

‘Wicked Are the Ways of Women’: A Horror-Feminist Reading of Witch Persecution in Shelby Mahurin’s *Serpent & Dove* Trilogy

1. Shonmirin P. A

PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Vels University (VISTAS)

2. Dr. S. Farhana Zabeen

Associate Professor, Department of English, Vels University (VISTAS)

3. Dr. T. Senthamarai

Professor & Head, Department of English, Vels University (VISTAS)

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Abstract:

This paper explores a horror-feminist reading of Shelby Mahurin’s *Serpent & Dove* trilogy, examining the figure of the witch as a symbol of feminist resistance in the face of patriarchal oppression. Central to the analysis is the recurring line “Wicked are the ways of women,” a phrase used by the witch-hunting order known as the Chasseurs to justify the persecution of women. By analysing the intersection of gendered violence, religious authority, and the reclamation of the witch archetype, the study argues that Mahurin critiques institutionalized misogyny and reimagines the witch as a symbol of radical female power. Drawing on feminist theory, horror criticism, and historical accounts of witch trials, Mahurin uses horror as a motif not to villainize female characters, but to spotlight the terrors of patriarchal control. With an emphasis on bodily autonomy, resistance, and female solidarity, the trilogy illustrates how horror can be a predominant medium for feminist storytelling. Mahurin’s witches are feared not for being evil, but for threatening systems of domination. In reclaiming the figure of the witch, the *Serpent & Dove* trilogy contributes to contemporary feminist horror discourse, particularly within young adult literature.

Key themes explored include the horror of enforced gender roles, the patriarchal roots of religious violence, and the redemptive potential of female solidarity and intersectionality. By situating Mahurin’s narrative within the broader tradition of feminist horror, the paper demonstrates how the trilogy critiques institutional misogyny while offering an empowering vision of resistance through magic, community, and narrative reclamation.

Keywords: horror-feminism, witch archetype, patriarchal ideology, monstrous-feminine, female agency, autonomy, sisterhood, Intersectionality.

Introduction

In the tradition of Gothic literature and feminist horror, witches have long symbolized the transgressive woman, an outsider who defies patriarchal boundaries of behaviour, belief, and biology. Shelby Mahurin’s *Serpent & Dove* trilogy; comprising *Serpent & Dove* (2019), *Blood & Honey* (2020), and *Gods & Monsters* (2021), draws upon this symbolism while embedding it within a rich young adult fantasy framework. The trilogy is a young adult fantasy series that intertwines themes of witchcraft, forbidden love, and the struggle between personal autonomy and institutional oppression. Set in the fictional, French-inspired kingdom of Belterra, the narrative follows Louise “Lou” le Blanc, a witch who has forsaken her coven and magic to live in hiding, and Reid Diggory, a devout witch hunter, or a *chasseur* bound by duty to the Church. Their paths cross unexpectedly, leading to a forced marriage that challenges their beliefs and ignites a complex relationship. This allows Mahurin to explore and ultimately dismantle the ideological pedestal of misogyny, religious terror, and gender-based violence.

This paper ventures into horror-feminist reading of the trilogy, focusing on how Mahurin mobilizes horror predominance to critique patriarchal institutions and reclaim the figure of the witch as a feminist icon. By drawing on feminist scholars such as Barbara Creed, Silvia Federici, bell hooks, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, the paper situates Mahurin’s trilogy within a broader discourse that views horror not only as a genre of fear but as a powerful groundwork for feminist intervention.

“Wicked Are the Ways of Women”: The Horror of Patriarchal Ideology

The often-repeated line “Wicked are the ways of women,” uttered by Reid Diggory in *Serpent & Dove* (Mahurin, *Serpent* 47), enfoldes the ideological framework that upholds witch persecution in the trilogy. This phrase reflects a religious worldview that links femininity with sin, echoing real-world historical justifications for witch trials. As Federici explains, “The witch-hunt deepened the division between women and men, and instilled in women a deep sense of distrust toward each other” (Federici 184). Women were targeted in witch hunts to break social power, particularly their roles in community-based healing, sexuality, and reproductive autonomy. Federici reframes the history of capitalism as inseparable from gendered violence, showing how the subjugation of women was not incidental but central to the system’s development. In Mahurin’s world, this suspicion manifests in the religious order of the Chasseurs, whose mission is to eliminate witches and maintain male-dominated social control.

