

# *Sharp Objects* by Gillian Flynn: Persistence of Patriarchal Motherhood and the Nascence “Odd” Monstrous-Feminine

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## ABSTRACT

The patriarchal motherhood values and the monstrous femininity are reflected in literary works and can be seen in the novel *Sharp Object* published by Gillian Flynn in 2006. Flynn provided to show a new perspective of monstrous femininity. This article analyze the continuity of motherhood tasks through patriarchal culture from Gillian Flynn's thoughts in *Sharp Objects*. This research also analyze the nascency new perspective of Monstrous-Feminine. The purpose of this research is to explain the controversial of patriarchal ideology in motherhood and triggers feminist resistance to existence of monstrous femininity. This research will be conducted using text analysis in *Sharp Objects*. This research use Elaine Showalter's Feminist Literary Criticism theory and Barbara Creed's Monstrous-Feminine theory to look at the patriarchal value of motherhood and monster femininity. This research finds there are still maternal patriarchal values in society that triggered the monstrous femininity in Flynn's works. Flynn not only showed the female monster clearly and publicly, but was also concealed by the presence of angels. The difference in appearance of the monsters brings a new perspective to the monstrous femininity.

**Keywords:** Patriarchal motherhood, Gender role, Monstrous-Feminine, Feminist Literary Criticism, *Sharp Objects*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The closest circle of individuals are family relationships. The whole family is equipped with a father, mother, and child. The father is likened to the head of the family, the mother is the queen in managing the house, and the child complements household life. This ideology has been formed by the existence of a patriarchal culture that has long been used in society. However, with the advancement of civilization and human thought, this position has undergone several changes. Such bisexual couples or also called same-sex couples in some countries are legally allowed to marry. Bisexual couples can choose to adopt a child or do an IVF program. Several other cases that have occurred in society today also involve the role of single parents. A single parent can be defined as a man or woman who takes care of and raises their child alone without being accompanied by their partner. Single parent can occur due to various things, such as divorce or the choice of individuals who do not want to get married but still want to take care of children.

The image of the family has changed dynamically with the development of the world. The image can be seen through the role of gender in the family, each individual plays his role. The role of the father was synonymous with earning a living to meet the needs of the family. In the other side, the role of the mother, who

are identical as caretakers of family members such as cooking, caring for children, and gardening. The role of the mother occurred due to the interference of patriarchal ideology. Patriarchal ideology controls mothers' role to remain in their ideological path so that the ideology of patriarchy has adapted into patriarchal motherhood. Whereas children have a role in learning and obeying both parents, the family has unconsciously given another stigma to parents and children's role, namely making children as savings for their future investment. This concept of children as investment cannot be seen and assessed directly but happens accidentally and is considered a regular thing. However, these roles have shifted and are not tied to the old concept. Some families have adapted to new gender roles. Along with the movement of change carried out by feminist activists in three waves, women can also carry out the tasks and roles carried out by men, and vice versa. The results of this movement also had a significant impact on the family's role, which had been carried out based on patriarchal ideology.

The concept and gender roles have long been embedded in society, even today, particularly in the role of mothers who are required to carry out their roles in line with the principles and ideology of patriarchy, namely not getting out of line and not shifting men's position in controlling aspects of the family. The fear of men

towards women in shifting their positions creates a new view of women. According to Barbara Creed as an observer of women in novels and films, in her book entitled *Monstrous-Feminine* [1], men's fear of women in shifting their position is by giving a terrible picture of women. Monstrosity against women was also created to restore patriarchal ideology in human bodies and thoughts towards women. As in the story of *Maleficent* [2], a film directed by Robert Stromberg and inspired by *La Belle au Bois Dormant* by Charles Perrault and *Little Briar Rose* by The Brothers Grimm. The film depicts *Maleficent* as an evil witch. Nevertheless, the real story behind this description result from of the king's greed to have the highest position in the country. So that the choice to corner and blame the witch became the path chosen by the king.

In her book, Creed also mentions the Greek mythology of Medusa as an example of female monstrosity. In the story, Medusa is depicted as a woman with hair in the shape of a snake who can turn a man into stone, looking directly into her eyes. Creed said that Medusa's hair is a representation of female monstrosities. "The sight of the Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone ... As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase 'monstrous-feminine' emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity [1]. On Medusa's head, is one of the male fears of female genitalia. The fear of women is created when a woman shows her strength (vagina and uterus).

