

Hexing the Patriarchy: Reclaiming the Witch Archetype for Feminism

Krishanu Singh¹, Shuchi Agrawal² and Payal Nagpal³

Abstract

This study traces the fascinating development of the witch archetype, from a vilified character to a potent representation of the tenacity and empowerment of feminism. It reveals how patriarchal civilizations have deftly exploited social conventions and religion to subjugate women through an analysis of foundational literature such as “Malleus Maleficarum” (1487) and “The Witch Cult in Western Europe” (1921). The study employs theories of gender performativity and existential feminism, drawing on the profound insights of notable feminists like Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir, to investigate the complex psychological and social foundations of witch hunts and their subtle role in perpetuating gender inequality. It draws attention to how the witch image has been unabashedly revived in contemporary feminist movements as a symbol of empowerment and resistance. This thorough and insightful analysis emphasises how crucial it is to question historical accounts, acknowledge the long-lasting influence of cultural symbols, and forward the admirable cause of gender justice and equality.

Keywords: *Witch Archetype, Feminism, Gender Inequality, Patriarchal Societies, Cultural Symbols.*

INTRODUCTION

The witch has always been a complicated and persistent figure throughout history, representing strength, horror, and revolution. Witches, historically perceived as evil entities possessing dark powers, have been the focus of misconceptions reinforced by the prejudices and fears of patriarchal societies. This research explores the history of the witch archetype, from the witch hunts of medieval times to its modern resurgence as a symbol of feminist strength. It provides an engaging look at how society has changed over time regarding women's roles and power.

In the past, witches were frequently represented as powerful, self-reliant women who disobeyed social norms. They questioned the established quo by using their expertise and influence, and as a result, they were frequently singled out by patriarchal civilizations that wanted to hold onto power via tyranny and persecution. The witch hunts of the late mediaeval and early modern periods, in which numerous women were accused, tortured, and put to death on the pretence of eliminating witchcraft, are examples of this persecution. These tribunals supported gender inequality and stifled female autonomy since they were founded on shaky evidence and were motivated by fear.

The research contextualises historical and cultural descriptions of witchcraft by including feminist theoretical frameworks from authors like Judith Butler and Rosemary Radford Ruether. According to Judith Butler, gender is a set of performed actions that are influenced by society norms rather than an innate characteristic. This idea is known as gender performativity. This explains why women who were seen as dangers were those who disobeyed customary norms, such as those who were accused of witchcraft. The concept of women as "the Other," subjugated by patriarchal structures that deny them agency and identity, is explored by Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism. When taken as a whole, these sources offer a thorough grasp of the evolution of the witch archetype from a terrifying figure to an empowering one.

Feminist organisations have revived the idea of the witch as a potent symbol of resistance and strength in the modern era. Witches in the modern era represent feminine strength, autonomy, and rebellion of oppressive

¹ Ph.D. Scholar (AIESR), Address- Sector 45, Gurugram, Haryana, India. E-mail ID- krishanu.singh@s.amity.edu

² Professor at AIESR, Ghaziabad, India. E-mail ID- sagarwal2@amity.edu

³ Professor at Janki Devi Memorial College, New Delhi, India. E-mail ID- payalnagpal@jdm.du.ac.in

systems. This transformation reflects wider shifts in society perceptions about gender and power and emphasises the continuous fight for gender equality.

The infamous “*Malleus Maleficarum*”, sometimes referred to as “The Hammer of Witches,” gives a terrifying description of how witches were seen and handled in late medieval times. It tells unsettling stories of women being brutally punished, which reflects the deranged mindset of those who believed they were speaking for God. The text portrays women as dangerous, uncontrolled creatures whose presence endangered the fundamental fabric of society, while at the same time continuously asserting the divine ancestry and inherent goodness of males. This research by Kramer and Sprenger demonstrates how males who were amiable and courteous to one another routinely deprived women of their rights and entangled them in a web of oppression. Claiming divine justice, they came up with numerous plans to inflict pain on the most defenceless members of society. This bleak depiction highlights the tremendous lengths to which patriarchal society would go to preserve its dominance over women.

On the other hand, “The Witch Cult in Western Europe” by Margaret Alice Murray offers a more complex perspective on the backdrop and cultural attitudes around witches. Murray's research examines how witches were frequently literate women or healers who were skilled in using plants and other natural medicines. However, in the late mediaeval and early modern eras, there was a major shift in the public's attitude of witches, which resulted in widespread persecutions and witch hunts.

