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The Witches and the Female Power in *Macbeth*: Challenging Patriarchal Control through the Supernatural

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Modern Languages in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts in English

Department of English and Modern Languages

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at Independent University, Bangladesh.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Approval

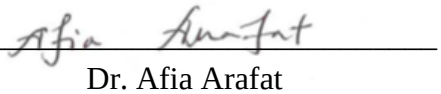
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Ethics Statement

This research adheres to established academic standards of integrity, transparency, and responsible scholarship. As a literary analysis of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the study relies exclusively on published texts and secondary sources, and therefore does not involve human participants, personal data, or ethical risks related to confidentiality or consent. All ideas, interpretations, and quotations drawn from existing scholarship have been properly cited to avoid plagiarism and to acknowledge intellectual contributions. The analysis has been conducted with fairness and critical objectivity, ensuring that differing scholarly perspectives are represented accurately without misinterpretation. Additionally, the study avoids cultural or gender bias by engaging sensitively with issues of patriarchy and female agency. Overall, the research maintains ethical responsibility by upholding honesty, academic rigor, and respect for existing literature throughout the study.

Abstract

Feminist reading of *Macbeth* still now garner curiosity and interest among the scholars all around the globe. This study examines the representation of the witches in *Macbeth* as embodiments of subversive female power that challenge patriarchal authority through the supernatural. Drawing on feminist and psychoanalytic theories, including the works of Gilbert and Gubar, and Jessica Benjamin, the research explores how the witches destabilize traditional gender roles and disrupt the rigid structures of male dominance in early modern society. Rather than portraying them as mere agents of chaos, this paper argues that the witches function as symbolic figures who expose the fragility of patriarchal control. Their ambiguous identities, prophetic authority, and resistance to normative femininity position them as powerful catalysts within the play. Ultimately, the study reinterprets the witches as central figures in negotiating power, agency, and gendered resistance in Shakespearean tragedy.

Keywords: Patriarchy; Feminism; Supernatural; Female power;

Dedication

This Thesis is dedicated to those whose unwavering encouragement and support have been the foundation which guided me throughout my scholarly endeavor. My deepest gratitude to my beloved parents whose endless love, sacrifices, support and faith in my potential and effort have been the driving force behind my achievements. To my professors and mentors, whose knowledge, feedback, and inspiration have shaped not just this thesis, but my growth as a student and an individual. Writing this thesis would have not been possible without the love, support and faith of everyone who stood by me. Thank you.

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Glossary

Agency	The capacity of an individual to act independently and make their own choices. In this study, agency refers to how female figures, particularly the witches, exert influence over events and challenge male authority
Ambiguity	The presence of multiple meanings or interpretations. The witches' prophecies are ambiguous, allowing different readings that destabilize certainty and control.
Feminine Power	Forms of influence or authority associated with female figures, often marginalized in patriarchal systems. In this thesis, it refers to both overt and subtle ways women challenge male dominance.
Patriarchy	A social system in which men hold primary power and dominate roles of leadership, authority, and control. The play reflects and critiques patriarchal structures through its treatment of female characters.
Supernatural	Phenomena beyond the natural world or human understanding. In Macbeth, the supernatural is embodied by the witches and serves as a key force disrupting social and political order.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Macbeth is one of William Shakespeare's most complex tragedies, dramatizing ambition, moral corruption, political violence, and the instability of power. Set in medieval Scotland, the play portrays a rigid patriarchal society where authority, kingship, and legitimacy are defined through masculine lineage, martial strength, and hierarchical order. Political power in the play operates within a system that privileges male dominance and suppresses female autonomy. Yet within this male-dominated world, Shakespeare introduces the Weird Sisters whose presence disrupts the logic of patriarchal control. The witches occupy a subtle position in the play. They are neither fully human nor fully demonic, neither traditionally feminine nor conventionally masculine. which immediately destabilizes fixed gender categories. They exist outside domestic structures, outside marriage, outside lineage, and outside political institutions. Unlike Lady Macbeth, whose power operates within the domestic sphere and through her husband, the witches possess autonomous agency. Their authority derives not from institutional recognition but from supernatural knowledge and prophetic speech.

This thesis argues that the witches represent a form of female power that challenges patriarchal containment through supernatural agency. By existing beyond biological reproduction, marriage, and domestic obedience, they resist the structures that define women's value in the play. Their power lies in language, prophecy, and manipulation of perception—tools that destabilize the masculine ideals of rational control and martial dominance. Through their influence over Macbeth, they disrupt the political order and symbolically threaten the continuity of patriarchal lineage.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Scholarly discussions of Macbeth have traditionally focused on themes of ambition, fate, kingship, and moral degeneration. The witches are frequently interpreted as embodiments of supernatural evil or as dramatic devices that initiate Macbeth's tragic downfall. In many readings, they function primarily as catalysts for action rather than as subjects of critical inquiry. Even within feminist criticism, attention has often centered more prominently on Lady Macbeth as the play's primary example of female transgression. The problem addressed in this study lies in the limited examination of the witches as autonomous agents of female power within a patriarchal framework. While critics acknowledge their narrative importance, fewer studies analyze how their supernatural authority challenges the ideological foundations of masculine dominance. The patriarchal system depicted in Macbeth relies on clear gender distinctions, hereditary succession, and the association of masculinity with violence and control. The witches destabilize each of these elements.

First, they undermine gender stability through their ambiguous physical appearance and behavior. Their refusal to conform to traditional femininity positions them as threats to social order. Second, their prophecies interfere with hereditary succession, particularly through the prediction that Banquo's descendants will inherit the throne. This prophecy disrupts Macbeth's expectation of a secure male lineage and introduces uncertainty into the patriarchal system of inheritance. Third, their manipulation of language influences Macbeth's perception of manhood. By framing ambition and violence as pathways to destiny, they subtly reshape his understanding of masculine honor. Despite these destabilizing actions, the witches are often reduced to symbols of chaos rather than recognized as figures who reveal structural weaknesses in patriarchy. This study addresses that oversight by analyzing how their supernatural power represents a form of resistance. Their marginalization does not eliminate their agency, but it intensifies it. By operating outside official structures of power, they demonstrate that authority

can be challenged from the margins. Therefore, the central problem is the insufficient recognition of the witches as embodiments of subversive female agency. This research seeks to reinterpret their role by examining how their supernatural presence exposes and challenges patriarchal control in the play.

