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A Gendered Interrogation of the "Witch": Reading C. S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew* and William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

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"Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time" (Butler 22). While gender is a social construct, gender roles are those which are promulgated as ideal or apt behaviour for an individual of a specific gender. Literature cuts across these boundaries and gives birth to characters that enjoy gender fluidity and do not restrict themselves to a single category. The "witch" is one such character in literature, an unnatural being that is not tied down by the constraints of societal gender ideologies. This paper intends a comparative study of the figure of the "witch" in C. S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew* and William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* through a gendered interrogation.

In a society where women are labelled as inferior, the "witch appears as a sudden intrusion of a female subject, who reverses the phallic gaze, contesting the authority of the masculine position," who represents "The split identity of the 'embodied subject' that negotiates between sub-conscious and conscious drives, between repressed and released desires, between the condensation of maternal physiology and social dis/placement," and is "a divided subject, a fantasy deployed to convey the transgressive status of the category of 'woman' and gender in general" (Sempruch, *Fantasies* 3, 10, 11).

The notion of the "monstrous-feminine" was coined by Barbara Creed in her book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993). She devotes her powerful book to an exploration and analysis of the depiction of "woman as monster" in the horror

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genre. It explores how important gender is, in the construct of a woman's monstrosity. According to Creed, women were often portrayed as monstrous / abject in media, and that the most obvious and common place to locate this is in horror films. She classifies this figure as the "monstrous-feminine" (3). She builds her theory by drawing mainly from Freud, examining those psychoanalytical approaches historically used in the analysis of horror texts---specifically, the Freudian notion of the "castrated female."

Though Creed points out to horror movies, it is true that women have been portrayed as "evil," "cruel" and "crooked" in almost all children's stories. Fairy tales by and large portray witches to be evil and destructive, while wizards as those who possess great knowledge of wonderful magic spells and beauty potions for everything good and pleasant. Men are always shown to be the "creators" of everything good and magical while women have always been given the title "destructors." This gender difference drawn in children's stories and all other genres of literature instills in one the idea of "destructive woman" and "creative man."

C. S. Lewis was an intellectual giant of the twentieth century and a highly influential writer of his day. There are not many authors in fantasy literature who are as beloved as him. He had a deep interest in Celtic literature and myths and was an admirer of the works of W. B. Yeats. Lewis's books always bore an enduring appeal and he turned out to be a gifted writer. His books have been filled with exceptionally memorable characters, places, and prose that excite every individual reader's imagination and heart. The world of Narnia has a magic and mystery of its own that urges its readers to return to it again and again.

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Despite Lewis's universal popularity, certain specific themes in his writing have been questioned and have gradually created controversy. In most of his works, Lewis puts across the view that women are inferior to men. The women characters in many of Lewis's stories are mostly expected to give in to their roles as wives, or else give up their own femininity in order to partake in more "masculine" tasks such as battle (Burrus 4).

Lewis was the cornerstone of an academic club known as the "Inklings" (Candice and McBride 2) which has been frequently accused of "misogyny and sexism," and their literary works for the "lack of strong female characters, as well as the masculine bigotry of their male characters" (Eros 283). The witch Jadis, in *The Magician's Nephew* stands apart and different from Lewis's other women characters in not conforming to this aspect.

Jadis was born into the royal family of the world of Charn. The members of the royal family were said to be part-Jinn and part-Giant. She is the evil, sadistic, cruel and self-declared final Queen of Charn and its only surviving resident. Being the main antagonist of the novel, Jadis is shown as the epitome of power; an amalgam of femininity and masculinity. It was known that she went deep into dark magic by practising her witchcraft in her own world, far beyond what is considered and said to be proper. Her greatest weapon was her knowledge about the secret of the "Deplorable Word." It was a secret hidden by her ancestors long ago, and it had the power to destroy everything that had life in it except the caster; the one who casted the spell. Jadis says that the Deplorable Word "was the secret of secrets" (Lewis 41). From the World of Charn, she was accidentally brought to the World of Narnia on the day of its creation, by Digory and Polly, the two child protagonists of the story. She was the first evil to enter Narnia and her corruption of Narnia by entering it, would leave its

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impact on the land for ages. Lewis calls Jadis a "Daughter of Lilith," in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (147).