In today's modern era, one form of monstrosity inherent in women can be seen at the education level. Women with a higher education history than men are considered to be 'unsolders'. This woman with a higher level of education is considered an ambitious and terrible person. Terrible in the sense of powerful women. The monstrosity of women is attached to women taking higher education levels such as undergraduate degrees and so on. This is due to men's fear of the high level of intelligence of women. This fear can include social, political, domestic, and etcetera. As explained in the previous two paragraphs, women's monstrosity can also be seen in various other literary works, such as films and novels. One of them is in the novel by Gillian Flynn, a female author who continues to write novels about women and family.

Gillian Flynn wrote three novels entitled *Sharp Objects* [3], *Dark Places* [4], and *Gone Girl* [5]. The three novels tell the story of women as the main character and tend to psychological illness. The three novels also have the same tendency in setting the atmosphere and plot twist. Also, Flynn's writing style in her three novels has something in common: telling about family problems. The impression of feminine women is also shown in the three novels. Although Flynn's admission that she is not a feminist, her written work contains a women's movement to be free from the shackles of unfair rules for women. The novel *Sharp Objects*, which tells

about the life of a wealthy family in Wind Gap who still maintains a Victorian lifestyle and keeps dark secrets about strange murders in the suburbs. Camille Preaker, as the main character in the novel, must return to her hometown of Wind Gap and reunite with the mother; she avoided meeting Adora Crellin and the half-sister she had never met, Amma Crellin. In her first novel, Flynn provides a new nuance in the novel with the genre, detective thriller, which is known to have a typical story with a tense shock plot. Through his work, Flynn has provided novelty in a novel with psychology genre thriller; novel *Sharp Objects* has not been studied using patriarchy, motherhood, and representation of female monstrosities. However, the patriarchy of motherhood and female monstrosity has been carried out in some previous studies.

In previous research on monstrous feminine, the first research was conducted by Indrawan Dwisetia Suhendi, Aquarini Priyatna, and Teddi Muhtadin with the title "*Representation of Women's Monstrosity in the Novel Mantra Lilith by Hendri Yulius*" [6]. By using the theory *Monstrous Feminine*, this research aims to see the representation of female monstrosities in the novel *Mantra Lilith*. In this study, they found that female sexuality was described as a snake as a punishment for women who did not want to live in a cultural environment with a patriarchal ideology. Anna Wing Bo Tso also conducted the second study on female monstrosity. Tso's research title is "*Representations of The Monstrous Feminine in Selected Works of CS Lewis, Roald Dahl, and Philip Pullman*" [7]. In her research on female monstrosity, Tso found that a grey position is a place for characters made with very antagonistic characters. With the blurring of the antagonistic woman's position, in line with the references cited and written by Creed regarding the definition of a monster [1].

In addition to previous research on women's monstrosity, research on patriarchy in motherhood has also been conducted to reference this study. Elizabeth Langland conducted these studies with the title "*Patriarchal Ideology and Marginal Motherhood in Victorian Novels by Women*" [8]. Langland's research is published in the journal *Women and Early Fiction* with a research focus on novels. Langland's research results reveal an intense dialogue between girls who adhere to patriarchal ideology with their marginalized mothers. The dialogue is to be free from the mythologies of the Victorian era ideologies and to interrogate them with the narrative form of conventions.

Research on *Sharp Objects* has also been done a lot before. As in the research of Banatul Qodariah, Ainur Rohmah, and Sugiyani Natalia with the title "*The Major Characters in Gillian Flynn Novel 'Sharp Objects' (A Psychoanalysis Freud)*" [9]. Using Sigmund Freud's theory of Psychoanalysis, the results of this study found two types of psychological conflict due to the existence of the id, ego, and superego with unstable conditions. The two conflicts are classified as conflict approach-avoidance and avoidance-avoidance. Other studies by

analyzing the main female characters, respectively, have also been conducted by Canon Elder Lane with the title "*Unlikability and Female Villains in the Works of Gillian Flynn*" [10] and Risma Ary Primaadi with the title "*The Representation of Phallic Fixation Through Camille Character in Gillian Flynn's Sharp Objects*" [11].