1.2 Research Question and Hypothesis

This study is guided by a central research question that seeks to examine the relationship between supernatural agency and patriarchal power in *Macbeth*. The primary question asks: how do the witches use their supernatural authority to resist and destabilize patriarchal dominance, and what does their portrayal reveal about early modern anxieties surrounding female power? Rather than treating the witches merely as instruments of fate, this research investigates how their ambiguous gender, prophetic speech, and marginal social position function as forms of symbolic resistance. The inquiry also considers how their existence outside marriage, motherhood, and domestic obedience challenges the ideological foundations of a system that defines women primarily through reproductive and submissive roles. Furthermore, it explores how their manipulation of language reshapes Macbeth's understanding of masculinity, ambition, and legitimacy. The witches expose the fragility of patriarchal identity. Through this line of questioning, the study aims to reposition the witches at the center of the play's gender and power dynamics rather than at its margins.

This research hypothesizes that the witches embody a suppressed yet powerful form of feminine agency that threatens the stability of the patriarchal order. However, the play portrays them as unnatural and demonic. Their representation reflects cultural fears of autonomous women rather than inherent moral corruption. Their supernatural authority symbolizes the disruptive potential of women who refuse to conform to social expectations. They reveal that patriarchal control is not absolute but vulnerable to symbolic and psychological subversion, as

it influences Macbeth's ambition and unsettles the structure of hereditary succession. Thus, this study argues that the witches' resistance operates indirectly through prophecy, ambiguity, and manipulation, yet effectively exposes the instability of masculine political authority.

1.3 Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, as it is most suitable for exploring the complex relationships between gender, power, and the supernatural in a literary text. Qualitative research emphasizes interpretation, meaning-making, and in-depth textual analysis rather than numerical measurement, making it particularly appropriate for literary and cultural studies. As John W. Creswell argues that qualitative research is used when a study seeks to understand how individuals or texts construct meaning within specific social and cultural contexts. Similarly, Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln emphasize that qualitative methods allow researchers to interpret symbolic representations, language, and discourse elements that are central to literary analysis.

In my paper, the primary method applied is close reading, which involves detailed textual analysis of *Macbeth* to examine how the witches' language, actions, and representations construct forms of female power. Close reading enables the identification of patterns of ambiguity, symbolism, and linguistic strategies that contribute to the destabilization of patriarchal authority. The study also incorporates secondary qualitative data drawn from scholarly articles, books, and theoretical texts, including works by H.M Doak, Favila Marina, and Vivek Malik, as well as feminist and psychoanalytic theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Jessica Benjamin. These sources are analyzed interpretively to support the argument and to situate the research within existing academic discourse.

The use of a qualitative approach is particularly justified because the research does not aim to generalize findings or produce measurable data. Instead, it seeks to provide a theoretical and interpretive understanding of how supernatural female figures function as agents of resistance within a patriarchal framework. Therefore, qualitative methodology is the most appropriate approach for capturing the depth, ambiguity, and complexity of the text.

1.4 Research Gap

Macbeth has generated extensive critical scholarship on ambition, kingship, morality, and the supernatural, the witches are still predominantly interpreted through limited analytical frameworks. Scholars such as Doak and Malik primarily view the witches as psychological catalysts who awaken Macbeth's latent ambition rather than as independent agents of power (325;159). Similarly, Favila emphasizes the role of "magical thinking" in shaping Macbeth's consciousness, suggesting that the witches function more as reflections of internal desire than as autonomous figures(12). While these interpretations are significant, they tend to reduce the witches to narrative or psychological instruments, thereby overlooking their potential as embodiments of gendered resistance.

Furthermore, critics like Spencer and Marler acknowledge the witches' connection to alternative systems of authority and their role in destabilizing moral and political order(5;8). However, their analyses often remain focused on symbolic or ideological disruption without fully examining how this disruption connects with patriarchal gender structures. Even within feminist criticism, scholarly attention has been disproportionately directed toward Lady Macbeth as the primary site of female transgression, leaving the witches comparatively underexplored as collective figures of female agency.

As a result, a critical gap exists in the integrated analysis of the witches as autonomous agents of subversive female power operating through the supernatural. As subversive female power

they create conflict in the patriarchal structure through their language, prophecies. Previous studies have not sufficiently examined how their ambiguous gender identity, marginal social position, and linguistic authority function together as a form of resistance to patriarchal control.

This study addresses that gap by repositioning the witches at the center of the play's gender and power dynamics, arguing that they do not merely reflect patriarchal anxiety but actively expose and destabilize its structural foundations. From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's argument that gender is a social construct (283) and with Gilbert and Gubar's claim that powerful women are often represented as monstrous figures to contain their threat to patriarchal order (34).

1.5 Limitations

This study, while offering a focused reinterpretation of the witches in *Macbeth*, is subject to several limitations. First, the research is primarily based on qualitative textual analysis and close reading, which means the interpretations are inherently subjective and dependent on selected theoretical perspectives. Although the frameworks of Simone de Beauvoir, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Jessica Benjamin provide strong analytical grounding, other relevant theoretical approaches—such as historicism or performance studies—have not been fully explored.

Second, the study focuses specifically on the witches and, to a lesser extent, Lady Macbeth, which limits a broader examination of other characters and power dynamics within the play. As a result, the analysis may overlook alternative interpretations related to class, politics, or religion. Additionally, the research relies on a limited range of secondary sources, which may restrict the diversity of critical perspectives. Finally, the study does not incorporate empirical or audience-response approaches, which could provide insight into how modern readers or

viewers interpret female power in the play. These limitations suggest that the findings, while meaningful, are not exhaustive and remain open to further expansion and reinterpretation.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* presents a dramatic world where supernatural forces shape human action, moral perception, and political order. Scholars often describe the witches as more than isolated fantasy figures. They function as symbolic agents of fate, psychology, and social fear. This chapter establishes the critical foundation for analyzing the role of the supernatural and female power in *Macbeth*. It examines how previous scholars interpret the witches and Lady Macbeth in relation to psychological influence, patriarchal authority, and gendered power.

