

Trajectory of Reinvention of Witches: Its Politics, Appropriation and Popularization

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Abstract

The archetype of witches has been an alluring instrument to inject ideologies through literary forms, the portrayal of which has taken a trajectory over the centuries- from negative to positive to neutral roles in its invention and reinvention through particularly, several popular drama series in the contemporary scenario, streamed over multiple over-the-top (OTT) platforms, wherein the representation of witches has become a sensational theme. This study intends to explore the divergence from Arthur Miller's socio-political concerns in *The Crucible* (1953), to the contemporary creative adaptations of this subject matter in six popular American television/web series that have experimented with artistic freedom, through an analysis of the antagonistic, antifeminist, feminist perspectives as well as the saviour complex imposed on such fictional characters, through a new historicist angle, since such tales are a fusion of history and imagination. These narratives produce a counter ideology, though they may not be free from the chains of social conformity, appropriation, romanticized normalization, and the traps of culture industry. However, they blur the barriers between high and low culture, thereby revolutionizing the world of art.

Keywords: American drama series, discard studies, homo sacer, ideologies, Miller, witches

1. Introduction: The Amalgamation of History and Artistic Creativity

The blending of historical narratives (established and discovering versions) and imagination (exploring immeasurable artistic freedom) can most probably be considered as one among the fascinating subject matters for the writers in penning down sensational works. More often than not, these tales transcend time and space which give the impression that these kinds of topics or themes never stop mesmerizing the literary enthusiasts all across the world, most probably because there is an aura of mystery and surprise surrounding such works. Even the thought of an investigation into mysterious topics with intricate storylines may arouse the curiosity within the human mind and acts as a motivating factor to explore further. Perhaps, this human curiosity is one among the reasons that pulls the people towards knowing more about countless conspiracy theories on subjects shrouded in mystery for instance, undiscovered aspects of universe and that of time travel, unidentified flying objects (UFOs), pagan traditions, occult, necromancy, geographical mysteries like Bermuda triangle, secret societies like illuminati or covens of witches and others supernatural or paranormal activities, as in the case of ghost hunting or exorcism or the so-called haunted houses. The human attempts to debunk mysteries or secrets or myths associated with these kinds of topics appear to be thriving, each passing day. Besides, the humankind's this particular insatiable obsession towards the unknown is laudable, since it is one among the crucial factors which in other words, regarded as the 'spirit of enquiry' that has led the humanity to the zenith of scientific and technological advancements, innovations, geographical discoveries and so on.

Moreover, it is a notable fact that creative performance or audio-visual art forms dealing with these kinds of matters that seem mysterious, and awaken the curiosity within individuals have revolutionized the culture industry, nowadays specifically through electronic modes of transmission like television or over-the-top (OTT) platforms, or social networking sites and others. Undoubtedly, the popularization of these kinds of works has become a major source of income to the makers of such productions or narratives. This trend has also enabled in the revival of neo-noir and neopaganistic tales among others, which has a revolutionizing effect on popular culture. No wonder, fictionalized versions of historical events, magical realist works, fantasies or mythicized sagas never lose their relevance or fail to charm the audience even in the twenty-first century, and maybe, that is exactly why the themes related to 'witches' remain profitable and crowd-puller topics, both in the entertainment industry as well as in academia.

Furthermore, these types of themes associated with "witches", considered to be the subdued or secluded or isolated section of the society like many others as well, can be considered as an engaging area/s of study and discussion. Literary works present the view that the people who are identified with such imposed "identities" are more like misfits or outlaws or outcasts, which can be studied from various angles. However, this article explores certain aspects among such dimensions which will be discussed further. Such portrayals can clearly be seen also in relation with the notions of 'homo sacer' by Giorgio Agamban (1994) (as in his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*) or

in the contemporary scenario, it can be analysed as per the views of Discard Studies, which presents the argument that “social, political, and economic systems maintain power by discarding certain people, places, and things” (Liboiron & Lepawsky, 2022).

An exploration into such works through these two views uncover the harsh truth that such ‘othered individuals’ seem to be easily disposable in the eyes of the privileged ones, and the former are mostly forced to “live at the mercy” of the dominant or valued forces. Hence, they are inside and outside the social setup at the same time, similar to a homo sacer as they have to fit within the norms and standards of the society, while on the contrary, not being able mostly to enjoy the privileges of any social institutions like their counterparts.