The astonishing resurrection of the witch image in contemporary feminist movements is also examined in this research. Modern witches stand in opposition to the traditional tales that have long attempted to subjugate women by representing tenacity, knowledge, and defiance against oppressive establishments. The

resurgence of the witch archetype highlights the ongoing struggle for gender parity and the reshaping of societal norms, signalling a profound shift in how society views female power and independence.

Through an extensive examination of many sources, such as historical narratives, cultural artefacts, and gender representations in contemporary media, this research endeavours to comprehend the fundamental mechanisms that have sustained gender stereotypes and the ways in which feminist principles have contested and reinterpreted them. The research draws on insight from the contemporary works that examine the resurgence of the witch as a feminist figure. For example, “Witches on Surfboards: How Witch Media has Ridden the Waves of Feminism” (2020) by Victoria Harris explores the representation of witches in modern media and their place in feminist debate. “The Contemporary Witch, the Historical Witch, and the Witch Myth” (1978) by Silvia Bovenschen provides a critical analysis of how the image of the witch has changed over time in both historical and modern contexts.

The witch archetype has changed from being a symbol of horror and persecution to one of resistance and power, indicating wider changes in how society views gender and authority. Witches have historically been used as scapegoats to justify social injustices and to maintain patriarchal society. The “*Malleus Maleficarum*” is a prime example of how misogyny and terror were perpetuated via the use of religion and society to punish and control women.

This study's primary objective is to examine how, especially regarding feminist movements, the witch archetype changed from being a representation of dread and oppression to one of strength and empowerment. It looks at how historical perceptions of witches have been used by patriarchal civilizations to repress women, and how these perceptions have evolved over time to mirror broader societal changes. In addition, the study aims to shed light on the intersections between gender, power, and religious systems, painting a more nuanced picture of these oppressions during periods of intense witch hunting.

This study fills in gaps in the literature by integrating intersectional views and taking global settings into account. In the end, it advocates for social and educational activities that advance gender equality and critically re-evaluate historical narratives. Rethinking feminist language in contemporary society and reassessing historical accounts can help us comprehend the complex relationships that exist between gender, power, and belief systems. A close look at the complicated past of the witch archetype highlights the continuous struggle for gender parity

as well as the enduring influence of symbols on public opinion. The witch, who was formerly associated with fear, is now a representation of the bravery and tenacity of women throughout history.

Unveiling the Patriarchal Manipulation in the Name of Witch Hunt.

The most infamous example of manipulation of religion in the favour of the patriarchal society is the book written by Henrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, “Malleus Maleficarum”, also known as “The Hammer of Witches”, which was published in the year 1487. This book gives a complete and chilling account of how the witches were tortured at the time. It sheds light on the appalling conditions faced by women during that era.

The “Malleus Maleficarum” has three levels and in each one of them, it presents disturbing narratives of how the women are perceived as the weaker section of the society who need to be controlled and kept in their proper places or else the world will see its doom because of the untamed women. The text repeatedly asserts the divine lineage and inherent virtue of men. They are portrayed as the resolute agents of Gods whereas women are depicted in stark contrast as dangerous and uncontrollable beings whose existence threatens the very fabric of society.

“Malleus Maleficarum” (1487) stands a blatant testament to sheer misogyny, which focuses solely on the brutal punishments meted out to the sorceresses. Henrich and Sprenger go to great lengths to emphasise that men are the people of God, and they will help in the termination of the women. In the last of the three sections of the book, they discuss about the torture and pain that should be inflicted on women and if the women did not cry, they were proved witches. This cruel rationale reveals the twisted mentality of the people who called them the voices of God.

Kramer and Sprenger's work showcases a grim picture of how men, who saw themselves as equals and treated each other with politeness and amiability, systematically stripped women of their rights, ensnaring them in a web of subjugation. They devised different strategies to cause suffering to the most impuissant individuals in society, all while claiming it was for divine justice. Malleus Maleficarum continues to symbolise the extreme measures patriarchal society would take to uphold its power and authority over women.

Kramer and Sprenger went as far as to dictate,

“All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman... What else is woman but a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted with fair colours!” Kramer, H., & Sprenger, J. (1487). Malleus Maleficarum. Part 1, Question 6.