Jadis was about seven feet tall, richly dressed "with a look of such fierceness and pride that it took your breath away. Yet, she was beautiful too" (Lewis 34). Digory was sure that she was a "great queen," as evident from her robes, her crown, the curve of her lips and the flash of her eyes. She had white beautiful hands that were "strong as steel pincers" (Lewis 38). Digory thought of her to be wonderfully brave and strong and felt that she was "hardly human" when he had a close look at her while in London (Lewis 45). She was so beautiful, fierce and wild that she looked nearly ten times more alive than majority of the people of London. But her naturally pale skin colour changed to a "deadly white, white as salt," the moment she ate the silver apple (Lewis 93).

The witch is cold and pale, like the world she creates, practically lifeless, and lacks both compassion and passion. It seems that the only passion she feels is anger. Jadis reveals her ability to read minds. She says: "my eyes can see through the walls and into the minds of men" (Lewis 47). Being a Queen, she had fought wars in Charn which had clearly made her an outstanding warrior. Her centuries-worth experience augmented her skills greatly. She refuses to be submissive and desires to rule over each and every living thing around. When Digory and Polly accidentally bring the witch to London, it is her overflowing beauty that she uses as her primary tool to ensnare and enslave people.

The first time when Digory tries to stare at the witch, something forces him to drop his eyes off her; "[t]here was something about hers that overpowered him" (Lewis 39). Jadis

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is an immensely beautiful woman who possessed immense macho aggression, brutal strength and bestiality. When she speaks, her voice is strong and terrifying: "then Jadis spoke; not very loud, but there was something in her voice that made the whole room quiver" (Lewis 46). These facts point out that while being a woman, she possessed both womanly and manly features. This blurs the boundary between the feminine and the masculine, and challenges gender stereotypes. The gender fluidity that she exhibits gives her an identity of her own, apart from being just a "female." She has a power of her own that can enslave anybody and anything around her.

Jadis is an abject figure. She is portrayed as a living-dead, human-like, non-human creature empowered with barbaric ferocity, aggression and superhuman strength, who does not fall into the binary division of subject and object, self and other, man and woman, living and dead. All this clearly suggests that the White Witch is the indefinable "in-between" with which neither the patriarchal system nor the gender system can be identified (Tso, 215-234).

She is a strong woman who does not fear the male powers of any world, except the great lion Aslan. She frightens every male that she comes in contact with and overpowers them. She asserts the notion of being equal to man, by discarding her "feminine" qualities. Jadis thinks that she is above the law and the people she rules. She does not consider anyone as equal to her. All her followers, including the male creatures, are merely her minions.

Jadis is depicted as the satanic temptress who is solely responsible for bringing evil into Narnia and is shown to be the unsurpassed personification of unalloyed evil in the

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Narnian universe. The witch is epitomised as evil, and wields her wand as a phallic symbol of ousting power. She is found to be a psychopath, arrogant and narcisstic, who views herself as the supreme, and is above all rules of conduct. She sees others simply as blockades to be shoved off or instruments to be used. She totally lacks empathy, moral sense, compassion and loyalty, as she feels ruthlessly proud about her victory even after wiping out her entire species. A true egomaniac, she is bedevilled with power and thronged with a strong desire to conquer the world around her.

Jadis erases all kinds of gender norms that were imposed on the women of the age. She, through her actions and attitudes, corroborates that a woman need not conduct herself according to society's demands and expectations in order to live with power and pride. Even though Jadis is a witch and has supernatural powers that she has acquired of her own, it is her determination to win over and conquer everything and everybody that obstructs her path, which makes her the iconoclastic paragon of breaking gender stereotypes.

The allegations of witchcraft, primarily towards women, in early modern England (Elizabethan era; 1558-1603) can be taken as an evidence of how much society feared the power of women. Alan Anderson and Raymond Gordon point out to the obscure position of women in the Middle Ages. They say that "the view of woman as instrument of the Devil, a thing at once inferior and evil, took shape in the earliest period of Church history and was indeed originated by the Church" (173).

Two things could be accomplished by punishing witches; it marked an end of the threat to the male society and injected in others a fear to follow in the unruly woman's steps.