Narratives which deal with the binary concepts of dominant and suppressed, valued and devalued, privileged and underprivileged or outcasts or evil and good are not so unfamiliar in the current age. Likewise, the narratives in which women are tagged as witches most often might present these characters as extremely magnetic or entrancing or vivacious (normally attributed to their “secret powers” or “gifts”, which may be blasphemous or dangerous or evil as per certain conventional views on witches and witchcraft) or perhaps as disfigured or scary or “monstrous” (with intimidating eyes and aura, carrying claw-like nails and even a hump on the back; and these stories might usually be placed in a macabre setting like dark and deserted places, or deep in the woods, or seemingly “haunted” places and such). Though, these kinds of characteristics used to be a part of the typical, conventional and negative portrayal of “witches”, which has transformed over the centuries and keeps on changing, although, these stereotypical depictions can still be found in all genres of literature and media.

Yet, these kinds of representations have not played a role in feminist cause only, but also as a critical ideological- religious or political motif and weapon, intending at a social awakening or awareness in the collective psyche, or to subvert the existing governing systems or institutions, or as a means of resistance or rebellion, so as to achieve higher goals or revolutionary changes in the world. Here, the term ‘weapon’ can be both defensive and offensive, depending on the contextual necessity. The collective consciousness of such ‘othered’ ones and their modes of defiance can be seen in relation with the observations put forward by Louis Althusser with reference to Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) (1970), because, even though such people somehow keep on trying to stand and fight against the existing power structures (deliberately or unconsciously), will be manipulated and repressed by ideologies. But the striking issue is that this kind of manipulation is not just carried out by dominant ideologies, but also at times even by counter ideologies which apparently present counter schools of thoughts, calling out the loopholes of the existing-established ones. The crucial factor behind this likely-tendency is that, when novel counter ideologies are formulated in an attempt to fight or challenge the dominant ideologies, the former might have the tendency to fall into the trap of the established patterns or they might also start following a particular order or structure or hierarchy, and might start adhering to a set of ideas, ideals, notions or “standards”, or narratives, thereby creating their own narratives and pose the threat of being institutionalized ideology/ies. Thus, the striking fact is that, any or every ideology that rises against the existing dominant ideological forces may also have an unintentional or subconscious tendency within themselves to be another power entity that controls and regulates. Hence, they too are not free from the chains of problematic aspects of the ideologies that they are challenging. It can be connected to Nietzsche’s view in the “Epigrams and entr’actes” in *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (though the translated versions may slightly vary depending on the translated work) (146th). He says:

“Whoever fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become one himself. And when you stare for a long time into an abyss, the abyss stares back into you” (1886, p. 69).

This study aims to examine the creative trajectory in the case of the representation of witches from Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* (1953), to that of six contemporary American popular television/web drama series titled, *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017), and its two spinoffs, *The Originals* (2013-2018) and *Legacies* (2018-2022), *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020), *Reign* (2013-2017), and *The Midnight Club* (2022-), while taking into consideration other works of fiction (secondary sources) with similar macabre or mystical themes as part of intertextual examination, although, without trying to canonize any particular work’s position or place these works in a hierarchical order. However, each work might be discussed based on the relevant ideas that the article wants to convey only.

Arthur Miller scholarship since the 1950s itself has been drawing attention throughout the world, mostly because of his remarkable and irreplaceable contributions to the world of drama as well as films and other genres of literature, which keep on growing each day due to the availability of reference materials, especially after Harry Ransom Center for Research in Texas started cataloguing and archiving unexplored documents and drafts, which according to Susan C.W. Abbotson will be a great source of study as,

“there is a growing need for newer bibliographies, detailed production histories, teaching guides, and varied other approaches to not only Miller’s plays, but also with film, his fiction, and non-fiction writing [...]” (2019, p. 1).

“In Prospects for the Study of Arthur Miller”, Abbotson provides a detailed list of background materials to study Miller, and the sources from where the primary sources may be accessed, as well as a discussion on the further scope of study. Along with it, her other critical works (2000-2019), and that of Christopher Bigsby (2005-2010), and Harold Bloom (2007-2008), are relevant while studying Miller in order to understand the intricacies of his creative style, along with the socio-political and historical context involved in the development of his writings.

For an analysis of the delineation of witches in Miller’s as well as the other primary sources for this study, writings on witches have been relied upon. However, an all-encompassing critical analysis of all the aforementioned drama series along with or without *The Crucible* has yet not been made available, specifically, as no studies seem to have come forward which discuss these works together, except for

some blog write-ups and reviews on some among these works, and also because, some of these series have been released in the recent years only, some of which are the adaptations of some popular comics.