“When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil.” Kramer, H., & Sprenger, J. (1487). Malleus Maleficarum. Part 1, Question 6

“When a woman sheds tears, she is preparing a trick.” Kramer, H., & Sprenger, J. (1487). Malleus Maleficarum. Part 1, Question 6

“The female sex is more prone to sex with the devil through witchcraft.” Kramer, H., & Sprenger, J. (1487). Malleus Maleficarum. Part 1, Question 6

Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger's comments vividly capture the misogyny of era, resonating till date. Women, perceived as vulnerable and susceptible to evil, were subjected to harsh consequences such as being forced to ingest excrement, sexually abused, stripped, physically assaulted, banished, or drowned. If they sank, they were considered not guilty; if they stayed afloat, their guilt was confirmed. The tragic irony lies in how innocence is only acknowledged in death, with no repercussions faced by the accusers. These actions were nothing less than genocide.

Women’s Benefactor in the Guise of Evil

Henrich and Sprenger contend that because women make up the weaker and more susceptible segment of society, it was simple for the devil to entice them to reject God and side with him. Here, the question of who created the weaker segment of society among women emerges. Men intuitively sensed that they were the

superior class in society and that it was their responsibility to prevent women—whether they be their sisters, mothers, wives, or friends—from advocating for themselves. It was forbidden for the ladies to take any action that might improve their life. They even made them entirely reliant on them financially, leaving the women with little choice but to submit to the patriarchs to survive. According to comments made by Scottish witches, as reported in Margaret Alice Murray's "The Witch Cult in Western Europe" (1921) the Devil would seduce women and promise them their greatest wish in return for denouncing their baptism, which the ladies would voluntarily accept. Because at the time there was no means for women to fulfil their desire. There is a frequent mention of "sayd soul" which means the sad souls of the women.

Women have always been the suppressed section of the world. Furthermore, they see no reason to turn down an offer of happiness and power from a person of influence. It is comparable to how orthodox religion offered women nothing at all, instead robbing them of everything a human being should possess, such as happiness and freedom, while the devil offered women so much that they seized the opportunity without hesitation. The treatment of the patriarchal society towards the women, completely justified their breaking away from the Church and joining the coven. The "The Witch Cult in Western Europe", also mentions women who themselves surrendered their children to the devil. Perhaps, they thought that devoting the child to the devil was a better idea than letting society make their lives miserable as they grow up.

"And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever." -The Holy Bible: King James Version. Cambridge University Press.

In Christian belief, exchanging your soul with the devil for any desire results in eternal damnation in hell. However, women's lives were filled with such misery and lacked hope to the extent that numerous individuals were ready to take that chance. In a deep way, these women encountered hell no matter what, whether in the next life or in their everyday life.

Caught in a realm filled with only pain, tyranny, and humiliation, the prospect of power and freedom from the demon appeared as a ray of hope. For women living in constant suffering, the fiery depths of hell were just another chapter in their ongoing struggle, a risky decision with everlasting outcomes.

The women, facing unimaginable difficulties, decided to grasp at any moment of joy they could find, even if it meant going against religious principles. By doing that, they bravely challenged the patriarchal powers that tried to oppress them. Their extreme decisions demonstrate the seriousness of their subjugation and the unbreakable courage that motivated them to find comfort and resilience, even in the most dangerous locations. Truly, whether through a pact with the devil or oppression from society, these women faced a living hell daily.

On top of men inflicting pain on women, women also inflicted pain on each other. Just as men were born masters, women were born slaves, because a child learns what it sees at home. As a girl watching her mother, obeying her father blindly and enduring all the abuses as a part of life, she thinks that it is how the world is. She believes that power, knowledge, and freedom are not meant for them. And they despised any woman who possessed any of these. That is why during the execution of the women as witches, the other women who supported it were equally culpable as men. A woman in quest to impress her master tends to wrong other women just to hear two words of praise, which she may or may not receive. If a woman raises her voice against this injustice, she is deemed to be a witch. Breaking away from something that has been so deeply ingrained in society from the beginning of time and something that has become the rule of the world, takes a lot of courage.