2.1 Supernatural Power and Psychological Influence

Spencer traces the origins of the concept of *wyrd* (fate) from Anglo-Saxon literature to Shakespeare's tragedy, arguing that the Weird Sisters embody a tension between fate and free will (3-4). She suggests that the witches symbolize both pagan beliefs and early modern concerns about moral responsibility (5). Through their cryptic prophecies, they blur the distinction between fate and human choice. As a result, they represent an alternative order outside Christian patriarchal logic. Spencer further interprets Lady Macbeth's invocation to "unsex me" as an attempt to appropriate this supernatural authority. By aligning herself with forces beyond social and religious order, Lady Macbeth symbolically crosses boundaries separating femininity from power. Spencer's reading therefore positions the supernatural as a domain in which denied forms of female influence become imaginable.

Malik similarly examines the supernatural as a catalyst for inner psychological conflict. In his comparison of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, he argues that Shakespeare uses supernatural figures not to impose evil but to awaken hidden desires already present within the protagonists (158). In *Macbeth*, the witches' prophecies do not create ambition but intensify it (159). Their strange

appearance and ambiguous language reinforce this function. Their minimal direct action further positions them as mirrors rather than controllers. Malik, therefore, sees the supernatural as a reflective agency exposing hidden moral weaknesses. This interpretation is particularly significant because it frames supernatural women as instruments that reveal instability within male authority rather than simply serving as external villains.

Marler develops this argument further by viewing the supernatural as a deconstructive force that destabilizes moral binaries and ideological certainty. She argues that the witches operate within a symbolic system that exposes contradictions in Elizabethan beliefs about divine order, gender hierarchy, and political order (6-7). Rather than functioning as simple tempters, they reveal the fragility of structures that claim to be absolute. Their prophecies unsettle distinctions between natural and unnatural, moral and immoral, divine and human. Marler's reading suggests that the supernatural in *Macbeth* is deeply embedded in psychological and cultural systems, functioning simultaneously as social commentary and dramatic tool.

Favila focuses on the interaction between supernatural prophecies and human consciousness (2). She suggests that the witches evoke Macbeth's imagination rather than directing his actions, transforming prophecy into a psychological process. Their influence operates through what she describes as "magical thinking," a mental state in which imagination reshapes moral reasoning. Favila also emphasizes Lady Macbeth's active engagement with supernatural forces, suggesting that she consciously invokes them to escape the limitations of traditional femininity. However, Favila ultimately shows that this supernatural empowerment is unstable, as guilt and moral awareness eventually undermine both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. The supernatural thus becomes a temporary psychological space where suppressed ambitions emerge but cannot remain secure.

Earlier criticism by Doak offers a foundational perspective by distinguishing between supernatural agency and human interpretation. He argues that Shakespeare's witches function primarily as embodiments of belief and superstition rather than independent forces of evil (321). Their role is to reveal how imagination, fear, and desire shape human action. In this reading, the supernatural is less about metaphysical reality and more about the human tendency to interpret events through symbolic narratives. Doak's interpretation reinforces the idea that the witches reveal internal conflict rather than imposing external control.

Kranz shifts attention from psychological meaning to linguistic and aesthetic function. He argues that the witches' power emerges through poetic rhythm, repetition, and sound patterns that echo across the play (346). Their language blurs the boundary between human and supernatural speech, creating thematic coherence rather than explicit ideological argument. Kranz therefore establishes the supernatural within Shakespeare's dramatic structure, suggesting that the witches influence the audience's perception through sound and form as much as through narrative action.

Taken together, these scholars demonstrate that the supernatural in *Macbeth* functions simultaneously as a psychological force, a symbolic structure, and a cultural critique. Rather than being purely remarkable figures, the witches become interpretive devices through which Shakespeare explores moral ambiguity, the instability of authority, and the limits of human control.

In addition to functioning as a symbolic and psychological force, the supernatural in *Macbeth* also operates as a narrative structure that organizes the play's momentum from order to chaos. The witches do not merely predict events, but shape the pattern of the drama by appearing at key moments when moral certainty is weakened. Their speeches unsettle the political order, suggesting that supernatural knowledge emerges most powerfully in moments of social

vulnerability. This idea shows that the supernatural is not external to the human world but embedded within it. The ambiguity of the witches' language allows multiple interpretations of their authority. Because their prophecies are never fully explained, they invite both characters and audiences to participate in constructing meaning. This interpretive openness strengthens their dramatic influence, as their power lies less in direct intervention than in their ability to provoke imagination and speculation. In this sense, the supernatural becomes a powerful force that reshapes perception and highlights how belief itself can function as a mechanism of power within the play.

2.2 Patriarchy, Authority, and Social Order

While earlier critics focus on psychological and symbolic interpretations, other scholars extend this discussion into the political domain. Beyond their supernatural power, the witches and Lady Macbeth also operate within a political framework shaped by early modern patriarchal ideology. Scholars often emphasize how their presence unsettles established hierarchies of kingship, morality, and masculine authority. The supernatural thus becomes intertwined with questions of governance, legitimacy, and social order.

Spencer argues that the witches challenge Christian patriarchal authority by representing an alternative system of authority rooted in pagan concepts of fate (6). Their knowledge appears to replace political hierarchy. This implies that masculine rule is not absolute but subject to forces beyond its control. Spencer suggests that this challenges the ideological stability of monarchy, since Macbeth's kingship emerges not from divine right but from prophecy delivered by marginal female figures. This represents power as something negotiable rather than fixed within patriarchal structures.

Marler similarly interprets the witches as agents who expose contradictions within early modern systems of governance. She argues that their prophecies dismantle the idea of a stable

divine order by revealing how easily authority can be manipulated (8). In this sense, the supernatural does not simply threaten individuals but questions the ideological foundations of monarchy itself. Marler's reading highlights how fear of disorder becomes intertwined with fear of female influence.