Though Arthur Miller has been studied quite vastly over the years, through a literature survey, it has been unravelled that the said web adaptations have never been studied in a diachronic or synchronic fashion in relation to (or comparison with) the alterations and evolutions that may have happened in the artistic process, while presenting witches through audio-visual media, which can perhaps be called as ongoing reinventions of this subject matter. It offers a further scope of study in this particular stream, in relation to novels, films, television/web series and other works.

An exploration into the role of the aforesaid reinterpretations and adaptations that keep on reinventing the depiction of witches through a new historicist lens, while considering certain aspects of cultural materialism, as well the other side view of cultural studies like the culture industry, furthermore, an investigation through the following vision are the aims of this study:

“Old historicists ask the question, ‘What happened and what do we learn about the event that happened?’ New historicists would ask, ‘How has the event that happened been interpreted, and what do these tell us now?’... New historicists, on the other hand, believe that we can at best only have access to facts of the past. What we do is interpret these facts from our point of view, and create a history. There are only different interpretations of facts, and one interpretation is as reliable or not as another” (Nagarajan, 2006, p. 176).

Hence, when narratives with such themes or motifs or tropes try to propagate ideologies, consciously or not, it can turn out to be tricky and may sometimes convey what the author may not have envisioned, as it is up to the audience or the readers to interpret as in their own subjective modes of perception, which can be further analyzed through the new historicist perspectives that has in it, considerable similarities and relations to the notions of Marxist thinkers like Louis Althusser, deconstructive views, Mikhail Bakhtin’s observations on dialogic criticism, and prominently, Michel Foucault’s ideas as well, among others’. In accordance with the views of new historicists,

“Like the authors who produce literate texts, their readers are *subjects* who are constructed and positioned by the conditions and ideological formations of their own era.... Insofar as the ideology of readers conforms to the ideology of the writer of a literary text, the readers will tend to *naturalize* the text -that is, interpret its culture-specific and time-bound representations as though they were the features of universal and permanent human nature and experience. On the other hand, insofar as the readers’ ideology differs from that of the writer, they will tend to appropriate that text- that is, interpret it so as to make it conform to their own cultural prepossessions” (Abrams, 2014, p. 247).

2. Discussion

2.1 The Politics of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*

The Crucible (1953) can perhaps be acclaimed as one of Arthur Miller’s most political as well as politicized works which has also been adapted into movies thrice in the years, 1957, 1996, and 2014, respectively, under the same title, among which the first one was a Franco-East German version directed by Raymond Rouleau with the adapted screenplay by Jean-Paul Sartre, and the second, an American version directed by Nicholas Hytner, scripted by Arthur Miller himself, while the third adaptation was a filmic production by The Old Vic, a theatre in London, distributed by the same group, directed by Yael Farber and co-directed by Robert Delamere.

In *The Crucible*, through the portrayal of Salem witch trials during the 1690s in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the playwright shook the world with its allegorical allure and political undertones, which can be referred to as a significant part of his literary oeuvre. This play can be considered as a medium for the playwright to express his harsh attack on the American society that kept on persecuting leftist ideologies and the followers of such views or practices. The socio-political dynamism in Miller’s work represents his political stance along with the zeitgeist of the era of its production, as well a genuine effort in his writing to stay authentic to the spirit of the historical period, particularly in the characterization of every character.

Through the re-presentation of Salem, where individuals were tortured, accusing them of practicing witchcraft, Miller indirectly wanted to criticize the situation in American during the late 1900s when he wrote this play. Numerous studies have been done through such angles, where Miller’s political affiliations have been discussed. Miller presents the view that it was probably one of the easiest tasks to accuse somebody or anybody of witchcraft so as to take revenge or vengeance, which was deeply rooted in personal grudges, most often due to trivial reasons. Anybody could lay blame on anybody else as a practitioner of witchcraft, for they will most assuredly be charged or punished by the governing forces. The social stigma, fear and isolation of the accused people are the focus of the play, from the beginning itself. As the plotline progresses, how each character’s moral and ethical stance is tested can be observed, since rather than taking up responsibility or facing the consequences of own actions, each character can be seen blaming the other of influencing them into doing “blasphemous” things. Thus, the society’s double standard or hypocrisy is also shown. This very aspect of the play is very crucial, as during the McCarthy era (the second Red Scare) in America throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, when the Communists or their supporters were tormented, many individuals who in fact were Communist sympathizers themselves, seemed to be ratting out even their close ones, in order to save their own life and reputation. The play even mocks at how censorship was being imposed on the people of Salem, which again can be considered as a direct criticism of the censoring tendencies during the McCarthy period in America. The play begins with the description of the upper bedroom of Reverend Samuel, along with an account of the “village”, which cannot be referred to an attack on just McCarthyism, but also on all theocratic or dystopian or autocratic forms of power. Through the initial narration itself, the

nature of the social setup over there is evident, where any form of art, theatre or entertainment was prohibited. The playwright penned down,

“No one can really know what their lives were like. They had no novelists- and would not have permitted anyone to read a novel if one were handy. Their creed forbade anything resembling a theatre or ‘vain enjoyment’” (1953, pp. 13-14).