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Therefore, witchcraft and the belief in it was not a new topic of discussion when King James was crowned the King of England in 1603. Though there is no exact information on when the Bard of Avon wrote *Macbeth*, it is assumed that Shakespeare wrote it sometime in 1606-07, during the course of the reign of King James I, who was the patron of Shakespeare's acting company (Bevington). Shakespeare has tried to create in his *Macbeth* a world of men, women and witches who fight against gender conventions, cross them and blur roles.

Robert Kimbrough, points out that the actual differences between men and women really exist in the mind, not in the body, and that this has become "an absolute division of humanity, not into subtypes of one species, but into separated types, each treated as if it were itself a separate species" (175). According to Mildred Tonge,

> One tendency of literary criticism has been to link the witches with current Elizabethan witch-trials, and to show that the *Macbeth* witches had their counterparts in the hags who were brought to trial and held up for view in Elizabethan England. The opposite tendency has been to raise the *Macbeth* witches above these 'vulgar witches' and to interpret them as wyrds and prophetesses. (234-235)

The three witches in *Macbeth* can be seen as characters who challenge the then subjugating patriarchal society. In fact "the world of *Macbeth* is ruled by the feminine and maternal figures represented in the witches and Lady Macbeth" (Lejri 106). Interestingly, while looking closely into the play, one can find no instances which show that the witches have a male superior. In Act I scene III, when Macbeth and Banquo meet these three weird

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sisters on the heath, there is no sign of male presence in sight. This is when Banquo wonders at the sight before him and says, "you should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (43-45). This statement makes it clear that they did not look like ordinary, normal women for their faces exhibited manly features. Banquo stands quite confused as to what to call them, their appearances having laid foundation to this bewilderment. Brett D. Hirsch notes that "the beard as a token of a witch forms a part of a wider association of monstrosity with diabolism and the supernatural" (94).

Reading through the beginning of Act I scene III, one comes across the explanation of a "skylarking" of the witches who seek vengeance against a sailor's wife who did not share her chestnuts. The first Witch decides to go after the woman's husband and says, "Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o' the Tiger: / But in a sieve I'll thither sail, / And, like a rat without a tail, / I'll do, I'll do, I'll do" (6-9). The other witches, on hearing this, offer her additional wind. She targets to keep the sailor awake all day so that, "Sleep shall neither night nor day / Hang upon his pent-house lid" (18-19). The first Witch adds more to her plan and says that the sailor would live like a man under a curse---he would become thin, weary, pale, and starve for eighty one weeks. Even though his ship would not be wrecked, it would be carried aimlessly through the ocean by the tempest. She then, with pride, exhibits "a pilot's thumb" ---the thumb of a pilot who was ship-wrecked as he came homeward (26).

Even though the witches are not as malevolent as Macbeth later turns out to be, they are shambolic and slatternly, with no regard of the norms of society, and seem to truly fancy that position. The Weird sisters' vengeance on the sailor's wife paves way into another baleful activity that witches were alleged to practice; "the prevention of lawful sexual

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relations between man and wife, technically labelled ligature or, more picturesquely in English witchlore, 'tying the points'" (Biggins, 257).

In Act IV scene I of *Macbeth,* the three witches are shown to be in a cavern where they are indulged in an act of preparing a soup into which they add weird things like the "eye of newt," "toe of frog," "wool of bat," "tongue of dog," "adder's fork," "blind worm's sting," "lizard's leg," "owlet's wing," "witches' mummy," "liver of blaspheming Jew," "finger of birth-strangled babe" and so on. Their repetition of the phrase "Double, double toil and trouble" gives us an answer to the purpose of why the soup is being made. Their ability to look into the future is proven through their prophesies about Macbeth and the statement "By the pricking of my thumbs, / Something wicked this way comes" by the Second Witch adds to this (44-45). The statement shows their ability to foresee what awaits them the next moment.

