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From Stage to Screen: A Comparative Analysis of Gender Roles and Power Dynamics in Shakespeare's Macbeth and Justin Kurzel's 2015 Film Adaptation

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Abstract

In this paper, I am trying to compare how gender roles and power are shown in Shakespeare's Macbeth and the 2015 film version by Justin Kurzel. Many people think a movie is just a copy of the play, but here it is not like that. Kurzel's film feels more like a deep psychological study, not just a direct translation. The movie adds a very emotional change in the beginning—the death of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's child. This moment becomes the main reason for their actions, shifting the focus from only ambition to pain and grief. Because of this, Lady Macbeth does not look like a cruel woman controlling her husband, but more like a heartbroken person, which makes her more human. The film also changes the witches. Instead of magical and scary figures, they look more like normal women, almost like a motherly group, which gives a different feeling. Also, Macbeth's struggle with manhood is shown through something we often hear in modern times—post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), commonly seen in people facing violence. By carefully reading the original play and studying the film's camera work, sound, and colours, this research shows how the film uses cinema to talk about today's issues like trauma, gender, and the mental cost of violence. In this way, the adaptation gives us a fresh and meaningful view of Shakespeare's tragedy that connects with the present generation.

Keywords; *Macbeth, Justin Kurzel, gender roles, power dynamics, film adaptation, trauma, grief, masculinity, femininity, Shakespeare, cinematic analysis.*

Introduction

William Shakespeare's Macbeth is one of the most famous plays in world literature, and it deeply explores human ambition, guilt, and how power can disturb the natural balance of life. In our country also people often discuss how power changes a person, and this play shows that in a very intense way. Written in the Jacobean period, the play goes inside the human mind and questions how gender and authority work in a strict patriarchal society. Characters like Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters are especially interesting because they do not follow the

usual roles expected from women at that time. Their actions break social rules and create political as well as moral confusion. This is why the play has survived for centuries—it shows how the hunger for power can destroy both the mind and society, and how guilt follows wrongdoing like a shadow. In 2015, Australian director Justin Kurzel made a film version of Macbeth that gave the story a very raw and powerful look. The movie keeps many of Shakespeare's original lines, but it does not simply copy the stage play. Instead, it takes bold decisions in how the characters think and behave. Kurzel focuses more on emotion, trauma, and the visual atmosphere, making the story feel almost like a psychological war film. His version feels darker and more realistic, with different interpretations of motives and themes. So, rather than being a traditional adaptation, this film becomes a fresh and daring reimagining of Shakespeare's tragedy, showing that even old stories can be told in new and meaningful ways. Justin Kurzel's film version of Macbeth uses a very dark and harsh visual style and gives deep attention to the characters' inner pain, making the old play feel modern for today's audience. In our country also many people now talk about trauma and the hidden effects of violence, and this film speaks in that same emotional language. This paper argues that Kurzel changes the main idea of Shakespeare's story by replacing ambition with grief as the driving force behind the characters. This shift completely changes how gender and power are shown in the film. Through his cinematic style, he gives more depth and agency to female characters like Lady Macbeth and the witches, and he presents the male struggle not just as a fight for power, but as a crisis caused by psychological scars. In this way, the movie becomes a cultural translation, connecting the old text with current issues. First, this analysis will discuss gender roles in Shakespeare's original play to set a foundation. Then, it will study how the film reimagines the story using new visual and narrative techniques. Finally, by comparing important characters and scenes from both versions, this paper will show how Kurzel's adaptation offers a fresh and meaningful interpretation of this timeless tragedy.

Literature Review

The study of Shakespeare's Macbeth is very large, and many scholars mainly discuss how the play deals with gender and power in a deep and sometimes disturbing way. In our country also we see many discussions about how women and men are expected to behave, so this topic feels very relatable. Feminist critics have looked closely at the female characters, especially Lady Macbeth, and they say she breaks traditional rules of womanhood. She does not want to act gentle or passive like society expects, but instead asks the spirits to "unsex" her so she can gain power. Some scholars, like Janet Adelman, even argue that the play shows a fear of female power, and suggests that peace is only restored when strong maternal or feminine influence is removed, which shows a deep patriarchal mindset. The Weird Sisters are also seen as symbols of gender confusion and fear. They are women, but with masculine features like beards, which makes them look strange and threatening to the normal idea of gender during the Jacobean period. Their supernatural nature makes them even more dangerous to the male dominated social order. Along with this, many critics have studied the crisis of masculinity in the play. They believe Macbeth's downfall happens because he struggles to meet different, confusing expectations of what it means to be a "real man." His wife keeps questioning his courage and manhood, pushing him into violent actions. In this way, the play shows how both femininity and masculinity become sources of pressure and conflict, making Macbeth a powerful study of gender and power struggles. Film versions of Shakespeare are usually not exact copies of the original text, but fresh reinterpretations based on the culture and artistic taste of their own time. Justin Kurzel's Macbeth (2015) is a good