Malik contributes to this discussion by emphasizing that the witches expose the fragility of masculine self-control (160). Because their power lies primarily in suggestion, Macbeth's downfall reveals the vulnerability of patriarchal authority to internal desire. Malik therefore suggests that the witches function as narrative tools demonstrating that political instability originates not from external threats but from psychological weakness within male authority.

Doak's analysis highlights an important historical context by showing that Shakespeare's audience would have associated supernatural women with moral and political danger. He argues that witch figures in early modern literature often symbolized fears about social chaos, particularly when women appeared to possess knowledge or influence outside male supervision (325). From this perspective, the witches' presence in *Macbeth* reflects broader cultural anxieties about maintaining patriarchal control.

Favila continues this discussion by examining how Lady Macbeth directly challenges patriarchal expectations of female obedience. Her solicitation of supernatural forces represents an attempt to surpass the limitations imposed on women within early modern society (15). However, Favila notes that the narrative ultimately reasserts social order through her psychological collapse, suggesting that female access to power is portrayed as dangerous but temporary.

Across these studies, patriarchy emerges not as a stable system but as one continually threatened by imagination, prophecy, and gendered fear. The supernatural therefore becomes a symbolic domain where anxieties about authority and legitimacy are negotiated. The

instability produced by supernatural influence also exposes the performative nature of patriarchal authority in the play. Macbeth's rise to power initially appears to reinforce traditional masculine ideas of strength and leadership, yet his dependence on prophecy reveals that his authority is founded on uncertainty rather than legitimacy. This tension reveals that patriarchal systems rely heavily on symbolic validation rather than inherent stability. The witches therefore function as figures who reveal the constructed nature of political hierarchy.

Moreover, the reactions of other characters to Macbeth's rule further emphasize this fragility. Suspicion, fear, and disorder of authority spread across Scotland, creating a sense of disorder. This indicates that authority cannot be sustained by violence alone. The play repeatedly shows that when masculine power attempts to secure itself through domination, it becomes increasingly unstable. By contrast, the witches remain untouched by political consequences, existing outside the structures they destabilize. The witches' detachment reinforces the idea that patriarchal systems may attempt to suppress alternative sources of authority, yet those sources continue to operate beyond their reach.

2.3 Gender, Female Agency, and Cultural Anxiety

A third major theme that scholars pointed out is the relationship between supernatural imagery and the early modern structure of gender. Critics often state that the witches and Lady Macbeth function not only as symbols of evil but as representations of cultural anxiety about female agency.

Spencer views the witches as unconventional female power excluded from the Christian patriarchy (5). Their collective identity as a sisterhood suggests a form of authority that operates outside male control. Spencer argues that Lady Macbeth's attempt to align herself with this power reflects a desire to make herself an unconventional female and participate in political action.

Favila similarly discusses how supernatural solicitation becomes a strategy for negotiating gender roles (18). Lady Macbeth's rejection of maternal imagery and her appeal to dark spirits signal a symbolic rejection of traditional femininity. Favila interprets this not only as a moral mischief but also as an attempt to redefine womanhood in accordance with ambition and authority.

Marler extends this interpretation by suggesting that the witches represent both external threats and internalized fears about female autonomy (10). Their unsettling appearance and ambiguous speech encode cultural discomfort with women who operate outside domestic roles. The supernatural therefore becomes a narrative language through which gender anxiety is dramatized.

Malik contributes a psychological perspective, arguing that supernatural women in *Macbeth* are portrayed as a concern of male fear because they reveal anxieties about female influence over masculine identity (159). This reading suggests that gender tension is central to the play's dramatic structure.

Kranz, though less explicitly feminist, supports this view indirectly by demonstrating how the witches' linguistic patterns disrupt stable identity categories. Their language unsettles distinctions between male and female, human and nonhuman, natural and unnatural, reinforcing their role as figures of ambiguity (350).

Collectively, these scholars show that the witches and Lady Macbeth operate as focal points for early modern fears about women who challenge social order. Yet most criticism stops short of interpreting them as deliberately resistant figures who consciously weaponize the supernatural. The witches' resistance to fixed identity also complicates early modern expectations of gender stability. Their collective speech and refusal to conform to conventional feminine roles create figures who exist outside binary definitions of womanhood. This

ambiguity challenges the assumption that power must be linked to masculinity. Instead, the witches show how authority can be expressed through knowledge, language, and influence rather than physical dominance. Lady Macbeth's actions further reinforce this complexity. While her initial appeal to supernatural forces suggests a deliberate rejection of traditional femininity, her later psychological unraveling reveals the immense pressure placed on women who attempt to step beyond traditional roles. Her downfall does not simply restore social order but exposes the emotional and moral cost of resisting gender expectations. Together, the witches and Lady Macbeth illustrate how Shakespeare's tragedy stages female power as both disruptive and revealing, suggesting that cultural anxiety about women's authority reflects deeper uncertainty about the stability of gender itself.

The reviewed scholarship collectively establishes a critical foundation for understanding how the supernatural in *Macbeth* operates across psychological, political, and gendered dimensions. However, these studies also shape the present thesis by revealing a significant interpretive limitation: while critics acknowledge the witches' symbolic and disruptive roles, they rarely position them as agents of intentional female power. By synthesizing Spencer's focus on alternative authority, Malik's psychological framework, and Marler's deconstructive approach, this research extends existing debates beyond descriptive analysis toward a more evaluative reading of female agency. In doing so, it reframes the witches not merely as reflections of male anxiety or structural devices, but as participants in a broader network of resistance that actively destabilizes patriarchal control. This intervention builds directly on prior scholarship while challenging its implicit assumptions about passivity and representation.

