Role of Witches in *Macbeth*/ Are they Subjective or Objective?

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'Take off from the play its peculiar atmosphere and what remains of the tragedy? Take away the Witches and what remains of its atmosphere?' observes S.C. Sengupta in his commentary on the play *Macbeth*, thereby signifying that while portraying the Witches Shakespeare might have thought of pleasing King James 1, but he had something beyond this in his imagination. Although the great dramatist retains the 'Weird Sisters' of Holinshed and improves upon the idea with materials from Reginald Scott's *Discovery*, Coleridge in his 'Lectures on Shakespeare' hails the Witches 'as true a creation of Shakespeare as his Ariel and Caliban'. In fact, the Witches are the most potent and ubiquitous element of the Supernatural in *Macbeth*, serving as an inscrutable presence in the murky atmosphere of the play, leading Macbeth towards eternal damnation. However, they have baffled not only the protagonist through jugglery, but also the critics who often equate them with the air-drawn dagger as figments of Macbeth's imagination.

The 'black, midnight hags' with skinny lips, choppy fingers and bearded face revel in destruction, both of the physical as well as the mental state of beings. They love thunder, lightning and rain, and like to meet in lonely heaths and talk in enigmatic language. Killing swine is their is their favourite sports as is the creation of tempests and dire storms that make

castles ‘topple on their warders’ head’. Topsy-turvydom is their craved state of affairs, as they sing ‘Fair is foul, and foul is fair’. Thus, they introduce the keynote in the play in that they hint at the impending inversion of moral order in the world.

Being ‘instrument of darkness’, the preoccupation of the Witches is to win as many human souls as possible. To this end, they possess a ‘supernatural idea of information’ and predictions, as Coleridge says, and lie in wait for mischief lurking in the corners of human minds: to them the ‘foul’ is ‘fair’. They have a foreknowledge of the ambition of kingship harboured in Macbeth’s mind. They win him with predictions of ‘noble having and of royal hope’. The fact that Macbeth starts at this foreboding suggests that the ambition was not sown by them in him, but only stirred to betray him in ‘deepest consequence’. Thus, Macbeth is torn between the good and the bad prospect of the prediction, and ‘horrible imaginings’ smoother his functions, and then he suffers ‘a state of insurrection’ (*Julius Caesar*).

It is noteworthy that in the case of the ‘master of the tiger’ the First Witch has sworn to ‘drain him dry as hay’ and ordained that ‘Sleep shall neither night nor day/Hang upon his penthouse lid’. In the case of Macbeth, too, they snatch from him ‘the season of all natures, sleep’. He, under their influence, becomes the instrument of darkness himself as when he yearns that the frames of things disjoin, invokes night and becomes a bloodsucker. However, the Witches further drive him towards damnation by creating in him a false sense of security. The Second Witch, as conjured by them, tells him of his invulnerability to a ‘man born of woman’ while in its very appearance as the baby Macduff born of a Caesarian section it portends his death in Macduff’s hands. The Third Apparition, again, prophesies, ‘Macbeth shall never vanquished be until/ Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane hill/ Shall come against him’, while in its appearance as the crowned Malcolm in his baby stage and with a tree in his hand, it pointed to the opposite of the prophesy: Birnam will actually rise up to

Dunsinane. Macbeth cannot grasp this 'double sense,' and over-confident, he awaits the attack of the English force instead of meeting and demolishing them. He falls, and only before this can he realise that 'be those juggling fiends no more believed'.

Thus, the Witches play a pivotal role in the play by liberating Macbeth's guilty desires and giving them a name and a proper vent. And herein begins the contention regarding whether they are projections of Macbeth's own imagination. Clearly, they are distinguished from the Dagger of which Macbeth himself is unsure and which the audience cannot see, and also from Banquo's ghost, which is seen only by Macbeth and audience. The Witches are seen by Banquo, too, and they exist in scenes by themselves, and Macbeth can talk of them to Lady Macbeth (Act I, Sc v) and Lennox (Act IV, Sc i). The fact is that in this play the boundary between reality and unreality is too often blurred. Whether one sees them as projections of Macbeth's unconscious or as wildly attired grotesque countrywomen talking gibberish and making guesswork, the Witches' effect upon Macbeth is what matters.