However, the play is not an exact representation of the Salem witchcraft trials or so, since historical accuracy is not adopted in its total sense, hence, the play can be called as a re-representation of such incidents. *The Crucible* opens with a note regarding this accuracy of the adaptation of history,

“This play is not history in the sense in which the word is used by the academic historian. Dramatic purposes have sometimes required many characters fused into one.... However, I believe that the reader will discover here the essential nature of one of the strangest and most awful chapters in human history” (1953, p. 11).

Miller mocks at the denial or incapability to take up the responsibility by the characters, from all the sides- the ones who are accused of witchcraft, their accusers and the persecutors. The discussion surrounding this denial can be seen in his other plays as well, like *All My Sons* (1946) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Apart from the well-known interpretative analyses, any reader or audience might bring to light, new insights through their own individual-subjective interpretations, as the birth of the reader at times may outweigh the relevance of the author, causing the ‘death of the author’. Moreover, the authorial intentions have little significance in the contemporary era, especially after the ‘death of the author’ (Barthes, 1977) view, as it has been already indicated at, as well as deconstructive notions that inspire the readers to realize the traces of meanings that could be associated to a particular meaning which someone would arrive at or derive through the readings of a text.

Similarly, it is noticeable that, similar to the ways through/in which critical views on any work vary and evolve subjectively, the creative adaptations of any text of drama (like any other genre), will also keep on changing with each and every production or remaking. This very idea is logically explained by James H. Pickering and Jeffrey D. Hooper in *Literature* (1982) when they discuss about what a drama is:

“It combines the use of the use of language with representational arts involving scenery, costuming, and the actors’ physical appearance. It also makes use of vocal emphasis and tone of voice, along with such nonverbal forms of expression as physical gesture, facial expression, and sometimes music and dance. Thus, a drama only becomes a complete work of art when it is seen on the stage, and the written text of a play is only its skeletal frame- lacking flesh, blood, and a life of its own. This skeletal script is, however, the only permanent part of a play.... Such extremes serve to remind us that the script is the only part of the play over which the author has complete control; the rest is the collaborative creation of many different artists, some of whom may misunderstand and therefore misrepresent what the author intended. Because we can never know exactly how Sophocles, Shakespeare, Moliere, and other early dramatists staged their plays, we can never reproduce exactly the work of art they intended” (pp. 983-984).

For this reason, it can be said that just like how the adaptations of *The Crucible* into other genres, like any other play might have alterations, its productions will also have variations, depending on the actors, makers, director, setting and so on, even if they stick to the originally written dialogues or descriptions. Besides, Miller has never claimed that this play is a true description of “historical events”. Moreover, the printed form of the play even carries elaborated notes mentioning the historical backdrop of Salem during the 1690s, since Miller intended at making sure the critics and scholars know that the play is not purely a work of imagination, but a fusion of history with his own creative interpretation in a figurative manner, considering the political undertones. Although, there have been numerous criticisms on the inaccurate portrayal of historical events (Abbotson, 2007) in the play, one thing which is clear while interpreting the text is that the playwright has taken his liberty in the modification of facts so as to blend it with artistic imaginings. Abbotson also points out that,

“By showing the connection of McCarthyism to the way people acted in Salem, Miller suggests that the 1950s U.S. vision of COMMUNISM was a moral issue that viewed communists as being in league with the devil.... *The Crucible* depicts how unscrupulous people, from the Putnams to the trial judges, declare the presence of evil to cripple whomever disagrees with them, not just religiously but politically and socially. Such people assume a moral high ground so that anyone who disagrees is deemed immoral and damned, without recourse to defense” (2007, pp. 108-115).

Also, Miller’s attempt in re-presenting or re-inventing the historical reality to bring a change in the society through his political allegory which evidently is understood to be a harsh attack on the persecution of communists and political activists, may not have succeeded fully in causing any transformative changes on a large scale, nevertheless, the conviction with which he brought the political allegory to light and the commitment he showed for revealing the “serious thought” behind the conception of the play are “never, ever in doubt” (Brater, 2010, p. 9).

