

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Powerful women have always been feared by men and the ultimate personification of that fear is the witch. The fact that most adults internalize the personification and carry it to the context of the modern world we are living in reflects how powerful representation of the witch carried through literature, cinema and pop culture has contributed its value in our society. Even though witch stories are vast in diversity, they share similar traits. Witches are women whose femininity transgresses society's accepted norms and myths and they are too powerful, too sexually aggressive and too undesirable. However, feminist activists and more social media influencers today have been actively dispelling the false binary of good and bad women by promoting the idea that powerful woman does not have to follow certain standard constructed by society. Hence, more and more women have accepted the symbol of the witch as an inclusive symbol of women empowerment that challenges patriarchy (Quaglia 2019).

The concept of "witch" is very common across cultures and usually linked to political relevance of patriarchal vested interest. However, a witch is not always what we perceive today as a wicked, morally corrupt and cunning woman. In ancient times, Hecate, a Goddess in Greek mythology, was

worshiped of her power which is associated with magic and astrology. She was the witness of Persephone abduction and assisted the search for her. Thus, Hecate or the pillars which stood at crossroads and doorways are believed to repel the evil from passing through. In Yoruba tradition, witches were believed as wise women who were equipped with the power of the trickster. Although these women were worshiped while practicing spiritual rituals, most of them were associated with healers, protectors or wise elders (Lotha 2019).

It was not until the 1400s that society no longer perceived witches as wise women with healing power. The male-centric Christianity in Europe was rising and these powerful women have started to be demonized. German churchman named Heinrich Kramer officially made the word “witch” as a pejorative term around 1468 when he published his book on how to hunt the witches titled *Malleus Maleficarum* or “The Hammer for Witches” (Federici 2004, 163). The publication which was corresponded with sentiment and fear towards powerful women would later motivate the European and American witch hunt in the 1500s to 1600s. The witch hunting was perpetuating the myths of women having evil capabilities and preserved the patriarchy. It did not only murder thousands of women, it also lowered women status in society as well as limited their opportunity to contribute socially and economically in civic discourse.

Even in the modern age, strong, wise and assertive women are repressed for their sexuality and gender because they refuse to be submissive and subordinate to men. The United States presidential election in 2016 proved

that fear of patriarchal society towards powerful women did not end with Salem Witch Trials in the 1600s. Media was overflowed with images of Hilary Clinton riding a broom, her skin edited in green and people named her The Wicked Witch of the Left (Miller 2018). Women rising in power have always been a threat to patriarchy and the fear turned into norms and policies which aim to limit women's economic opportunities and social contributions. They are stigmatized for their sexuality and gender, continues to be stereotyped because they refuse to commit to the traditional gender roles and over-simplified as evil beings that caused disturbance and castration.

Roald Dahl is widely known as one of brilliant British short story writers who decorated his world of fiction with ambivalences and absurdity (Jabeer 2016, 1173). Dahl's world is also colored with black humor, comedy tinted with grotesqueness that mostly tends to make the readers fearfully quivering rather than chuckling in delight. This eccentricity is hugely influenced by his personal experiences that expanded from being born during World War I, lived through The Great Depression, World War II and also feminist movements. Roald Dahl indeed lived in remarkable times. With the rise of the second wave feminism as well as more and more women emerged as influential leaders, assertive female characters became very noticeable in literature (Curtis 2013).

Apart from violent and absurd themes going around inside his work, *The Witches* (1983) is proven to be very popular among children as it won three awards on the same year the book was published. In the country it was

published, *The Witches* (1983) is awarded The Whitbread Award, voted by authors based in United Kingdom as literary work which is enjoyable to read to the wide audience, voted as the winner of the Federation of Children's Book Groups Awards by entirely children readers, while in the US it is awarded the New York Times Outstanding Books for its outstanding selling across the country (RoaldDahl.com n.d.). These awards surely tell something about how a book mostly critiqued for its offending nature towards women is massively loved by its readers.

Although Dahl's works are mostly published decades ago with the latest one was released in 1991, most of them are widely considered as classics and remain popular among readers. This lasting and even said to be increasing popularity is mostly motivated by the relevance that Dahl's works offer to modern society. Themes that are brought up in Dahl's texts are diverse and afflicting but also appealing to diverse readers. They mostly involve absurdity, humor and violence. What seems to be a noticeable and recurring theme that converge elements in this line is his female antagonists. His female characters are usually associated with cruel, mean, ugly grown-ups' traits which often disgust readers (Jabeer 2016, 1172). Even Dahl goes as far as stating that "All witches are women" (Dahl 1983, 3) in one of his most popular works, *The Witches* (1983). The book is known to be controversial for most part because of the alleged notion of misogyny represented by its female antagonist. However, as the book contains strong and distinctive female characters, it can be viewed as having a feminist influence towards its readers.

Regarding assertive female antagonists in children's literature, previous researchers have been addressing the issue through analyzing the stereotypes adhered to the female antagonists. Mallan in *Witches, bitches and femme fatale: viewing the female grotesque in children's film* (2000) presented the analysis of Dahl's *The Witches* (1983) movie adaptation and its characterization of The Grand High Witch as one of many representations of Female grotesque. Mallan gives an insight to this study that proves appropriation of female grotesque in children's films is constructed by literary and cultural stereotypes and consequently can be regarded as refusal of the limits enforced on women's body and acceptance of the ambivalent qualities by transgressing norms of traditional femininity. Thus, supported this study's argument on how The Grand High Witch as depicted in the book can be viewed as liberating body performance of women in children's literature.