By casting this ideology as a source of horror, Mahurin transforms the familiar terrain of misogyny into a terrifying landscape of institutional violence. The horror, in this sense, is not the witches themselves but the systems that define them as evil. As Barbara Creed argues

in *The Monstrous-Feminine*, horror often reflects societal fears surrounding female power and sexuality, framing the female body as a site of contamination or chaos (Creed 3). Creed argues that female monsters embody cultural fears about the female body, sexuality, and motherhood and critiques how patriarchal narratives use monstrosity to contain and demonize female power, and it calls for a rethinking of how femininity and horror intersect. Mahurin's witches are persecuted precisely because they resist the limitations imposed upon their bodies and spirits by patriarchal dogma. The protagonist Lou actively rejects traditional female roles assigned by society. She's assertive, independent, and sexually autonomous; traits that defy the docile, obedient ideal of women.

Lou le Blanc and the Monstrous-Feminine

Lou, the protagonist, represents what Creed terms the "monstrous-feminine," a woman who defies gendered expectations and is punished for her autonomy. Lou is irreverent, sexually assertive, and fiercely independent. She does not fit the model of submissive womanhood revered by the Church. Her magical power is intimately tied to her bodily autonomy.

Lou's declaration in *Blood & Honey*, "I am Lou le Blanc, and I do not bow" (Mahurin, *Blood* 122), directly confronts the religious and cultural forces that seek her submission. Her journey is one of horror and survival, as she navigates a world intent on erasing her identity. Yet she is not destroyed by this violence. Instead, she becomes a symbol of what bell hooks calls "feminist resistance," a refusal to conform to systems that dehumanize women (hooks 22). Lou's character can be seen as embodying a form of resistance that defies patriarchal and religious systems that seek to control and dehumanize women, particularly women with power. Magic, for her, is an embodiment of personal agency. It is rooted in their will, imagination, and sacrifice. In a society that vilifies witches (as powerful, autonomous women), the use of magic is an act of resistance against both religious and patriarchal oppression. The very fact that witches are hunted reflects how threatening female power is to the patriarchal Church, which relies on strict gender roles and divine justification for male authority.

Forced Marriage and the Horror of Bodily Control

One of the most apparent manifestations of patriarchal control in the trilogy is the forced marriage between Lou and Reid. Initially framed as a solution to a public scandal, the marriage is emblematic of how women's bodies are regulated and commodified within patriarchal systems. Reid's role as a Chasseur infuses him with religious authority, allowing him to dominate Lou both legally and socially. Even within her forced marriage to Reid (a *chasseur*, or witch-hunter), she reclaims power by setting her own boundaries and eventually guiding the emotional and sexual dynamic between them.

Lou begins to challenge his beliefs, forcing him to confront the dehumanizing logic behind religious and institutional oppression. Lou's use of her magic, her assertion of autonomy, and her refusal to apologize for her power demonstrate a feminist defiance of the binary that frames women as either virtuous or dangerous. Her relationship with Reid; a devout *Chasseur*, challenges and ultimately transforms him, forcing him to question the Church's dogma, which has long justified violence against witches.

Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of marriage in *The Second Sex* is especially relevant here. She writes, "Marriage has always been a compromise with servitude" (Beauvoir 470). Lou questioned Reid about the role of a wife, "Am I not considered your property? Do you not have the legal right to do whatever you please with me?" (Mahurin, *Serpent* 336). This resonates with Beauvoir's argument that women have historically been defined in relation to men, rather than as autonomous beings. She examines the social, psychological, historical, and biological factors that have contributed to women's oppression and challenges the notion that gender roles are natural. Mahurin dramatizes this tension by allowing Lou to challenge and ultimately transform the relationship. Her resistance to control, both magical and sexual, reclaims her body as her own.