example of this idea, because the film uses strong visuals, serious mood, and deep emotional feeling instead of simply repeating the play word by word. One of the most important changes in the movie is the death of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's child, which is not there in Shakespeare's text. Many critics believe this one change completely shifts the meaning of the story. Instead of ambition being the main reason for their actions, grief becomes the real force that pushes them forward. Because of this, Lady Macbeth is shown less like a "fiend-like queen" and more like a suffering mother, which many people in our country can emotionally connect with. The witches also look different in the film—they are not scary magical figures, but more like a quiet group of women, almost maternal, just watching everything. Macbeth's struggle as a man is also reimagined. Rather than only about power, it is shown as a mental breakdown, similar to PTSD, which we commonly see in soldiers after war, and this is clear in Michael Fassbender's serious performance. Even though some scholars have discussed these points separately, this paper tries to bring them together. It argues that the dead child is not just a small change, but the heart of the whole film. By following how this one trauma changes Lady Macbeth, the witches, and Macbeth himself, this study shows that Kurzel's movie builds a fully connected and powerful psychological version of the original play.

Methodology

This research paper uses a simple qualitative method, mainly through comparison and close reading of both text and film. The two main sources I study are Shakespeare's original play Macbeth and Justin Kurzel's 2015 movie version. My approach has two sides so that I can understand both literature and cinema together. First, I do a close reading of the play to look at the language, characters, themes, and dramatic structure. I pay special attention to how gender roles and power are shown in the early Jacobean time, Society then was very different from today. I also study important soliloquies, dialogues, and main plot points to understand the gender crisis in the original story. Second, I analyse the film version to see how it changes and reinterprets the play. For this, I look at different cinematic techniques like mise-en-scene, camera angles, movement, colour palette, editing, and sound design. These elements help me understand how the film builds a stronger emotional and psychological mood, which is commonly seen in modern cinema. By studying all these formal features, this research shows how the movie changes character motivations and themes, and gives a fresh and deeper meaning to the old text.

The Jacobean Crisis of Gender in Shakespeare's Macbeth

Macbeth shows how this order breaks down when people try to cross those limits. The tragedy in the play is not only about ambition, but also about confusion in gender identity, which affects both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and brings disorder to the whole world of the play. Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most powerful women. Her strength comes from the way she rejects the normal idea of how a woman should behave. In those days, women were expected to be quiet, religious, and obedient. But she is different. In her famous speech, when she reads Macbeth's letter, she asks the spirits to "unsex me here," which shows her desire to leave behind her womanly softness and become cruel enough to push her husband towards murder. She even wants her "milk" to turn into "gall," which clearly shows that she wants to reject the caring side of womanhood. After this, she starts to control Macbeth not by force but by using strong words. She questions his manliness and tells him that if he dares to kill Duncan, only then he will be a true man. This shows how she uses the same patriarchal idea of masculinity for her own purpose. But her power does not

last long. After Duncan's murder, Macbeth slowly stops listening to her and becomes more violent on his own. Lady Macbeth, who was once so bold, starts losing her mind under guilt. Her sleepwalking scene, where she keeps trying to clean her hands, shows her deep regret and helplessness. In the end, her death happens quietly offstage, which also reminds us how the male order finally takes control again. Such endings are commonly seen in old tragedies, where a woman's rebellion against power does not end well. The Weird Sisters in Macbeth also show how female power can disturb the normal order of society. From the very first scene, they do not fit into any proper social or natural rule. Even Banquo is confused when he sees them and says they "should be women" but their beards make it hard to understand their gender. This androgynous look makes them appear unnatural, and in early societies anything that did not follow fixed gender roles was seen with fear. Their strange appearance clearly represents the play's theme of mixing what is "fair and foul," or blurring the difference between man and woman, order and chaos. In our country also, people often feel uneasy when someone does not act according to traditional expectations, so this idea still feels relatable.