2.2 The Blurring Lines Between ‘Antagonist’ and ‘Antifeminist’

The collective stereotypical sense surrounding the conception of witchcraft has reflected in literature and media over the ages which has added to the formulation of a “typical” monstrous, petrifying, antagonistic and inhuman image to individuals who are termed as witches, particularly many women who chose not to conform to the general societal standards and expectations.

In fables, folk tales, fairy tales, children's fiction, like for instance in the popular stories of *Snow White* (1812), *Sleeping Beauty* (1330-1344), Walt Disney movies like, *Tangled* (2010), popular movies like *The Witches* (which has been recently remade under the same title in the year 2010, after another 1990 film adaptation, both based on the same novel with the same title, in the former, Anne Hathaway portrays the role of the witch who is eventually turned into a rat for the cruelty towards children (2020)) these representations and re-presentations can be observed. These kinds of "grand" narratives may have played a role in creating a stereotypical impression and usually children imbibe this as part of the parenting pattern by the parents, wherein the latter try to discipline the children by scaring them off with such stories of good and evil, so that they will not do anything "disobedient" in the fear of "evil" attackers. On the other hand, adults too at times get affected by such representations which might shape their judgements, probably making them believe in similar stereotypical narratives. This applies to their perception of judging women or any individual who is labelled as a witch.

The conception of "witches" at certain times, seem rather perplexing and problematic in *The Midnight Club*, (an American horror mystery-thriller series surrounding eight terminally ill young adults, seems to be cancelled by Netflix after its first season) which is based on the same titled novel by Christopher Pike (1994), as well as the Canadian-American historical-romantic drama series *Reign* (2013-2017), centred on Mary, Queen of Scots, during the sixteenth century.

The Midnight Club (2022) pictures a cult that worships the five daughters of the Greek god of medicine, Asclepius: Aceso (the goddess of healing process), Panacea (goddess of universal health), Iaso (goddess of recuperation), Hygieia (goddess of health and hygiene), and Aglaea (goddess of beauty). The characters in the story believes that the cult might have in its initial form had culminated in blood-sacrifice of some of its followers. Also, the characters raise the suspicion and opinion that the aim of these kinds of cults which are devoted to ancient deities might be corrupted, the view which in itself seems like undermining the status and credibility of ancient deities and its followers, though the presentation of the cult here is strictly that of neo-pagan nature, rather than any direct attack on the practices of any pagan tradition. Thus, in order to introduce the idea of a cult only, the story relies on ancient goddesses, which might either suggest that the "modern" age human beings misuse the ancient belief systems, however, a passive watching of the web series with superficial understandings on the ancient religions might create misconceptions in the minds of the viewers.

Meanwhile, the Canadian-American historical-romantic drama series *Reign* (2013-2017), through the portrayal of minor witch characters may frighten the audience through a kind of ruthless portrayal of 'witches', which is evident in a particular scene wherein a witch-character who is 'supposed-to-be-conceived' by the "devil" does not die even with a mortal wound, but automatically self-heals that wound. However, a sympathetic side of such characters' plight is also depicted, for instance, a prominent "witch" like character, Delphine is portrayed as extremely selfless, empathetic and loving, even though she has a vicious, vengeful side. Also, the picturisation of the persecution faced by pagan believers, tagging them as witches (burnt as heretics) try to present the other side of the subject matter.

These kind of adaptations can be called as antagonistic in nature, since still in many works, women who are presented as witches are painted as villainous and inhuman. These kinds of stereotypical representations are the exact imitation of the grand narratives involving "witches" and can be called as antifeminist narratives too, since the portrayal is highly problematic, even though there may be a discussion of their side of the story or cause also. In spite of all these arguments, expressing through literature or art cannot be limited or restricted, because artistic freedom means the liberty to experiment with all sorts of characters, stories, interpretations, and reinterpretations, inventions and reinventions, and presentations, representations and re-presentations. In addition to that, in the contemporary audio visual narratives, multiple dimensions of the same thing can be identified, even though there may be problematic depictions too, which might be antifeminist in nature. This balancing act in tales can be seen as a kind of conformity and appropriation, which make them likable to the masses and non-controversial, and this balance is maintained by introducing those characters' versions of their struggle and vengeful approach, and the characters who are "virtuous" and "good witches" or fairies too, who are like the nemesis of the "evil" ones.