Various previous studies helped complete this research by having a research equation, namely using the theory Monstrous Feminine. However, this equation is limited only to strengthen the theory Monstrous Feminine that will be carried out in this study. Previous research on patriarchal motherhood is also used in this study to help support the historical foundation of patriarchal ideology that has existed since the Victorian era. Whereas previous research concentrated on Gillian Flynn's novel, it helped this study analyse female characters in the novel *Sharp Objects*. With various previous research results related to the novel *Sharp Objects*, it is known that this novel has never been studied before with analysis through the theory of Monstrous Feminine and patriarchal motherhood. In the novel *Sharp Objects*, Feminist Literary Criticism has not been carried out, which will later become a tool to prove the existence of monstrous feminine and the ideology of patriarchy of motherhood. It is hoped that this research can also be a reference for further research on monstrous feminine or research on other Gillian Flynn's novels. Using the theory of Monstrous Feminine from Barbara Creed [1] will help answer questions in this study. Barbara Creed states that monstrous feminine is a terrible image of women both in body and femininity due to the construction of a patriarchal culture [1]. According to Barbara Creed, in her book *Monstrous-Feminine*, female monstrosity states that there are seven types of female monstrosities, namely woman as archaic mother, monstrous womb, vampire, witch, possessed body, monstrous mother, and castrator. The various types of female monstrosities can be concluded that the depiction of women can lead to disgusting and gruesome images.

Furthermore, to answer this research question regarding the existence of patriarchal ideology motherhood, the patriarchal ideology's understanding will be used motherhood. Patriarchal ideology is an idea of patriarchy that spreads to various aspects of life, which has given more advantages and a high position to the male gender. It is undeniable that this patriarchal ideology also penetrates the household sector, more precisely to regulate the role of mothers in the household. The mother's role is arranged in such a way as to free men from roles that degrade them from women. So that with the unwritten rules regarding the position of men being higher than women and regulating the duties and responsibilities of women in carrying out the role of mothers, the shackles of the patriarchal ideology of motherhood are presented in society even today. Using the feminist literary criticism approach in this study, Elaine Showalter's explanation of Feminist Literary Criticism will be used as a conclusion to all the analyst's texts that have been found previously. Feminist literary

critic belonging to Elaine Showalter states in her article entitled "*Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*" [12] that feminist literary criticism has a purpose in interpreting and describing meaning in the literary world as a form of realizing equality between men and women through writing.

Thus, the use of the theory and approach described in the previous paragraph is appropriate in answering this research question. Because in the novel *Sharp Objects*, women's monstrosity is presented indirectly, and the patriarchal ideology of motherhood still applies in the text. However, as a female author, Flynn provides texts with the thriller genre and provides criticism of her femininity in the text. So that in the discussion of this research, it does not only discuss the ideology of patriarchy, motherhood, and representation of monstrous feminine. However, it will also discuss feminist literary criticism as an approach to reading the text closely. This study uses a descriptive analysis research method with a feminist literary criticism approach. The primary data used is the novel *Sharp Objects* Gillian Flynn's published in 2006. By explaining the use of the theory Monstrous Feminine and the ideology of patriarchal motherhood previously described, the novel *Sharp Objects* will be analyzed and find evidence through text regarding the existence of patriarchy of motherhood and representation of monstrous feminine. The research was then carried out through the library method and then performed a close reading with a collection of quotations on novels related to motherhood's patriarchal ideology and monstrous feminine. The collection of quotations will be analyzed in detail so that the analysis results can prove that there is patriarchy of motherhood and the monstrous feminine in the text. At the end of this research, we will conclude the analysis that has been done previously.

## 2. ANALYSIS

### 2.1. Patriarchal Motherhood and Gender Role

Patriarchal ideology has entered various aspects of life, as in household life and gender roles in it. It can be seen that there is an ideology in the division of family roles. Until modern times, the roles of husband and wife are still clearly divided into different sides where husband's role as head of the family is above the role of the wife. The head of family only monitors the wife's role, who is also the child's primary caregiver. This system that regulates family roles is controlled by patriarchal ideology, and feminists try to escape from the bonds of control that suppress women.

