland. But this very act condemned her in the eyes of the Elizabethan audience because a woman could not dare to act like a man while maintaining the identity of a female. Her action made her a monster in the eyes of the Elizabethans and she was delineated accordingly. In French's words, "Her crime is heinous because it violates her social role, which has been erected into a principle of

existence: she fails to uphold the feminine principle. For her, as for Goneril, this failure plunges her more deeply into a pit of evil than any man can ever fall” (17).

Shakespeare, being the author, could not allow a female figure to make an uprising against the set rules of his time as such behaviour might infuriate the audience who mostly consist of men, and might instigate women to break the social decorum. Perhaps for this reason, Lady Macbeth fails to preserve herself against the patriarchal values and morality and dies a miserable death although she acts more courageously than Rosalind.

On the other hand, when we look at Katniss Everdeen who is a creation of the twenty first century, it appears that she demonstrates far greater freedom- both physical and spiritual - even though she lives under many rules and regulations imposed by the autocratic system of the country called Panem which is at present known as North America. While Rosalind had Corin to take care of her farm and possibly to arrange food for her and her companions, Katniss herself hunts in the woods, going against the laws of the state, to fend for her family. Like Lady Macbeth, she does not use any female charms in order to subsist in a hostile and ruthless world. On the contrary, like her father, she is absolutely comfortable while trading with other people or selling games in the local black market called the Hob. It is solely through her physical prowess and intellect that she survives in the deadly dystopian world of Panem and Katniss flatly tells the readers, “I kept us alive” (26). Peeta Mellark says to Katniss at the reaping that his mother said about Katniss, “She’s a survivor, that one” (46). The dexterity of surviving against the most fatal occurrences is Katniss’ greatest strength and this is what separates her determinedly from Shakespeare’s strongest heroines. For a Renaissance heroine, Katniss’ activities would have been violating of gender roles and the heroines would have been persecuted severely just as Lady Macbeth was. But it appears that the literature of the twenty first century allows a writer enough authority and freedom, without the fear of being persecuted, to dissolve gender binary. Katniss has definitely broken legal laws, but has not crossed the line between masculinity and femininity because there is no such restricted fixed position for women in the futuristic world of *The Hunger Games*. Whalen Turner authentically points out, “It’s a credit to Collins’ skill at characterization that Katniss, like a new Theseus, is cold, calculating and still likable” (Publishersweekly.com).

Politics and power-play are some noteworthy phenomena in *As You Like It*, *Macbeth* and *The Hunger Games* where we can measure the progress of female characters in literature. The heroines of each of these books are directly involved in politics either because they are born into a political family or drawn to politics with the course of events of their lives. For Rosalind it is because her father was a duke, her uncle is the present duke and she is a princess, that she wields political power, no matter, whether she likes politics or not. Throughout the play, she proves herself better in all the faculties than any other characters, yet interestingly she never shows any political inclination. Duke Frederick considers her a threat to his rule but we never get to hear that she did anything to avenge her father’s loss or tried to reinstate him in power.

Rosalind’s real power comes from her disguise as a boy and she possesses this power and independence as long as she keeps her camouflage. Without her disguise, she is powerless and accepts her position as a subordinate woman to her father and husband. Harold Bloom thinks that “Shakespeare has been very subtle in portraying Rosalind’s character ...[S]he has no equal, in or out of Arden, and deserves a better lover than the amiable Orlando, and better wits for her conversation than Touchstone and Jaques” (144-46). Perhaps her compliance is the reason that she avoids tragedy and is allowed to have a peaceful ending in the book. Critic Peter Erickson professes, “The ending of *As You Like It* works smoothly because male control

is affirmed and women are rendered nonthreatening” (42). Erickson further comments on Rosalind’s disguise and suggests that Rosalind is not regarded as a threat to patriarchal society: By virtue of the costume, Rosalind does have access to both male and female attributes, but the impression she conveys of androgynous wholeness is misleading. Neither Rosalind nor the play questions the conventional categories of masculine and feminine...The liberation that Rosalind experiences in the forest has built into it the conservative countermovement by which, as the play returns to the normal world, she will be reduced to the traditional woman who is subservient to men. (45)

About the rest of her life we can guess that she will continue to rule her husband’s heart so far as her youth, beauty and witty nature would guarantee her.