2.3 The Feminist Tales (?)

Fierce women, presented as the weird ones who will never stoop or bend to their knees in front of the dominant powers, no matter what, and who keep fighting for their callings, stances, choices, and keen visions of a better world where they can enjoy equity, can be frightening and intimidating for the rest of the world that which stands at a distance, isolating those women by prioritizing unreasonable stigma and judgmental attitude. That is exactly why, it is no wonder why such women challenge the foundations of the patriarchal or hierarchical world or social set-up. They stand against oppressing powers as the voices and representatives of the forsaken, forbidden, forgotten and unseen parts of the society, side-lined from the mainstream strata. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), by Alice Walker examines how, through the ages, the world kept on stepping on the dreams of uncountable women, trying to crush their spirits, similar to what Virginia Woolf talks of in *A Room of One's Own*.

Chilling Adventures of Sabrina (2018-2020), an American series based on the teenage witch, Sabrina, adapted from the Archie comic book series of the same name, is a supernatural horror fantasy series. Despite the fact that, it talks of the emergence of Sabrina, it also cannot be called exactly as the tale of a completed liberated or emancipated or self-reliant or emerged women or feminists, because many a time during the crucial situations they seem to depend on their male counterparts and friends, especially in the case of Sabrina who turns to her boyfriends, specifically to Nicholas Scratch (Nick) during crucial situations. However, in comparison to many other typical works of fiction on witches, this series is one among its kind which portrays witches-women who choose their own paths. Similar to the typical grand narratives on witches, this series too discusses the binary notion of good and evil, putting the characters into these categories. When

it comes to the comparatively “better” ones, the multidimensional aspects of their character is also discussed- their insecurities, vulnerabilities and dilemma (about their identities, duties, decisions and so on), rather than claiming bluntly that women have to be devoid of any weaknesses or emotional crisis and they should and must be “strong” in every aspect to be independent, by just intensifying their virtuous quality only, or by sketching them as indifferent ones. Although there are certain characters who are seemingly “evil” as per the binary conceptions, they at times too rise to the occasion when their support is needed, which can be read in many ways- as an experimental storyline, or just a typical pattern where the “evil” ones turn “good” through the selfless and sacrificing attitude, approach, courage, strength, initiatives of the “good” ones, or through further angles, which challenges the stereotypical tales or as mere works which conform to the norms, appropriating them to sound less controversial, by satisfying the patterns of the established narratives.

On the contrary, the role of these kinds of works also, specifically the original comic with the same title (2014-present) from which this web series is adapted should be acknowledged for experimenting with this taboo kind of topic and motif. Even though these works have popularized the subject matter of witches, they represent their own political undertones also, because even though there can be paradoxical or contradictory elements with regard to the descriptions or re-inventions of witches, their part in spreading the ideas of emancipation of women and the subdued groups has been remarkable. A profound reference/s to the influence of comics, Sabrina’s impact, the emergence of women and their rights, the rights of every oppressed community, based on different factors like gender and race and others can be found in the American series, *Riverdale* (2017-2023) which was supposed to be a companion series to *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, though both of them were made as separate independent works. Stories like this present a fierce and undefeatable side of the suppressed groups, mainly women, who even after facing multiple challenges, stand for their causes or as advocates of an inclusive society, the idea and struggle for which provide hope about a better world with equity, not just in the case of women, but also, when it comes to the suppressed, the tortured and the scorned ones. Similar themes and symbolic representations can be found in American popular musical videos as well, for instance in Taylor Swift’s “...Ready For It?” from the album, *Reputation* (2017), in which a kind of awakening is shown when the artistic persona stands on a platform engraved with the line, “They’re burning all the witches” (03: 31), which also propagates the idea of sisterhood like the said works with similar themes of witches.

2.4 Saviour Complex and the Burden of Collective Responsibilities

The Vampire Diaries, an American supernatural young adult drama series, initially telecasted on television but later distributed to other over-the-top (OTT) platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime has had a magnificent role in revolutionizing the age old tales of vampires and witches, among other supernatural beings like the werewolves, hybrids, “tribids”, sirens, and the recurrent transitions from one living or non-living form to the other among others, depending on the plotline, most probably after the Harry Potter and Twilight Saga’s influence on the youth and the people belonging to other age categories as well. It was created by Kevin Williamson and Julie Plec, based on the vampire fiction series of the same name by the American writer, L.J. Smith who predominantly works on young adult fiction.

The work has not just fictionalized the origin and evolution of the vampire myth as the title indicates, but also talks of the key role of the witch, Esther, the mother character, involved in the creation of “original vampires”, who were originally witches (except for Niklaus (Klaus), who was a hybrid- witch and werewolf bloodline combined together (who later turns into yet another hybrid with the blood of vampire and werewolf), leading to multiple lines of vampires who were turned by/duo to the original five vampires, Finn, Elijah, Niklaus, Kol and Rebecca, who are the children of Esther and Mikael, among a total of seven children, of which the first one, Freya becomes a powerful witch, who also plays a key role in the progression of the storyline.