Lou's insistence that "I'm perfectly capable of making my own choices" (Mahurin, *Serpent* 190) marks a pivotal moment of feminist assertion. Her body becomes a site of both horror and resistance and a place where the violence of patriarchy is enacted, but also where liberation is forged.

Magic as Metaphor for Power, Sacrifice, Female Agency, and Sisterhood

Magic in Mahurin's trilogy is not a whimsical gift but a metaphor for feminine power rooted in sacrifice and suffering. Witches must obey the principle of balance: to gain something, they must give something of equal value. This is often referred to as the "Rule of equivalent exchange." Spells in Mahurin's world demand sacrifice, often in the form of physical pain, highlighting the cost of self-determination in a patriarchal society. Every spell demands a price; witches must sacrifice something personal, whether physical pain, cherished memories, blood, or even a sense. For example, Lou experiences pain or must recall painful memories to cast magic. This forces her to weigh whether her goals are worth the toll on her body and psyche. Witches must constantly decide whether using their power is worth the personal cost, which adds moral complexity to the narrative. For Coco (Cosette Monvoisin), who is one of the most compelling characters, her magic carries significant consequences that highlight a different dimension of Mahurin's magic system. While Lou's magic tends to revolve around manipulation of elements and illusions, Coco practices blood magic, which is darker, riskier, and more socially taboo, even among witches. Every spell she uses physically weakens her, and the more powerful the spell, the more blood (and therefore energy/life force) it costs her. Unlike the patriarchal power of the Church, which is

inherited and institutionalized, magical power must be earned through pain and emotional vulnerability. This aligns with Audre Lorde's assertion that "Women's fear of their power has been used to manipulate and control us" (Lorde 111). This fear is not natural as it is socially imposed, so that women internalize doubt and self-limitation, believing that expressing power makes them dangerous, unfeminine, or unworthy. When women hesitate to act, speak, or lead, they become easier to dominate. Women's power, especially when expressed threatens systems built on male dominance. In Mahurin's world, the witches' power is precisely what makes them dangerous, and thus, feared. However, they reclaim their power consciously and unlearn the fear of their own power, because that fear is a tool of oppression. When women embrace their full selves, they become agents of change, not subjects of control.

Lou's growing mastery of her magic parallels her growing comfort with her identity as a woman who refuses to be contained. The necessity of sacrifice in spellcasting suggests that feminine power comes with a cost, but that cost is also a source of strength. As she explains in *Gods & Monsters*, "Power is neither good nor evil. It simply is" (Mahurin, *Gods* 211). This moral ambiguity challenges the binaries imposed by the Church and reflects the complexity of feminist identity formation.

In the midst of persecution, Lou and Coco build relationships as it is crucial. They provide emotional and strategic support outside of patriarchal norms. This sisterhood stands in contrast to the male-dominated world of the Church, offering a different kind of power; one rooted in mutual support and shared resistance.

The Church as Gothic Villain

Religious institutions have long played a central role in the persecution of witches, and Mahurin's portrayal of the Church aligns with the Gothic tradition of exposing the corruption beneath spiritual authority. The Chasseurs, cloaked in righteousness, enact horrific violence in the name of divine justice. They burn witches, suppress dissent, and enforce a moral code that equates femininity with danger.

Elisabeth Bronfen, in *Over Her Dead Body*, describes how Gothic literature often uses the figure of the "dead or dying woman" to reveal deeper anxieties about societal control (Bronfen 23). She explores how women are often depicted as the symbolic victims of death or as figures of mourning in literature, art, and film and how these portrayals shape our understanding of femininity, examining themes of victimization, passivity, and the association between women and mortality. Death is frequently used as a narrative device to explore the roles and identities of women, particularly how their death can often be tied to their perceived purity or transgression. Bronfen's analysis links these representations to

larger social and cultural contexts, illustrating how women's bodies are subject to control, both symbolically and literally, within these frameworks. However, Mahurin's witches, threatened with death for their independence, embody this metaphor but subvert it through survival. They do not die silently; they fight back, curse their enemies, and refuse to be silenced.