Another study addressing female antagonists in children's literature is Tso's *Representation of the monstrous feminine in selected works of C. S. Lewis, Roald Dahl and Philip Pullman* (2012). Tso used Creed's model of Monstrous-Feminine in analyzing The Grand High Witch and other female antagonists from different works as the characters that in the end should be eliminated and perished to re-establish men's domain of the only party who holds aggression and power (Tso 2012). Based on Creed's model, it is suggested that a witch is categorized as the daughter of Lilith who demands to be men's equal but is represented with specific vocabulary that emphasizes her transfigured and ambiguous nature. Tso's study argued that Dahl's text

carries the mission to eliminate monstrous-feminine figures who threaten the patriarchy and therefore, misogynistic at its core while this study aims to address the text's feminist agenda to portray subversive female antagonist as a critique to patriarchal society.

Apart from the stereotypes and didactic concept of evil women in the children's literature, assertive women and their transgressive bodies and acts have been positively symbolized by some feminist theories promoting women transgression against patriarchy. This study focuses on how assertive female antagonist is viewed as a positive symbol of women transgression and also views child-less nature and child-hate performed by The Grand High Witch as a symbolic form of child-bearing freedom using Radical Feminism approach introduced by Shulamith Firestone.

Abortion rights and reproductive technologies are urgent issues today and Firestone's arguments about exploitation of women's reproductive nature remain highly relevant. In *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970), Firestone argues that pregnancy is barbaric and women's childbearing role is the source of female oppression. The opportunity to increase women's reproductive choices is seen as a form of women control over their bodies and liberation from dependency from men's provision while in a cycle of pregnancy, childbirth and nursing (Firestone 1970).

This study also uses a concept introduced by Justyna Sempruch in *Fantasies of Gender and the Witch in Feminist Theory and Literature* (2008), which reveals a new concept of the witch who challenges the stigmatized

forms of sexuality, race, and ethnicity and focuses on the conversion of the “hag” into a “superwoman” as a continuous negotiation of subject’s identity (Sempruch 2008). This concept supports Firestone’s Radical Feminism in analyzing the text to break the didactic idea that women transgression in children’s book is an absolute wickedness as well as proposes a new point of view where assertive women in children’s literature is something to be taken as pleasure and fulfillment of desires.

This study only focuses on assertive female character represented as the antagonist of the story: The Grand High Witch. The figure of a witch has always discussed largely as a subject of fear, fascination and even a reference in fashion and symbol of women empowerment. From the history of the Salem Witch Trials to the modern witch-themed TV series and films, the relevance of the witch today remains unbothered. Discussions regarding The Grand High Witch involve her physical traits, speech and behavior narrated in the book to reveal stereotypes that are imprinted on female antagonist and then proceed to interpret it to a concept where The Grand High Witch’s assertiveness and transgression is a positive symbol which challenges the stereotypes. This study also elaborates the issue drawn from the text with the premises of radical feminist in order to contextualize the text with relevant condition of our society.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Based on the background of the issue, this study proposes a research question regarding The Grand High Witch as the main focus of this study as follow:

How does The Grand High Witch represent women transgression as a liberating view against patriarchal norms in Roald Dahl's *The Witches* (1983)?

1.3 Objective of the Study

Based on the statement of the problem above, this study aims to answer the following statement:

To view The Grand High Witch's transgression as liberating act against patriarchal norms in Roald Dahl's *The Witches* (1983).

1.4 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is to break the didactic idea that views women transgression in children's book as an absolute wickedness. Since the book is widely loved by its readers who are mostly children, it is important for adults to assist the reading activity with progressive understanding towards female antagonists instead of painting it black and white as the pure evil. It is also expected that this study presents a point of view where transfigured women in literature is something to be taken as a pleasure and fulfillment of women's suppressed desires as opposed to conforming oppressing patriarchal borders which limit women's expression of power and transgression.

Moreover, this study is expected to contribute in enriching references for students of English Department of Universitas Airlangga in conducting similar studies.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

- Fantasmatic Other:** A universally subversive woman who holds great and wise knowledge and power beyond her femininity and stigmas followed (Sempruch 2008, 27).
- Patriarchal norms:** A set of standards and practices in a society which constructs the subordination of women to men. It also dictates femininity stereotypes towards women and imposes absolute male authority (Rawat 2014, 16).
- Radical feminism:** A standpoint where feminism no longer demands equality but radically aims to eliminate patriarchy entirely. Radical feminism suggests that the origin of women oppression is patriarchal gender relation and therefore sex distinction should no longer matter culturally (Firestone 1970, 11).
- The Grand High Witch:** The Grand High Witch is the main antagonist in *The Witches* (1983) who acts as the ruler of the witches all around the

world. She is all powerful and merciless as the other witches fear her for life (Dahl 1983).

Women transgression: Act of breaking the traditional representations of femininity and challenges the notions of docile and submissive women. (Jabeer 2016, 1173)