The witches are powerful women who act without any male control, which creates cultural anxiety, because in patriarchal societies female independence is commonly seen as dangerous. They do not directly force Macbeth, but their prophecies work like seeds in his mind, pushing his hidden ambition to grow. For many years, critics blamed these female figures for Macbeth's downfall, which allowed people to ignore Macbeth's own choices. This attitude shows how society likes to blame women for men's mistakes, something commonly seen in Indian people even today. In the play, the witches' supernatural power and unclear gender make them strong symbols of social disturbance and even cosmic disorder. In Macbeth, when the usual ideas of femininity are challenged, it also creates a big confusion about what it really means to be a man. At the beginning of the play, the definition of masculinity is very clear. Macbeth is praised as a brave and strong warrior, and as in many societies including our country, a man's value is often judged by his strength and ability to fight or protect. This warrior image is the main ideal of the patriarchal system in the play. But soon this stable idea starts to break. Lady Macbeth brings a different idea of manhood, where being a man means taking power without hesitation and doing whatever it takes. Macbeth feels stuck between these two definitions. At first, he believes that a true man should also follow moral values, as seen when he says, "I dare do all that may become a man." But sadly, he later gives in to his wife's harsher version of masculinity. The whole play becomes like a fight over the meaning of being a man. Macbeth keeps trying to prove he is manly, which actually shows he is very insecure deep inside, something commonly seen in Indian people when society puts pressure on men. The crisis only finds some balance at the end when Macduff introduces a better version of masculinity. He shows that a man can be brave in battle but also express emotions like grief and compassion. When someone tells him to face his family's death "like a man," he replies that he will, but he must also feel it as a man. This moment teaches that true manhood does not mean hiding humanity, but accepting both strength and sensitivity together.

Trauma and Gender in Kurzel's Macbeth

Justin Kurzel's 2015 film version of Macbeth is not just a simple copy of Shakespeare's play, but a bold reinterpretation that uses the power of cinema to create a fresh emotional experience. Films can show feelings through visuals, music, and editing in a way that books or plays cannot. Kurzel uses these tools to change the main focus of the story. Instead of showing ambition as the central cause of tragedy, he highlights grief and

trauma as the true driving forces behind the characters. Right from the beginning, the film builds a mood of deep sadness and "doom and despair." The cinematographer Adam Arkapaw shows Scotland as a cold and lifeless land filled with fog, dark skies, and damp fields. The colours are dull and faint, almost like the characters have lost all hope. This gloomy world reflects their emotional pain. Sometimes, the film also shows shocking and haunting images that feel both beautiful and terrifying at the same time. As Macbeth becomes crueller, the land itself starts looking more like hell. In the final battle, everything is covered in burning reds and oranges, like the whole world has caught fire due to violence. The music, made by Jed Kurzel, is heavy and sad, like a heartbeat full of pain, reminding us that the characters are suffering inside. Kurzel also uses different camera techniques to make us feel what Macbeth is feeling in his mind. The slow-motion battle scenes turn war into a disturbing dance, making us face the true horror of killing. Close-up shots and soft, quiet voiceovers make the scenes feel very personal, almost like we are trapped inside Macbeth's thoughts. At many moments, it becomes difficult to know what is real and what is only in Macbeth's imagination. Are the witches and Banquo's ghost truly there, or are they just images created by his grief and trauma? In our country also, people often say that the mind can play tricks when someone is deeply hurt. This film uses that idea and makes the tragedy more human and emotional. Kurzel does not just retell Shakespeare—he turns the story into a psychological journey of a broken man lost in pain. The biggest change that Justin Kurzel makes from Shakespeare's original story is the addition of a dead child for Macbeth and his wife. As we all see in the film, it does not start with the witches but with a very sad scene of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth at their baby's funeral, his tiny body being prepared for the pyre. This is not a small detail; it becomes the heart of the whole movie. This tragic loss changes everything that comes after. The witches' prophecy is no longer just a trigger for ambition. Instead, it feels like a lifeline for a couple who are drowning in grief. The chase for the crown is shown as a desperate and painful attempt to fill the emptiness left by their child's death. Many critics have said that the film stops being only a story of "ambition's bad effects" and becomes a lesson on how grief can blind and torture people. Their plan to kill Duncan is shown as a way to fight back against fate, to "take back" what nature has cruelly taken from them. This central trauma is shown in many visual ways in the movie. For example, the famous "dagger of the mind" that guides Macbeth to Duncan's room is held by the ghost of a young soldier, standing in for his lost child. The sleepwalking scene of Lady Macbeth is also changed strongly. She is not asleep, but awake, sitting alone in a cold chapel, speaking directly to the ghost of her dead baby. This makes her inner suffering visible and real. Her guilt is not just about killing a king but about losing her child, a very human and heartbreaking pain. Kurzel uses this new story to make the tragedy feel closer to the audience, showing how grief drives their actions and thoughts.