Referring to the statement of a feminist, Adrienne Rich [13] that "all forms of women's movements in the domestic sphere are controlled in such a way by men." Rich believes that women in the domestic sphere have been arranged in such a way to keep walking on the path set by the patriarchal ideology. Under their control, patriarchy has controlled and governed motherhood as one aspect that will remain under their rule—maintaining

the integrity of patriarchal system. In the novel *Sharp Objects* Gillian Flynn's, the ideology of patriarchy in the realm of motherhood is shown openly. The reason is, the patriarchy that is presented does not seem to control the storyline tightly. However, several scenes of the characters prove that traces of the patriarchal ideology used in the previous story in the plot, as in the confession of Camille Preaker as the daughter of Adora Crellin. Camille has memories of how her parents raised Adora. "The town loved her, she was like a cake topping: the most beautiful, sweet girl Wind Gap had ever raised. Her parents, my grandparents, had owned the pig farm and half the houses around it, and kept my mother under the same strict rules they applied to their workers: no drinking, no smoking, no cursing, church service mandatory" [3]. In this quote, Adora is shown as a child who is loved by both his parents and the environment Wind Gap. Adora was raised under strict rules by her family. For example, with the enactment of rules not to drink alcohol, smoking is prohibited, it is prohibited to use harsh words and must to carry out religious activities in the church. From generation to generation, this is also applied by Adora to his family. Adora gave the same rules to Amma but did not apply to Camille because she preferred to leave Adora and go to Chicago.

## **2.2. Motherhood and Represent of Monstrous-Feminine**

Monstrosity can be attached to women because it is considered a threat to the patriarchal ideological system and order [14]. Patriarchy considers that women can be a threat to the continuity of patriarchal ideology. This threat can be seen when women have a higher and broader position or role than men. As one form of effort in realizing the sustainability of patriarchal values in society, monstrosity is created for women who are seen as a threat. This effort is to provide a terrible picture of women. Even this image will lead to an assessment of women as disgusting figures.

In the novel *Sharp Objects*, Adora's image as a terrible woman is not shown directly. Adora is described as having an elegant noble female character. So that Adora's appearance as a terrible character is not visible and the surrounding environment does not suspect her at all as a murderer. As explained in the previous paragraph regarding female monstrosity, Adora's character is created as a perfect mother figure. Adora's perfection makes her a woman who must always be seen doing all forms of perfect motherhood.

As a mother character, Adora is depicted as a mother figure who is almost perfect for her environment. Adora's perfection as a mother can be seen in her love for her child and others. Camille, her daughter, did not feel the kindness that Adora did in caring for and raising children. As if Adora did not recognize Camille's existence. This made Camille gloomy, and she saw Adora's kindness only for her beloved child. So, Camille tries to get Adora's attention so she can feel her affection too. One of

the mother's roles performed on Camille is paying attention to her health. Adora pays more attention to her children when it comes to their health. "I remember being a kid, rejecting all those tablets and medicines, and losing her by doing so," [3]. In the quote, Camille has experience with the way Adora always gives drugs to her. However, Camille felt that something was wrong. Nevertheless, Adora still thinks that Camille is just a stubborn child and does not want to obey Adora's wishes. Her desire to provide these medicines was based on how much Adora paid attention to of her children's health.

Adora's behaviour in pouring out her affection as a parent was also considered unnatural by one of the nurses. The nurse had been watching Adora's behaviour during Marian's treatment. The nurse stated how Adora gave her affection to Marian in an unnatural way. "Mother shows no interest in Marian when she is well, in fact, seems to punish her. Mother holds child only when she is sick or crying. I and several other nurses, who for political reasons choose not to sign their names to my statement, believe strongly the child, as well as her sister, should be removed from the home for further observation. "Baverly Van Lumm," [3].

Adora's figure with the image of a perfect mother is a form of monstrosity. Adora's change in behaviour behind her kindness has provided a vague assessment that being a good mother is an obligation for every woman. When Adora slowly kills Marian through the drugs she gives, this behaviour simultaneously portrays the mother's role as a terrible figure. Adora's behaviour was also carried out based on the pressure she received as a result of the community's assessment of the perfect motherhood. The monstrosity given to Adora's role is seen as a form of overthrowing women. Women who undergo maternal roles are considered to be following the values and ideology of the patriarchal culture. Require women to become and carry out maternal roles properly and educate. However, this monstrosity in the novel *Sharp Objects* is masked by Adora's angelic behaviour so that the monstrosity is well covered in these characters.