Although previous scholarship thoroughly explores the psychological, symbolic, and political functions of the supernatural in *Macbeth*, few studies fully theorize the witches as embodiments of collective female resistance. Critics often interpret them as mirrors of male ambition, structural devices, or cultural anxieties rather than as figures who actively challenge

patriarchal authority. Similarly, while Lady Macbeth is frequently analyzed as sinful, her connection to a broader network of female supernatural power remains underexplored. This research therefore addresses a gap by examining how the witches operate not only as symbols but as a form of supernatural sisterhood whose knowledge, prophecy, and linguistic authority destabilize masculine hierarchies. By integrating feminist and psychoanalytic approaches, the study reinterprets the supernatural as a coded language of female power that exposes the fragility of patriarchal control in early modern society.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Foundation

This chapter establishes the theoretical foundation for analyzing the witches and female power in *Macbeth* as a challenge to patriarchal authority through the supernatural. The research draws upon three major theoretical perspectives: Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, and Jessica Benjamin's *Beyond Doer and Done To*. These frameworks collectively offer existential, literary, and psychoanalytic feminist lenses through which the witches in *Macbeth* can be examined not simply as supernatural figures but as symbolic agents of female resistance. The witches occupy a central yet ambiguous position in *Macbeth*. The Witches Traditionally interpreted as embodiments of evil, temptation, or chaos. They have often been confined within patriarchal narratives that equate female power with moral disorder. However, when examined through feminist and psychoanalytic theories, the witches emerge as figures who destabilize male authority. Their presence disrupts the naturalized hierarchy of masculinity, kingship, and rational control. Rather than being passive agents of fate, they represent female knowledge and power that operate beyond the patriarchal order.

Simone de Beauvoir argues that women have historically been constructed as the "Other" in relation to men, who are positioned as the absolute subject (16). According to Beauvoir, masculinity is regarded as the norm and femininity is defined negatively as a deviation. A woman becomes a secondary being (26). She is defined not by herself but in opposition to man. This concept is crucial for understanding how the witches function in *Macbeth*. The world of the play is intensely patriarchal. Political authority is male-dominated. The kingship is linked with masculinity, lineage, and inheritance. Within this framework, the witches stand outside social structures. They are not wives, mothers, or daughters in any identifiable way. Their ambiguous gender is highlighted when Banquo notes their beards place them beyond

conventional definitions of femininity. They are thus doubly "Other", and they also resist the roles prescribed to their sex.

Beauvoir also argues that patriarchal culture often associates women with nature, irrationality, and mystery, in contrast to man's association with reason and culture (96). The witches embody this cultural projection. They are aligned with storms, darkness, and supernatural forces. Yet, from a Beauvoirian perspective, this association does not merely indicate inferiority. Instead, it reveals how patriarchal discourse constructs female power as dangerous to contain it. By occupying the realm of the supernatural, the witches gain access to knowledge denied to male characters. They foresee events, manipulate language, and influence action. Their power lies not in physical strength but in symbolic authority with the power of prophecy and interpretation. Thus, the witches can be read as figures who expose the instability of male supremacy. If masculinity depends on rational control and political order, the witches undermine both by revealing how fragile that order truly is. Their "otherness" becomes a site of resistance. They do not seek involvement within patriarchal society. The witches operate beyond it and thereby challenge patriarchal legitimacy.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explore how patriarchal literature often divides female figures into binary categories like the "angel" and the "monster" (17). The angel represents obedience, purity, and silence. The monster embodies rebellion, sexuality, and excess (28). Women who resist submission are frequently depicted as mad, unnatural, or destructive. Applying this framework to *Macbeth*, the witches clearly align with the category of the "monster." They are described as "weird," grotesque, and unnatural. Their physical appearance defies gender norms. Their speech is cryptic and rhythmic. However, Gilbert and Gubar's theory encourages readers to reinterpret such monstrosity as a coded expression of suppressed female anger and creativity. The "monster" is not inherently evil, but she is a projection of male fear (36). The witches' supernatural abilities can thus be understood as symbolic

representations of female intellectual and imaginative power. In a society where women's voices are restricted, prophecy becomes a radical act. The witches speak in riddles and refuse to provide clear answers. This ambiguity destabilizes the authoritative male voice. The witches' language resists closure and certainty because they never state clearly who will be king. Moreover, the concept of the "madwoman" parallels the witches' marginalization. Just as the madwoman in nineteenth-century fiction represents the repressed double of the obedient heroine, the witches function as repressed embodiments of female autonomy. They exist outside domestic space, unbound by marital or maternal roles. Their independence itself becomes threatening. Through Gilbert and Gubar's lens, the witches' monstrosity can be reclaimed as subversive energy. They challenge the patriarchal expectation that women remain silent and compliant. Instead, they speak first in the play and initiate the dramatic action. Their opening line establishes their narrative authority. By framing the tragic trajectory of Macbeth's ambition. The witches demonstrate how female-coded power can shape history. Even if that power is officially condemned.

Jessica Benjamin's psychoanalytic theory in *Beyond Doer and Done To* introduces a relational model that critiques hierarchical structures of domination and submission (5). Benjamin argues that traditional power relations operate through a binary of "doer" and "done to" (15). In this pattern, one subject asserts control while the other is reduced to passivity. Patriarchal systems reinforce this dynamic and position men as active agents and women as objects acted upon. Benjamin proposes the concept of mutual recognition as an alternative to domination. True subjectivity emerges when individuals recognize each other as autonomous beings rather than reducing one another to roles within a power struggle (23). However, when recognition fails, relationships collapse into coercion and control. This framework provides a compelling lens for analyzing the witches in *Macbeth*. The patriarchal order of the play depends upon clear hierarchies: king over subject, husband over wife, man over woman. Yet the witches

disrupt this binary structure. They are not “done to” by male authority. They are not passive; they act as “doers” who directly command action. They speak possibilities rather than issuing orders. Their prophecies do not force Macbeth to act; they expose and catalyze his ambition.