They are represented as the icons of sacrifice or as saviours and healers, also, having the capability to destroy the entire world due to their immense power, gained from nature, that can be used for “good” as well as “bad” causes. They are also some presented at times as vengeful creatures, though all of them are portrayed as mortal human beings, unlike the other supernatural beings in the story. The idea of “good” cause is also problematic in the context of these narratives, as “goodness” is mostly centred around and for the sake of main characters, even if at certain situations, they do things for the collective good. However, even when the characters of witches have infinite power, be it Esther, Freya, Davina Claire, Sophie Deveraux, and the prominent male witch, Vincent Griffith, Hope Mikelson, (The Originals and Legacies, the two spinoffs of the former series), Bonnie Bennett (The Vampire Diaries), Josie, or Lizzie (Legacies), the original vampires’ prominence and need to stay alive outweigh the relevance of other significant characters, namely the witches. The witches in these stories mostly act as the catalyst for the growth of the other characters, even though their stories are also told.

Witches in these three series act like the anchors that provide strength and stability to the other characters and are mostly shown as selfless beings, even after having to fight their own demons for survival and for staying “good”. Their portrayal reminds that of a lifeless plant that has been drained out of the sap for keeping everybody else safe and sound, or like figures from whom everybody expects “mothering” and “saving” at all times, even if they have to become martyrs or victims or scapegoats. Some episodes of these three web series also slightly talk about the burning of “witches” as heretics, even though they entirely fantasize such women as beings with supernatural abilities. Similarities may be traced in the Netflix series, *The Midnight Club*, which has a particular episode titled, “Witch” that talks of the healing-prophetic power of witches, somewhat like a prophetic vision that can be altered or postponed, but cannot be completely omitted forever, similar to the three witches’ prophecies in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1606). It reveals how the characters have to bear with this self-imposed or “destiny-imposed” social duty/commitment/responsibility, which make their survival difficult.

At times only, antagonistic witches are brought into the picture like, Kai Parker, which is a deviation from the usual portrayal of witches that fit to the descriptions of the “established” narratives. Also, Vincent Griffith’s portrayal among a few other male witches is yet another

exception that may act like in breaking the idea of only women labelled as witches. Even then, some patriarchal aspects can be assigned to the relevance given to these male witches, since they attempt to overpower many female witches (even though, not always). However, mostly, like all other witches, Vincent also falls into the trap of the supremacy bestowed on the vampires, as he too becomes a supportive figure to solve the problems of major characters in crisis, since they are expected to fulfil certain roles and assigned duties at all times, similar to the portrayal of “warlocks” in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, the male counterparts of witches, that is becoming a part of the popular culture now. These characters are not just representatives of their expected roles as per the collective psyche, but they themselves cherish a kind of self-imposed saviour complex.

3. Conclusion

Artistic creativity can only be explored in its fullest by the writers or makers of any work of fiction (even when it involves historical facts or events or narratives) when they enjoy artistic freedom. However, many a time these works may conform to the societal standards and the expectations of the dominant forces, thereby leading to an appropriation of motifs, themes and characters, which is appealing or pleasing or likable by the established ideological forces at play or in order to satisfy all sorts or groups of people alike, by bringing in element in a balanced fashion which gratify the needs of everyone, rather than just sticking to one angle or by upholding any particular singular ideology or belief. As per the deconstructive notions regarding centrality, the source of power is relative and keeps on changing, even though the whole system is subverted, which is exactly what the new historicists are concerned about. Nagarajan says,

“Again, there is the problem of power. It does not flow from any outward agency one-way, controlling all below it. Power is what circulates at all levels. It helps in the exchange, and the give and take of objects, institutions and discourses. Any discourse is a social language created for a way of understanding the experience of an institution.... Forms of discourse ensure the reproduction of a social system through ‘selection, exclusion and domination’. They wield power, but also undermine it. [...]” (2006, p. 177).