Lou's reflection that the Church "Didn't just punish witches, it silenced us. Made us myths. Ghosts. Curses in the dark" (Mahurin, *Blood* 184) reveals the true horror: erasure. By giving voice to these women, Mahurin counters the historical silencing and offers a space for narrative reclamation.

Reid's Arc: Unlearning Patriarchal Violence

Reid's transformation from devout witch hunter to ally is a critical component of the trilogy's feminist message. His identity is bound to a system that enforces a binary moral code: witches are evil and must be destroyed, while the Church (and its male-led hierarchy) embodies righteousness. This worldview is deeply patriarchal, rooted in control over women, particularly those who defy gender norms through power, knowledge, or autonomy. His journey involves unlearning deeply ingrained misogyny and questioning the institutions that shaped him. Initially, he embodies patriarchal authority; armed, righteous, and emotionally repressed. But through his relationship with Lou, he begins to dismantle these internalized beliefs.

This process mirrors what feminist theorists describe as the necessity of male allyship in dismantling patriarchal systems. Reid's horror is not external but internal; a realization that everything he believed to be good was rooted in violence and fear. His ability to change does not absolve him but demonstrates the possibility of transformation within systems of power.

Reid's actions and beliefs at this point are not born out of personal malice, but rather, social conditioning. His violence is 'institutionalized' and 'sanctioned.' He kills witches not because he understands why they are threats, but because he has been told they are. The horror-feminist lens highlights this as a classic feature of patriarchal violence. The blind obedience to a system that targets women, especially powerful or subversive ones as evident in Reid's point of view: "Witches weren't human. They were vipers. Demons incarnate" (Mahurin, *Serpent* 36).

In *Blood & Honey*, Reid's belief in the Church begins to crumble. The archbishop; his father figure is revealed to be manipulative, cruel, and ultimately complicit in the persecution and torture of witches. Reid must confront the fact that the entire institution he believed in is built on lies, control, and patriarchal dominance. This realization is violent and

traumatic as unlearning patriarchal ideology is not a clean or easy process. Reid's loss of faith is a kind of symbolic death; the death of the 'good man' shaped by toxic systems. He must rebuild his identity, not as a Chasseur, but as someone who chooses not to wield inherited power for harm. The horror of the Church's actions; the mutilation, burning, and execution of women is no longer distant or abstract to him. It is personal.

Reid's arc is central to the series' horror-feminist critique, as it shows how even a well-meaning man can be complicit in structural misogyny, and how love, loss, and self-reflection become instruments of unlearning. He embodies the potential for men to move beyond complicit violence, but only through confronting the institutions, ideologies, and desires that shaped them. He chooses to confront the horrors within himself and the world he once upheld.

Female Solidarity and Intersectionality

One of the most radical elements of Mahurin's trilogy is its emphasis on female solidarity. The bond between Lou and Coco, a blood witch of African descent, represents a model of intersectional feminism. Coco's experiences are shaped not only by gender but by race and cultural difference, offering a more nuanced understanding of oppression. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality emphasizes that systems of power often overlap and compound to create unique forms of discrimination (Crenshaw 1245). Coco faces suspicion even within the witch community, highlighting how marginalized identities are further fractured by internal prejudices. Yet her friendship with Lou is one of mutual trust, resistance, and care.

This solidarity is a form of what bell hooks calls "sisterhood," a political and emotional alliance that strengthens feminist resistance (hooks 18). The witches' collective defiance against patriarchal violence; through shared rituals, protection, and storytelling forms a coven not of fear but of healing.