From Benjamin’s perspective, the witches reveal the instability of the doer/done dynamic within patriarchal masculinity. Macbeth attempts to assert himself as the ultimate “doer,” taking violent action to secure power. However, his sense of agency is fragile, dependent on the validation of prophecy. The witches function as mirrors, reflecting his ambition back to him. In this sense, they destabilize the illusion of autonomous male control. Benjamin also emphasizes how domination arises from the fear of dependency. Patriarchal masculinity often denies vulnerability in order to maintain authority. The witches, as female figures associated with knowledge and fate, embody what masculinity fears: dependence on forces beyond its control. By confronting Macbeth with predictions that shape his choices, they expose his reliance on them. He seeks them out repeatedly, revealing that his authority is not self-generated but relational. Furthermore, Benjamin’s idea of recognition can be extended to the witches’ collective identity. Unlike the isolated male hero, the witches operate as a group. Their shared speech patterns suggest collaboration rather than competition. This collective presence challenges the individualistic, hierarchical model of power that defines male kingship. Their power emerges from connection, rhythm, and shared knowledge. The qualities of the witches contrast sharply with the solitary ambition of Macbeth. Thus, Benjamin’s theory helps reframe the witches not simply as agents of chaos but as figures who expose the relational foundations of power. By undermining the binary of active male and passive female. The witches reveal that authority itself is dependent on recognition and interpretation.

When these three theoretical perspectives are brought together, the supernatural in *Macbeth* can be interpreted as a symbolic space where female power escapes patriarchal regulation. Beauvoir highlights how women are constructed as “Other”; Gilbert and Gubar reinterpret

female monstrosity as suppressed agency, and Benjamin critiques domination and proposes relational subjectivity. Combined, these frameworks illustrate how the witches operate beyond conventional gender roles. The supernatural realm is not governed by political law or lineage. It exists outside the structures that define male authority. The play paradoxically grants them a form of autonomy by situating female figures within this realm. While the Witches are marginalized socially, they display symbolic power. Their knowledge shapes events, yet they remain untouchable by the consequences of those events. Importantly, the witches do not seek to overthrow patriarchy directly. Their challenge is indirect and discursive. They manipulate language, create ambiguity, and provoke introspection. Through prophecy, they reveal the latent instability within masculine ambition. Their presence suggests that patriarchal control is neither natural nor absolute but dependent on fragile assumptions about gender and authority. This theoretical foundation establishes a multidimensional approach to interpreting the witches and female power in *Macbeth*. Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as "Other" reveals how the witches embody marginalization while transforming it into symbolic authority. Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of the monstrous feminine reclaims their grotesque portrayal as a sign of rebellious agency. Jessica Benjamin's relational psychoanalysis challenges the binary logic of domination, exposing how the witches destabilize patriarchal notions of active male control.

Together, these frameworks allow for a re-reading of the witches not as mere instruments of evil but as complex figures who actually challenge the foundations of patriarchal power. Through the supernatural, they occupy a space of resistance. They reveal the constructed nature of gender hierarchy. Their voices are cryptic and unsettling. They articulate a form of female agency that transcends societal boundaries. The integration of Simone de Beauvoir, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Jessica Benjamin fundamentally shapes this research by providing layered perspectives on female power in *Macbeth*.

Chapter 4

Discussion

This chapter establishes how female power operates in *Macbeth* to challenge and destabilize patriarchal authority. It interprets the roles of the witches and Lady Macbeth as agents of supernatural and psychological influence. The chapter connects textual analysis with feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives. It further examines how gender roles are constructed, resisted, and ultimately negotiated within the play.

4.1 Supernatural Female Power and the Challenge to Patriarchal Authority

One of the central arguments of this research is that the supernatural female figures in *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare destabilize the rigid patriarchal structure that governs the political and social world of the play. The Weird Sisters represent a form of female authority that exists outside the boundaries of conventional gender expectations, directly opposing the obedient and passive roles assigned to women in a patriarchal society. Unlike such prescribed roles, these witches exercise a mysterious and unsettling form of power that influences male action and political destiny, particularly evident when they proclaim, “All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!” (Shakespeare 1.3.50). As Malik argues, the witches do not impose ambition but awaken latent desires within Macbeth, demonstrating how their power operates psychologically rather than through direct control (159).

At the beginning of the play, the witches appear in a dark and chaotic setting, introducing a world where moral boundaries are blurred. Their famous chant, “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (Shakespeare 1.1.10), establishes the ambiguous nature of their power while simultaneously reflecting the moral confusion of the play. This ambiguity suggests the witches’ ability to manipulate perception and reality, reinforcing Marler’s argument that they destabilize ideological certainty by exposing contradictions within moral and political structures (8).

Through their supernatural knowledge, they possess a form of authority that threatens patriarchal control, not derived from traditional institutions but from a realm historically associated with fear and marginalization.

The witches' influence over Macbeth further reveals how female power can disrupt male authority. When they introduce the idea of kingship, they ignite Macbeth's ambition without directly compelling action. This dynamic highlights how patriarchal anxieties often project responsibility onto women for male transgression. This interpretation aligns with the feminist framework of *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who argue that patriarchal literature frequently represents powerful women as monstrous or dangerous figures (34). The witches embody this concept, as their authority exists outside male control and is therefore depicted as unnatural and threatening.

Furthermore, the witches' ambiguous gender identity strengthens their challenge to patriarchal norms. Banquo observes their strange appearance, stating: "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (Shakespeare 1.3.45–47). This description highlights how the witches exist beyond the traditional gender binary, destabilizing fixed definitions of femininity. From a feminist perspective, this ambiguity undermines the patriarchal belief that gender roles are natural and unchangeable, reinforcing Beauvoir's argument that gender is socially constructed rather than inherent (283). Thus, the witches function not simply as supernatural agents but as symbolic figures representing suppressed female power, whose presence exposes the fragility of patriarchal authority.

4.2 Lady Macbeth and the Rejection of Patriarchal Femininity

While the witches represent supernatural female power, Lady Macbeth embodies a more direct challenge to patriarchal expectations within the domestic and political sphere. Unlike the witches, who operate outside human society, Lady Macbeth exists within it yet refuses to conform to the submissive role expected of women. Her ambition and determination demonstrate a form of female agency that directly confronts male authority and destabilizes traditional gender hierarchies.