Gender and Power from Stage to Screen

When we look at Shakespeare's play and Kurzel's film together, it becomes clear how much the film changes the story. As we all can see, the shift from ambition to grief affects everything—the way power works between characters, how they are shown, and even what causes the tragedy. This change is not small; it makes us think differently about the story and the people in it. The film makes the tragedy feel more personal and human, showing how loss and pain can drive people to do terrible things. The banquet scene shows clearly how Shakespeare's play and Kurzel's film are very different. In the play, the fear comes more from social and political problems. Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost, but the lords around him do not. This makes him look crazy in front of

everyone. Lady Macbeth in the play acts like a smart political thinker. She tells the lords a story about a sickness and scolds Macbeth for his weakness, trying to keep control of the situation. In Kurzel's film, the scene feels very different. The ghost is not clear, and we feel it mostly through Macbeth's fear. The camera focuses closely on him, so the audience sees his terror and guilt very personally. Lady Macbeth also changes; she is less a political fixer and more like a worried wife trying to calm her husband. The scene becomes about their shared pain and trauma, which happens to take place in front of people, instead of being just a political problem. It feels very human and emotional, as we can see the suffering up close. The biggest change we can see between the play and the film is in Lady Macbeth. In Shakespeare's play she is very ambitious and cold, always thinking about power and how to get it. She is clever and knows how to use the rules of a man's world to control Macbeth, pushing him to do what she wants. But in Kurzel's film, with Marion Cotillard playing her, she is different. Her actions come from deep grief and sadness, not from wanting a crown. She and Macbeth are more like partners sharing a painful loss than a ruler and her pawn. In one scene, she encourages him while they are intimate, showing how their sorrow and their actions are connected. This makes her more human and less like a scary, "fiend-like queen." The film also shows her descent into madness with more care and sympathy. Her famous sleepwalking scene is changed too; she is awake, speaking to the ghost of her child in an empty church, showing real regret. This makes us feel her pain directly, not just her subconscious guilt. Shakespeare's witches are very strange and scary in the play. They look neither fully male nor female and have magical powers that create chaos and start the tragedy. But in Kurzel's film, they are very different. The witches are shown as a normal human family of women and children, living at the edge of society. They wear simple, plain clothes and act quietly, nothing like the scary, weird images in the play. Their prophecies are not full of laughter or mischief, but full of sadness, like they know something bad will happen but cannot stop it. This changes everything about them. In the play, they are active and make things happen. In the film, they just watch, seeing how the men destroy themselves. Their power is not magic, it is caring and maternal. They survive, protect their children, and even save Fleance after Banquo is killed, hiding him from Macbeth's killers. In this way, they become guardians of the future, keeping hope alive. They show a different, matriarchal world that can last beyond the violent, selfish world of men.

Conclusion

Justin Kurzel's 2015 film of Macbeth is not just a modern version with nice visuals, it is also a deep psychological retelling. In this film, the characters act not because of ambition but because of grief and personal trauma. Lady Macbeth is shown less as a cruel, power-hungry woman and more as a sad, grieving mother. The witches are no longer magical figures, but ordinary women protecting their children and offering a maternal alternative. Macbeth himself is shown as a broken soldier, already wounded by war and loss, not just a man making evil choices. This change makes the story feel very close to our time. Today, in our country and elsewhere, people understand how trauma and violence affect minds and hearts, and the film shows that tragedies can come from coping with loss, not only from wanting power. The film proves that Macbeth's story is still very powerful and can be told in new ways, reflecting our fears and feelings. Kurzel's adaptation shows that Shakespeare's exploration of gender, power, and human weakness still matters, and it gives a dark mirror to what we see in our own world.

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