These artistic endeavours might be suggestive of their own political undercurrents or may have their own political intentions or stances nonetheless. Though, these views may sometimes be subtle or indirect, rather than being direct criticism or attack on anything. Moreover, the major factor is that the lives of human beings undergo politicization almost all the time, in whatever they do or express, because every action, be it personal or social can have its own politics and individuals are not free from being political even when they claim to be apolitical, because that stance can be termed as their own politics, or even being neutral might have its own politics in itself. Hence, human beings can be called as leading a political life, even when they are not consciously aware of social conditioning or manipulations on a daily basis; so as in the case of art and literature. No work is devoid of any political aspect, because if human beings are social beings, obviously they are being controlled, regulated, scrutinized, manipulated and influenced, by forces of capitalism, commodification, commercialization, materialism, social institutions and so on; therefore, the art made by those individuals might represent politicization of ideas, thoughts, characterization and reinventions of tales. Although, even works of fiction are being politicized, as the aforementioned ideas, they too go undergo appropriation so as to make it reach to the masses. And sometimes, even the works that takes a clear and fierce stance on what they want to convey, may even accidentally present even bits and pieces of contradictory elements, most probably because, no human being is entirely free from the clutches of social conditioning. The only solution for this problem may be the consistent effort to undo and unlearn problematic thoughts and practices, though trying to emerge from the chains of imbibed-socialization might be as hard as trying to be political correct when it comes to each action, word and even the usage of any language, because words might have multiple problematic connotations.

When it comes to the reinventions of themes related to ‘witches’ in various genres of literature also, the aspects of politicization, appropriation can be noticed, although commercialized works may follow marketing strategies and tactics too even if they may have revolutionary, yet ambiguous re-presentations, like for instance:

“The witches have been considered to be one of the threats to the world in the accounts of history or in a vast part of literature or media as well, and according and they had not just popped up all of a sudden in the twentieth century. Moreover, their vibrant modern day interpretations as in Harry Potter, contrasts with that of the dull historical accounts, as for several centuries witchcraft was considered to be a capital offense, and it they also reveal that the ones who were accused of practicing witchcraft were mostly women, specifically the ones who were free-spirited and unconventional. They were persecuted through witch trials, irrespective of age” (Fallon, 2014).

Also, the romanticized, fantasized and beautified versions of witches through these artistic forms may appropriate the image of witches through a sort of “positive” representation, which might have (as in the primary sources of this study) typical binary division portrayals, or balanced appropriation- giving a sympathetic characteristic to the “evil” witches, or by boosting the “good” ones’ features , or by making them the modern day equivalent of “saviours”, or by blurring the gender gaps, by bringing in other gendered witches/warlocks and so on. Yet, the conscious or unconscious aims of such performative works to inculcate or inject counter ideologies or spread messages or circulate ideas are succeeding through the popularized-global reach of internet.

However, in an attempt to normalize such characters, sometimes, a process of “divinification” happens that cements the view that counter ideologies against established ideologies also grow into institutionalized ideologies, which is a threat to the stability of the society. Thus, it has been revealed that narratives are entangled in the power struggle as vibrant participants in the recurring remaking of meanings (Baldick, 1990, pp. 245-246). And nowadays in popular media, such reinvented stories display a celebration of the theme or maybe in

reaction to the centuries long persecution faced by such people. However, even though this specific celebration might seem like questioning the dominant forces responsible for people's ("witches" or any subjugated group) mistreatment, there is no doubt that these characters have been appropriated largely to fit into the society's concept of "saviours and "sacrificers", who stand for the betterment of everybody else around and sacrifice their happiness and peace for it, although they too might have hypocritical attitude.

Hence, it can be called as a modern kind of psychological subjugation where "witches" are made to believe that they have autonomy over their choices and decisions, but end up just being tools used for the benefit of other major forces or characters or communities or groups. Therefore, they may seem like important figures in these popular works, but in its depth, they are just a group of exploited people taken for granted by others, forcing on them a so-called natural or collective responsibility to save and preserve the world or social balance. Yet, from an age where talking of such subjects were a taboo, to a time where these subject matters are discussed or celebrated, is an appreciable and considerable development, even though these reinventions may have affiliations to social conformity to make it unproblematic and noncontroversial or to create a fan base as part of the larger marketing strategies.

In addition to that, the study also signifies how such cultural productions act as the proponents of popular culture, that in turn as Adorno has pointed out, can create a mass capitalist effect (as in the concepts of culture industry), which may create passivity among people regarding social issues that matter, though such works also help in breaking the barrier between high and low culture or other forms of culture (2001). Furthermore, these types of narratives with such enigmatic, compelling, or enthralling, influence on enthusiasts of art and literature will keep on flourishing as long as the human minds do not lose its curious nature to dive into the unknown.

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Authors contributions

Kavya Joseph, being the first author is responsible for the idea, the design of the study, as well as the collection and coordination of data and the compilation of the manuscript. Meanwhile, Laxmi Dhar Dwivedi, being the second author, contributed in the drafting of the manuscript, providing with insights, inputs and directions, also discussing the topic at each stage of its conception and development.

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