One of the most striking moments in the play occurs when Lady Macbeth calls upon supernatural forces to remove her feminine qualities, declaring, "Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here" (Shakespeare 1.5.47–48). This speech reveals her awareness that traditional femininity is associated with weakness and compassion, qualities she seeks to reject in order to gain power. This rejection aligns with the arguments presented in *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, who asserts that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," emphasizing that femininity is socially constructed (283). Lady Macbeth's desire to be "unsexed" illustrates her recognition of gender as a restrictive social category rather than a fixed identity.

Lady Macbeth's manipulation of Macbeth further demonstrates her challenge to patriarchal authority. She questions his masculinity to persuade him to murder King Duncan, asserting, "When you durst do it, then you were a man" (Shakespeare 1.7.49). By linking masculinity with violence and courage, she appropriates patriarchal values and reverses the traditional power dynamic between husband and wife. From the perspective of Jessica Benjamin, this interaction reflects a struggle within relational power structures, where one individual assumes the role of the "doer" while the other becomes the "done-to" (15). In this context, Lady Macbeth

initially occupies the position of the "doer," directing Macbeth's actions and shaping his decisions.

However, this reversal creates tension within the patriarchal structure of the play. Lady Macbeth's rejection of feminine norms allows her to exercise power, yet it simultaneously isolates her from the social order. As the play progresses, her psychological stability deteriorates, suggesting that patriarchal systems ultimately punish women who attempt to transcend prescribed gender roles.

4.3 The Witches as Symbols of Patriarchal Anxiety

The witches can also be interpreted as manifestations of patriarchal fear toward female autonomy and knowledge. In early modern Europe, women accused of witchcraft were often those who existed outside social norms or possessed knowledge that threatened male authority. Shakespeare's depiction of the witches reflects this cultural context, reinforcing Doak's argument that supernatural women were historically associated with moral and political danger (325). Their ability to foresee the future grants them a form of knowledge inaccessible to male characters. When Macbeth demands answers, stating, "I conjure you… answer me / To what I ask you" (Shakespeare 4.1.50–51), his insistence reveals both fascination and anxiety. He attempts to control their knowledge, yet ultimately becomes dependent on it, exposing the instability of patriarchal authority.

From a feminist perspective, this dynamic reflects attempts to control female agency. Gilbert and Gubar argue that patriarchal narratives portray powerful women as dangerous because their autonomy threatens male dominance (44). The witches embody this threat, as their knowledge cannot be fully controlled and their prophecies lead Macbeth toward his downfall. Additionally, the witches' cryptic language reinforces their authority. Their prophecies are intentionally ambiguous, forcing Macbeth to interpret them according to his own desires. For

example, the statement that “none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (Shakespeare 4.1.80–81) creates false security. This ambiguity demonstrates how language itself becomes a tool of power, supporting Kranz’s argument that the witches’ linguistic patterns shape perception and destabilize meaning (350).

Moreover, the witches’ refusal to provide clear answers reflects a resistance to being controlled or categorized. When Macbeth demands certainty, they respond with riddles and equivocations, refusing to conform to his expectations of knowledge as something fixed and controllable. This resistance can be interpreted through Gilbert and Gubar’s argument that patriarchal systems attempt to define and contain female identity, while female figures often resist such categorization (45). The witches’ ambiguity thus becomes a form of power, destabilizing the very structures that seek to suppress them.

4.4 Psychological Power and the Dynamics of Control

The power dynamics between the witches, Lady Macbeth, and Macbeth can also be understood through psychological frameworks. According to Jessica Benjamin, power relationships involve interactions between recognition and domination (23). The characters in *Macbeth* struggle for control within these dynamics.

Lady Macbeth initially dominates Macbeth by directing his actions and challenging his masculinity. However, once Macbeth gains the throne, the balance of power shifts, and he begins to act independently, arranging Banquo’s murder without consulting her. This shift reflects the reassertion of patriarchal authority and the marginalization of female influence.

The psychological consequences of this shift become evident in Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking scene, where she cries, “Out, damned spot! Out, I say!” (Shakespeare 5.1.37). Her breakdown illustrates the emotional cost of resisting patriarchal expectations. Benjamin’s

theory explains this transformation, as domination replaces mutual recognition, leading to psychological fragmentation (30).

Macbeth's own psychological transformation is evident in his hallucinations, particularly in the dagger soliloquy: "Is this a dagger which I see before me" (Shakespeare 2.1.33). This moment demonstrates how the witches' influence becomes internalized, blurring the boundary between reality and imagination.

4.5 Restoration of Patriarchal Order

Despite the powerful challenges presented by the witches and Lady Macbeth, the conclusion of Macbeth ultimately restores patriarchal order. After Macbeth's death, Malcolm assumes the throne, reestablishing political stability. The defeat of Macbeth and the disappearance of the witches symbolize the reassertion of traditional authority. However, the restoration of order does not entirely erase the disruptive influence of female power within the play. The witches and Lady Macbeth reveal the fragility of patriarchal systems by demonstrating how easily they can be destabilized. Their actions expose the hidden anxieties and contradictions within a society that depends on strict gender roles. The play therefore presents a complex portrayal of female power. On the one hand, it depicts powerful women as dangerous and destructive. On the other hand, it reveals how patriarchal structures attempt to suppress female agency to maintain control.

Although the restoration of order at the end of the play appears to reaffirm patriarchal stability, it is important to recognize that this restoration is neither complete nor uncomplicated. The violence and chaos that precede Malcolm's ascension leave lasting marks on the social and political landscape. The play suggests that while patriarchal authority may be reestablished, it is not immune to disruption. The reinstallation of Malcolm as king represents a return to legitimate succession, yet it also reinforces traditional gender hierarchies by eliminating the

figures who challenged them. The witches disappear, and Lady Macbeth dies, effectively removing the sources of female power that had destabilized the system. However, their absence does not erase their impact. The events they set in motion reveal the vulnerability of patriarchal structures to internal and external threats. The play raises questions about the nature of power itself. Macbeth's rise and fall demonstrate that authority based on violence and ambition is inherently unstable. While Malcolm's rule promises restoration, the play does not fully resolve the tensions it has exposed. Instead, it leaves the audience with an awareness of the fragility of social order.