Regarding politics and power, Lady Macbeth is the exact opposite to Rosalind. She takes a deep interest in politics and pursues power for her husband and herself. For the first half of the play, she is commensurate with her husband in all the plots for maintaining and increasing political power. Whereas Macbeth also craves kingly power, he is hesitant to use wicked means to gain it but Lady Macbeth is adamant to see her husband as the king and herself as the queen. Lady Macbeth understands her husband’s character and analyzes him thus, “Thou wouldst be great, / Art not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it” (1.5.17-19). Consequently, she argues cogently with Macbeth and succeeds to instigate him to follow the aberrant path of killing the old king.

But Lady Macbeth draws this power of chiding her husband from his affection for her. About the Macbeths, Jan Kott says:

Each great Shakespearean character has many aspects, and lends himself, or herself, to more than one interpretation. In this particular union, in which there are no children, or they have died, Lady Macbeth, plays a man’s part. She demands murder from Macbeth as a confirmation of his manhood, almost as an act of love. (71)

It may be deduced that Macbeth loves his wife dearly for her strength of character, intellect and quickness of decision. So love plays its role to empower her. It is doubtful that she would ever hold any political power in the Renaissance world if her husband were not the Thane of Cawdor, in other words, a politically powerful man.

When we look at Katniss Everdeen, we notice a gradual development in her from an ordinary citizen to an active political persona throughout the trilogy. In the first book titled *The Hunger Games*, she has no thoughts or inclinations for politics. She is only focused on the survival of her family and herself. In the second book titled *Catching Fire*, she struggles to fathom politics and by the last book titled *Mockingjay*, she becomes the symbol and face of the rebellion. Her epiphany comes in a hospital containing wounded people from District 8:

A new sensation begins to germinate inside me. But it takes until I am standing on a table, waving my final goodbyes to the hoarse chanting of my name, to define it. Power. I have a kind of power I never knew I possessed. Snow knew it, as soon as I held out those berries. Plutarch knew when he rescued me from the arena. And Coin knows now. So much so that she must publicly remind her people that I am not in control. (40)

After that she actively takes part in the war and brings down the regime of President Snow and also kills President Coin for her personal revenge and for saving her countrymen from another autocrat. So, we see that unlike Rosalind and Lady Macbeth, she is not born or married into a royal family. Even though she chooses not to be the President of her country, she gains tremendous political power solely through her own competence.

Furthermore, unlike Rosalind and Lady Macbeth, Katniss does not need the love of a particular man to accumulate social and political power. Despite the ruse of presenting Peeta as her lover

in the arena and many people in the Capitol loving her for this supposed romantic relationship, it is not what gives her the control over the rebellious minds of the country at large. Her undaunted nature, true sacrificing heart and extraordinary skills make her a national heroine. David Gritten calls her “a great role model for girls” because she “has love interests, but doesn’t mope passively over boys” (“Why has ‘The Hunger Games’ outdone ‘Twilight’?”).

Nevertheless, in Shakespeare and Collins, the heroines undergo severe tests to prove their strength, and their power cost them a lot of hardships. Compared to Lady Macbeth and Katniss Everdeen, Rosalind’s fate is a happier one. But finding happiness has not been easy for her either. At times she comes very near to catastrophe too. At the opening of the play, she is presented almost as an orphan who has recently lost a father (sent in exile) and herself at constant risk of meeting the same fate as her father or being put to death by her hot-tempered uncle. When she is banished, she leaves for the Forest of Arden to look for her father but the journey to the forest is not a comfortable task apart from the fact that she has to maintain her charade of a man in the face of every difficult situation which would be unbearable for any lady. With one incident going amiss, her fate would be turned upside down and her life would be a disaster. She realizes this, so braces herself to stay firm:

I could find in my heart to disgrace my man’s apparel and to cry like a woman. But I must comfort the weaker vessel, as doublet and hose ought to show itself courageous to petticoat; therefore, courage, good Aliena. (2.4.3-5)

Shakespeare treats Rosalind’s strength carefully and never lets her cross the boundary of her social role as a woman. She enjoys her power and rules almost all the men and women while she is masquerading as a male.

In contrast, Lady Macbeth is not allowed to have peace and power at the same time and meets a terrible ending. As Terry Eagleton posits that Shakespeare’s “plays value social order and stability” and adds that “[y]et it is all this which Shakespeare’s flamboyant punning, troping and riddling threaten to put into question. His belief in social stability is jeopardized by the very language in which it is articulated” (1). This is exactly what can be detected in Lady Macbeth’s character. Lady Macbeth has violated the boundary of civilized society and committed atrocious sin and crime when she instigated her king’s slaughter. From that point of view, through Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare depicts what happens to women who commit outrage against accepted norms, rules and regulations. But when the playwright’s cleverness in hinting of Macbeth’s ambitious mind and giving us a privy to Lady Macbeth’s psychology is taken into view, it does not remain easy to condemn Lady Macbeth for her dreadful acts. From this point of view, while she was courting King Duncan’s murder, she was acting like a dutiful wife to fulfill her husband’s ambition. Yet she receives ruthless retribution in the play. Stephen Greenblatt tries to look at Shakespeare’s works as an outcome of “a sublime confrontation between a total artist and a totalizing society” and says:

By a total artist I mean one who, through training, resourcefulness, and talent, is at the moment of creation complete unto himself; by a totalizing society I mean one that posits an occult network linking all human, natural, and cosmic powers and that claims on behalf of its ruling elite a privileged place in this network. (2)

Later his realization comes:

No individual, not even the most brilliant, seemed complete unto himself- my own study of Renaissance self-fashioning had already persuaded me of this- and Elizabethan and Jacobean visions of hidden unity seemed like anxious rhetorical attempts to conceal cracks, conflict, and disarray. (2)

When Lady Macbeth's transformation is contemplated, it is difficult to grasp that the same person who proudly said that only a little water would suffice to clean the evidence of murder from their hands, utters later, "What, will these hands ne'er be clean?" (5.1.41) It is suggested in the sleep walking scene that her dementia is a result of her sense of acute guilt and the torment of her conscience. But a bit later when Macbeth speaks about Lady Macbeth, it becomes apparent how far the pair has diverged from each other. Macbeth in one sentence asks about his wife's health and that even halfway through the particular scene when he is done with his military orders, "How does your patient, doctor?" (5.3.34) Macbeth's desires are fulfilled when he becomes the king and he is no more the frantic indecisive ambitious person who needs his wife's assurance and psychological support. It is this distance from Macbeth that is Lady Macbeth's real punishment and this is where her punishment is greater than Macbeth. When Lady Macbeth commits suicide, Macbeth's reaction is one of the tragic ones for a pair whose relationship has been so close at the beginning, "She should have died hereafter; / There would have been a time for such a word-"(5.5.18-19).

In a self-righteous time and society where women were expected to be soft-hearted, pleasant and charming, that a character like Lady Macbeth would be rejected is comprehensible. The Macbeths chose the lone trajectory of the Machiavellians and their crime was transgression of recognized and accepted formal values. For Lady Macbeth, the transgression is worse because she has surpassed the limits put by the gender divisionary principle of her age. No wonder that at the closing speech of the play the complacent Malcolm has only one adjective for Lady Macbeth "fiend-like Queen".

However, like Rosalind, Katniss does not seek power but because of her valiant spirit and physical prowess, she comes across great power. In return, her power destroys her ordinary and quiet life. Her near death experiences and grievances over her losses bring her to the brink of insanity. Like Lady Macbeth, she also has hallucinations under the effect of the heavy doses of medicine. In *Mockingjay*, she says, "I'm still not entirely convinced that I was hallucinating the night the floor of my hospital room transformed into a carpet of writhing snakes" (5).

By the end of the trilogy, the readers are left with the impression that the Elizabethan and Jacobean prejudices were right that if women are allowed too much freedom, they will end up destroying the balance of personal and social life; in short, no evolution has taken place in female characters. However, when the ending of Lady Macbeth is compared to Katniss, it can be seen that unlike Lady Macbeth, Katniss carries on with life despite all the harsh and cruel incidents. She is a survivor to the end. Her mind, though unhinged, denies acquiescing to the pressure of her surroundings. It is her continuous fighting to survive that marks how far the female characters have come from giving in to suicidal tendency when faced with the harsh difficulties of life.

### Conclusion

The paper has proved through its above discussion that the female characters as a whole have come a long way at present with literary pieces like Collins' *The Hunger Games* from the ones of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Despite the strength of many of Shakespeare's lady persona, they have always been secondary to male persona in almost all his plays. With Viola (*The Twelfth Night*), Portia (*The Merchant of Venice*) and Cordelia (*King Lear*), we feel like that they outshine everyone in their respective plays, but they are always subservient to and dominated by men. Whereas Rosalind and Lady Macbeth demonstrate all the potentialities to be magnificent rulers, they never come close to ruling the

country. Although Katniss declines to rule her country as its President, she guides her nation towards its freedom from tyranny through her leadership. It is also because of the evolution of female characters that it has been possible for Katniss to find love and happiness without being a romantic heroine like Rosalind. So, what Rosalind and Lady Macbeth could have been, given the circumstances of their time period were favourable to them, are materialized with Katniss Everdeen in a much different futuristic world than that of the Renaissance English one.

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