Reclaiming the Witch Archetype

In *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici argues that the witch-hunts of early modern Europe were not random outbreaks of religious zealotry, but systematic tools of social control that accompanied the rise of capitalism. She writes: "The witch-hunt was an attack on women's resistance to the new capitalist discipline, on their sexuality, their reproductive capacity, their political power" (Federici 170).

Historically, the figure of the witch has served as both a scapegoat and a symbol of radical female potential. Federici further argues that the witch hunt was essential to the rise of capitalism and the subjugation of women's reproductive labour (Federici 103). By reclaiming the witch, Mahurin reclaims a history of resistance.

In the *Serpent & Dove* trilogy, witches are systemically hunted by the Church and the Chasseurs; an explicitly patriarchal institution. Characters like Lou, Coco, and even Morgane challenge the Church not just as individuals, but as representatives of an older, feminine mode of power that predates and defies the authoritarian order. This reflects Federici's framing of witches as symbols of resistance to the privatization and discipline of female bodies under capitalist-patriarchal regimes.

Lou, Coco, and their allies do not hide or renounce their identities as witches. Instead, they embrace them, transforming what was once a curse into a banner of freedom. The trilogy reimagines the witch not as a monster but as a woman who refuses to be controlled. Through Lou and her kin, the trilogy resurrects the witch as a site of feminist hope, horror, resistance, and rebirth. Kristen J. Sollée in *Witches, Sluts, Feminists: Conjuring the Sex Positive* helps frame that the trilogy is not just literary fantasy but feminist allegory, she writes "The witch is undoubtedly the magical woman, the liberated woman, and the persecuted woman, but she can also be everywoman" (Solee 14). Mahurin's witch is not just a suppressed woman, but every woman who refuses to bow, every woman who survives and fights back.

Through the character of Lou le Blanc, Mahurin confronts historical narratives that have demonized powerful women, especially those who defy social norms that suppress women. Lou's journey is emblematic of a feminist reclamation; her magic is not a curse but a catalyst for self-discovery and empowerment (Mahurin, *Gods* 182). As Lou embraces her identity as a witch, she also reclaims her agency against oppressive institutions like the Church and the Dames Blanches, which represent the religious and cultural forces that have long vilified female power (Mahurin, *Gods* 209). In doing so, Mahurin joins a growing body of feminist fiction that transforms the witch from a feared outcast into a symbol of survival, resistance, and transformation.

Conclusion

Shelby Mahurin's *Serpent & Dove* trilogy reclaims the figure of the witch as the central theme of feminist power, subversion, and survival. Through a horror-feminist lens, the series reframes the monstrous not as a quality inherent in women, but as a projection of patriarchal fear. By rendering the true horror in systems of religious dogma, forced conformity, and gendered violence, Mahurin critiques the institutions that have historically persecuted women under the guise of virtue.

The recurring phrase "Wicked are the ways of women" becomes a rallying point for resistance rather than condemnation. As Lou, Coco, and their allies embrace the very identities the Church seeks to destroy, they expose the arbitrariness of moral binaries and the brutality masked by religious authority. Lou's arc, from hunted witch to self-possessed

woman, mirrors the reclamation of the witch archetype itself, that is, once demonized, now defiant.

In weaving together magic, horror, romance, and rebellion, Mahurin crafts a narrative that speaks to contemporary feminist concerns; bodily autonomy, intersectionality, and the subversive power of female solidarity. Her witches are not merely victims but are revolutionaries. They bleed, suffer, and make hard choices, but they never relinquish their agency. Horror, in this context, becomes a feminist tool, not to instill fear in women, but to spotlight the very real terrors they face under patriarchy and to imagine ways of fighting back.

By placing the *Serpent & Dove* trilogy within the genre of feminist horror and speculative fiction, Mahurin offers more than just a fantasy story. She delivers a potent critique of gendered oppression and a passionate vision of liberation. The witch is no longer a monster to be burned; she is a woman to be feared because she dares to be free.

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