Another interesting moment in Act IV scene I is when Macbeth questions the witches about what they are doing. He asks, "How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags! / What is't you do?" to which the witches answer together-"A deed without a name" (46-48). Macbeth addresses the witches as "secret," "black," and "midnight hags." This adds to both, their physical appearance and who they are. Their secretive nature is made clearer. Referring to the witches as "black" might be a symbolic representation of their evil nature, their black complexion or black attire and of how they were always associated with the darkness of nature---deserted places, caverns, thunder, lightning, wind and storm. "According to both popular superstition and 'learned' witchcraft treatises, the body of the witch was supposed to be physically deformed, as an outward manifestation of inward, moral

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aberration, or branded by the Devil"(Hirsch 95). The term "midnight hags" indicates that they were old women who came out only during the darkest hours of the night. "Witches, then, are common place impoverished old women so greedy and vengeful that they make a bargain with Satan to get what they want" (Albright 226). Selima Lejri points out that,

> Shakespeare here incorporates elements of the village witch stereotype such as those shared by the popular beliefs of his time. Always constructed in terms of the feminine and maternal, the witch is an ugly and old woman whose post-menopausal body sets at the opposite of the generous, fertile and feminine body of the ideal woman and whose attitude and behaviour keep on the margins of neighbourly interactions and community life. (106)

The haggish and wild outsides of these witches are constructed in such a way that they match the insides and thus justify their unnaturalness. Daniel Albright points out that, ". . . the witches seem to be dedicated to Macbeth alone. When they succeed in destroying him, they vanish; their peculiar sort of evil seems no longer to exist as a factor in human affairs. They dispel themselves as they finish casting spells on Macbeth" (229).

Claudia Opitz-Belakhal mentions that "those suspected of being witches were often strong women with knowledge of magic who struggled in times of crisis for their physical and social well-being" (90). Looking into the character and background of Jadis, this proves to be true. The witches in *Macbeth* as well as the witch in *The Magician's Nephew* seem to throw apart the conventional theories of womanhood. They do look like women in the first glance but exhibit "unnatural" maleness in them. Their voices become more deep and hoarse

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at times, they have beards on their face and show more physical strength and revenge than that of men. Comparing them with the ill-treated women of the ages, the "witches" are women with a sense of strong determination and will power. They are not afraid of the ruling patriarchy that tries to confine women within boundaries created by men themselves. Yet it is ironical that, where the life and future of women where determined by men, these witches predicted the dreadful ill fate of men like Macbeth and had the power to influence and indirectly lead them to their dreadful end.

The witches in both these texts have their attires totally different, and in contrast. The witch in *The Magician's Nephew* dressed "with a look of such fierceness and pride that it took your breath away. Yet, she was beautiful too" (Lewis 34). She had very clear womanly features with an addictive beauty that held the eyes of any male, while the witches in *Macbeth* look "so withered and so wild in their attire" that they "look not like the inhabitants o' the earth / And yet are on't"(I, iii, 38-40). Though they have "beards" and look masculine, they are said to have "choppy fingers" and "skinny lips" which gives them a feminine look (I, iii, 42-44). The difference in their attires shows the transformation and transition of the "witch" from a demonised, unruly woman to that of a beautiful woman with captivating features.

Shakespeare has tried to give witchcraft a permanent and new interpretation; his witches are not just "Elizabethan hags," they are a quintessence of "Norse wyrds, classical Circes, fates, goddesses, or prophetesses" and are a representation of a kind of evil "which cannot be altogether apprehended through the senses, but which takes shape in tangible forms" (Tonge 236). Sempruch points out that "the 'witch' is suspended at the point of

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crossing into the unspoken and forbidden" and that "her speech perverts the language of philosophers; laughter, spells, and evil incantations flow from her grotesque and filthy mouth. Emerging in asymmetric relation to logocentric thought, the 'witch' articulates a force for subversion that exceeds her own representation within the philosophical logos" (*Fantasies* 2).

On re-reading the radical feminist versions of the "witch" figure, it is possible to come to a conclusion that "no matter who she is, or whom she supposedly represents, the 'witch' remains a benevolent 'wise-woman,' a victim of phallogocentric hegemonies" (Sempruch, "Feminist" 113). "As a radical feminist identity, the 'witch' strategically represents both the historical abject figure subjected to torture and death, and a radical fantasy of renewal in the form of a female figure who desires a cultural transformation that has not happened yet and also the one who already marks that transformation" (Sempruch, "Feminist" 115). Thus, the witch is no longer a victim of subjugation and torture; she is a strong woman who crosses the boundaries of societal gender conventions and stands for establishing an independent empowered identity of her own.

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