A Crisscross of Religious and Political Interests

Everything that was incomprehensible by the patriarchy was labelled to be dangerous. Witches have always remained a mystery. Sometimes even their existence has been argued about. When men came to have a small idea of something which lived in their society, and which held more power than them, they wasted no time and took the pledge to eradicate them, without knowing the facts about them. In no time, it became a religious issue. People have always been driven

by religion, they are devoted to God not for their love but mostly because of their fear. Any topic that can take its place in church has to be related to politics somehow. Mingling with the religious faith of people has been the easiest way to influence people. So, the misogynists started creating their image of witches and spread it among the people. Slowly and gradually, the women who were nothing else but adept at playing with herbs, studying stars, and healing people, were made the enemy of society.

The Salem Witch execution in Massachusetts was only from 1692 to 1693, but just in that one year, it managed to mark its place in history as the darkest age for women. It cannot be denied that witch hunts destroyed the confidence and self-respect of women all over the world. Despite of the previous dark times, things got better, and this ghastly movement was ended. Later, Scotland became the first country to formally apologise to the people who were accused of being witches and those families who lost people because of these allegations. On 8th March, which is the International Women's Day, misogyny was recognized as a hate crime by the parliament.

Feminine Struggles Depicted in the Character of Thomasine

Thomasine of "The Witch" or "The VVitch" (2015) which was directed by Robert Eggers, is a true representation of girls or females of the time, who at the end of all their sufferings saw it to be easier to devote their life to the devil than to live in the society which can only bring her harm and accuse her of things that she has never done. After doing everything in her power to keep her family happy, she finally turns to the devil to live a more free and happy life. Thomasine is labelled to be vilified because she stands against her father who does not do enough to provide for his family, and she calls him a hypocrite. It was because he entered an unnamed religious agreement with the local church, he along with the family was sent to exile, which at first, they thought was a temporary arrangement but later they realised it was not. As per the societal norms, women should always obey the patriarchy no matter what, but Thomasine is seen not caring about these norms while giving a reality check to his father. Hence, she is labelled a witch and does not belong among the people.

Thomasine also has a complicated relationship with her mother, who calls Thomasine a "slut" as she is transforming from a girl into a woman which is a constant reminder of her mother's fading beauty. The way she talks to her father and the way her brother is drawn towards her growing body, the mother thinks that her position in the family is shaken now and hence she keeps abusing her. The twin siblings are also not good towards her. Mercy disrespects her always. Here we can also see how females of the same family target one female and make her life miserable. Because of the competition to win the approval of the male of the family, women purposefully jeopardised each other. Instead of empowering each other, they

pulled one another down. This story is based on a pre-feminism wave era, so it is a true depiction of how women treated each other. The sisterhood entered feminism only in the second wave, though it was a selective sisterhood which later in the third wave changed to a holistic wave. At the end of the story, when Thomasine surrenders to the devil, she lets all her clothes slide down her body and dances freely. It is the first time she feels liberated and free.

Thomasine's experience in "The VVitch" serves as a touching portrayal of the difficult truths of the time before feminism. Her ultimate surrender to the devil and dancing without inhibition signifies a strong assertion of her independence, depicting a deep and poignant liberation from the restricting societal expectations.

DISCUSSION

The witch archetype's development from pre-feminism to modern feminist movements captures important changes in how society views gender and power. In the past, witches were seen as dangerous misfits who personified society's biases and anxieties against women who didn't fit into traditional norms. A key source in this text, the "Malleus Maleficarum", illustrates how social and theological manipulations were used to legitimise the persecution of women, therefore fostering superstition and terror that served to maintain patriarchal power.

Feminist groups have reinterpreted the witch archetype in modern times as a representation of female autonomy, resistance, and empowerment. This reclaiming reflects larger cultural shifts that acknowledge and combat gender inequality. A context for comprehending these changes is provided by feminist theory, especially

the writings of Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir, which emphasises how patriarchal systems have traditionally disadvantaged women by calling them witches.

In determining how witches are portrayed and treated, the intersectionality of gender, class, and religion is vital. The feminist movements' revitalization of the witch image highlights the tenacity and power of historically persecuted women. This change from a terrifying to an empowering figure represents the continuous fight for gender parity and the reworking of social conventions.

Additional investigation is required to examine the views of people throughout the world about witchcraft and the empowerment of women, including modern sources like digital media to document changing attitudes. By exposing the historical abuse of the witch stereotype, educational initiatives may promote gender equality and fight sexism by encouraging a more critical view of gender relations.

This study sheds light on the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the persistent influence of cultural symbols in forming society perspectives by exploring the complicated history of the witch archetype. Once a terrifying symbol, the witch today challenges and reshapes the narratives of female power and autonomy, serving as a monument to the bravery and perseverance of women throughout history.