## **2.3. Feminist Literary Criticism**

Women's struggles to participate in and contribute to the world of literature are quite complex. At first, women were not allowed to write or read. The main task of women is to only take care of household needs, so it is useless for women know equal to men. This is inseparable from the interference of the patriarchal ideology that has long bound people's minds. However, this is gradually shifting and changing, along with the many movements and struggles of women giving opinions and demanding equal rights with men. Thus, there have been many female authors who are free to write and work in modern times.

One of the Feminist Literary Criticism theorists was Elaine Showalter. This critique was created based on a woman's experience as an author to speak out about her femininity. As is well known, Showalter [12] explains

that Feminist Literary Criticism will show the same position between men and women in creating literary works. Therefore, female literary criticism is important enough to understand the meaning in the writing of female authors.

Gillian Flynn is no exception, starting his work by carrying out the murder mystery genre. In the literary works that he has written, Flynn generally is interested in writing stories about women and family problems as a common thread in each of his stories. As a female author, Gillian Flynn does not only provide narration for entertainment. Flynn also shared his thoughts and criticisms about women, which have been taboo enough to be discussed in society. One example of a quote in this novel shows a causal relationship between Adora and Camille. This quote means that Camille accuses Adora of being the cause of the fear and trauma she has experienced so far. "I blame my mother. A child weaned on poison considers harm a comfort," [3]. Through this quote, Flynn criticizes the image of women as the cause of trauma to their children. The traumatic events that Camille experienced were based on motherly deeds by Adora. Adora's painstaking kindness in taking care of her child in maintaining health has harmed Camille's childhood memory. However, this seems to give a bad score to the parenting style carried out by women in carrying out their role as mothers.

Through the novel, Flynn explained that women, with all their roles assigned to them, will always experience criticism and demand perfection in being women. He criticizes women 's perfection in carrying out the role of a mother as a form of a double burden on women. Adora, who has responsibilities and obligations as a mother, makes her children 'things' that she must raise and take care of perfectly so that she gets a perfect mother's assessment. However, these ambitious attitudes and actions have taken away her motherly feelings for her child, especially Camille.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Patriarchal ideology in motherhood occurs from generation to generation in the Adora family. Women are required to be pious and look perfect for the community. In the novel *Sharp Objects*, Flynn, as a female author, shows that patriarchy's ideology in motherhood still exists. Through the character Adora, motherhood is clearly shown as a task done by women without any interference from men. So that with the patriarchal ideology in motherhood, placing women as women who are required to be able to carry out all forms of role demands in the household, especially in the role of motherhood.

The representation of women with demands to fulfill the role of mother perfectly has given birth to a women's monstrosity. Based on the patriarchal ideology of gender roles in motherhood, mothers who do not follow the perfection of patriarchal ideology will be assessed as a female monstrosity. In the novel *Sharp Objects*, the

female monstrosity is attached to the role of the mother. Adora is represented as a mother who was born and raised to perfection. Surrounding with privilege life, the society expect and judging Adora as the role model of perfect family should be. Therefore, for the continuity of the patriarchal ideology, the Adora character must act and act as a perfect mother and is constructed as a monstrosity. The difference in the representation of the monstrous feminine in the novel *Sharp Objects* lies in the packaging of the character Adora, who is shown as an angelic mother from her environmental assessment. The monstrosity of women is behind the kindness that Adora did as a mother. With this camouflage, the author criticizes that literal motherhood will still be considered non-monstrous even though she has committed an act that is not normally correct.

Through feminist literary criticism carried out in this study, it can be seen that there is a continuity of patriarchal ideology in the role of motherhood. The author wants to break the patriarchal ideology where women who do not follow the patriarchal order are monstrous. However, women's role as mothers cannot be assessed and seen only from a patriarchal point of view.

### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the study conception and design of the research. Siti Alifah Tamir and Mina Elfira performed material preparation, data collection and analysis. This research completely checked by all authors with several revision and editing. All authors discuss and accomplished this research as the final result.

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