CONCLUSION

Broader shifts in cultural perspectives on gender and power are highlighted by the metamorphosis of the witch archetype from a fearful and persecuted figure to a powerful and rebellious one. This research looks at the theoretical, cultural, and historical development of the witch, showing how patriarchal societies have moulded the way people view them to suppress female autonomy and maintain gender inequity. The research highlights the significant influence of theological and cultural deceit on the lives of women wrongfully accused of witchcraft by analysing influential publications such as Jacob Sprenger's and Heinrich Kramer's "Malleus Maleficarum".

Witches in the past were frequently healers who challenged the established quo of men-dominated society with their knowledge of plants and natural remedies. By linking women to evil, heresy, and demonic activity, the "Malleus Maleficarum" significantly contributed to the widespread persecution and witch hunts that followed. The hunts were marked by fear, frenzy, and a patriarchal intent to subjugate women who did not conform to societal norms.

As a representation of resilience, strength, and resistance to repressive systems, feminist groups have reclaimed the witch stereotype in the modern day. Society's views of female autonomy and authority have been profoundly shifted because witches are now viewed as courageous, wise, and independent women, which has challenged conventional narratives and encouraged a re-evaluation of women's responsibilities.

Future studies should examine how current perceptions of witches are shaped by internet media. The stereotype of the witch has been revived by the emergence of social media platforms and online communities, leading several people and groups to use the word for their activism and personal branding. Comprehending this digital transition will provide valuable perspectives on the changing cultural icons and how they influence societal opinions.

Educational programs that draw attention to the historical misapplication of the witch archetype as a means of subjugating women might cultivate a more critical perspective on gender relations. The integration of these programs into public awareness campaigns and educational curricula is necessary to promote gender equality and counteract sexism. To further challenge patriarchal norms and empower women, current feminist groups that reclaim and reinterpret the witch stereotype should be supported financially, politically, and through collaborations.

This evolution of the witch stereotype highlights how gender and power have always interacted dynamically. Understanding this progression helps us to better understand the ongoing fight for gender parity as well as the powerful impact of cultural symbols on social views and the empowerment of coming generations.

REFERENCES

- Bovenschen, S., Keil, R., Werner, H., Böttcher, R., & Bruckner, H. (1978). The contemporary witch, the historical witch and the witch myth: The witch, subject of the appropriation of nature and object of the domination of nature. *New German Critique*, 15, 83-119.
- Briggs, R. (1996). **Witches and neighbors: The social and cultural context of European witchcraft**. Penguin Books.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble*. Routledge.
- De Beauvoir, S. (1949). *The second sex*. Gallimard.
- Eggers, R. (2016, February 20). Robert Eggers on 'The Witch,' familial trauma, and the supernatural [Video]. Vice Talks Film YouTube channel. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGNrHzCXpTM&frags=pl%2Cwn>
- Harris, V. (2020). Witches on surfboards: How witch media has ridden the waves of feminism. *Cardinal Compositions*, 4, 39-43.
- Kramer, H., & Sprenger, J. (1487). *Malleus Maleficarum*. Part 1, Question 6.
- Lee, D. (2006). *Romantic liars: Obscure women who became impostors and challenged an empire*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Luff, T. L. (1990). Wicce: Adding a spiritual dimension to feminism. *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 35, 91-105.
- Maddox, T. M. (2022). Womanhood as weakness, or why witches were women. In *The Routledge Handbook of Women's Experiences of Criminal Justice* (pp. 6-16). Routledge.
- Margaret Murray and the Euhemeristic theory in British folklore in the first half of the 20th century. (2021). *Etnograficeskoe Obozrenie*, 2021(2), 111-124.
- Reis, E. (1997). *Damned women: Sinners and witches in Puritan New England*. Cornell University Press.
- Ruether, R. R. (1980). Goddesses and witches: Liberation and countercultural feminism. *Christian Century*, 97(28), 842-847.
- Sollée, K. J. (2017). Witches, sluts, feminists: Conjuring the sex positive. ThreeL Media.
- The Holy Bible, King James Version. (n.d.). Revelation 20:10.
- Whitney, E. (1995). The witch 'she'/the historian 'he': Gender and the historiography of the European witch-hunts. *Journal of Women's History*, 7(3), 77-97.