From a feminist perspective, the ending can be interpreted as both a reassertion of patriarchal control and a subtle critique of its limitations. The need to eliminate powerful female figures in order to restore order suggests that patriarchal systems depend on the suppression of alternative forms of power. At the same time, the memory of the witches and Lady Macbeth continues to challenge the notion that such systems are natural or inevitable.

4.6 Interpretation of Findings

The analysis presented in this research demonstrates that female power in Macbeth operates through both supernatural and psychological dimensions. The witches embody an external form of power that exists beyond the boundaries of human society, while Lady Macbeth represents the internal challenge to patriarchal authority within the domestic sphere. This distinction is evident when the witches operate in liminal spaces such as the heath, delivering prophecies like "All hail, Macbeth" (Shakespeare 1.3.50), while Lady Macbeth exerts influence within the domestic sphere by persuading Macbeth to murder Duncan (Shakespeare 1.7.49). By applying the theoretical perspectives of Beauvoir, Gilbert and Gubar, and Benjamin, this study highlights how the play reflects broader cultural anxieties about gender and power. The witches and Lady Macbeth expose the instability of patriarchal systems by demonstrating that

gender roles are neither natural nor fixed. In addition to demonstrating the dual nature of female power, the findings of this study also emphasize the interconnectedness of gender, power, and language in Macbeth. For example, the witches' paradoxical statement "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (Shakespeare 1.1.10) disrupts moral certainty, while Lady Macbeth's challenge to Macbeth's masculinity demonstrates how language can directly influence action (Shakespeare 1.7.49). The witches and Lady Macbeth both utilize language as a means of exerting influence, yet their linguistic strategies differ significantly and this supports Kranz's argument that the witches' rhythmic and ambiguous language shapes perception and meaning, reinforcing their authority through sound and structure (Kranz 350). The witches rely on ambiguity and paradox, while Lady Macbeth employs direct persuasion and emotional manipulation. Together, these approaches illustrate the diverse ways in which female agency can manifest within and beyond patriarchal constraints.

The application of Beauvoir's theory further highlights the constructed nature of gender roles within the play. Both the witches and Lady Macbeth challenge the idea that femininity is inherently passive or subordinate. Instead, they demonstrate that gender identity can be reshaped and redefined in response to social and political circumstances. This insight reinforces the argument that patriarchal systems rely on the maintenance of rigid gender distinctions, which are ultimately unstable. This instability is evident when Banquo questions the witches' gender, noting that their beards make it difficult to identify them as women (Shakespeare 1.3.45–47). Moreover, the integration of Benjamin's relational theory provides a deeper understanding of the psychological dimensions of power. The interactions between characters reveal that domination often comes at the expense of mutual recognition, leading to isolation and conflict. This is reflected in Macbeth's growing isolation after gaining power, particularly when he arranges Banquo's murder without consulting Lady Macbeth (Shakespeare 3.3). This dynamic is particularly evident in Macbeth's transformation from a respected warrior to a

tyrannical ruler, suggesting that the pursuit of power can undermine the very relationships that sustain it.

Overall, the discussion underscores the complexity of female power in Macbeth. Rather than presenting a simple opposition between male and female authority, the play explores the ways in which power operates across multiple levels like supernatural, psychological, and social. The witches and Lady Macbeth do not merely challenge patriarchal control; they expose its contradictions and limitations, revealing the possibility of alternative forms of agency. Also, this interpretation reveals that Macbeth portrays female power as both transformative and threatening. This duality is clearly illustrated in Lady Macbeth's transformation from a commanding figure to a psychologically fragmented one, as seen in her sleepwalking scene where she cries, "Out, damned spot!" (Shakespeare 5.1.37). The supernatural elements of the play allow Shakespeare to explore forms of authority that exist outside traditional social structures, while the psychological struggles of the characters illustrate the human consequences of power and ambition.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This thesis has examined how the witches in *Macbeth* function as embodiments of female power that challenge and destabilize patriarchal authority through the supernatural. Across the chapters, the study has argued that the Weird Sisters are not merely narrative devices or symbols of evil, but complex figures whose ambiguous identity, linguistic authority, and prophetic knowledge expose the fragility of masculine dominance. Situated within a rigidly patriarchal society structured by lineage, kingship, and gender hierarchy, their presence disrupts the ideological foundations upon which such authority depends.

The central argument of this research is that the witches operate outside social, biological, and institutional structures, thereby resisting the mechanisms through which patriarchy defines and controls women. The literature review demonstrates that while scholars have explored the psychological, symbolic, and political dimensions of the supernatural, they have often stopped short of recognizing the witches as agents of intentional female resistance. This gap provides the foundation for the present study. The theoretical framework, drawing on the works of Beauvoir, Gilbert and Gubar, and Benjamin, offers a multidimensional lens through which female power is reinterpreted. These perspectives collectively demonstrate how marginality, monstrosity, and relational dynamics function as forms of resistance rather than weakness.

The discussion further develops this argument by analyzing the witches alongside Lady Macbeth, showing that female power operates both externally and internally. The witches represent a supernatural authority beyond societal control, while Lady Macbeth challenges patriarchal structures from within the domestic sphere. Their use of language through prophecy, ambiguity, and persuasion emerges as a central mechanism of influence. At the same time, the study reveals how patriarchal systems respond to such challenges through containment and the eventual restoration of order. However, this restoration remains

incomplete, as the disruption caused by female agency exposes the instability rather than the permanence of patriarchal control.

This research therefore offers a significant reinterpretation of the witches as central figures of subversive female agency. By integrating feminist and psychoanalytic approaches, it moves beyond traditional readings that reduce them to symbols of chaos or reflections of male ambition. Instead, it positions them within a broader network of resistance that challenges fixed notions of gender, authority, and power. In doing so, the study contributes to literary scholarship by bridging the gap between supernatural criticism and feminist analysis, demonstrating how these domains intersect in meaningful ways.

Furthermore, this research provides a foundation for future studies. Scholars may extend this work by comparing the witches with other supernatural female figures in early modern literature or by examining how similar representations of female agency appear across different cultural and historical contexts. Future research may also explore the relationship between language and power, particularly how ambiguity and interpretation function as tools of resistance. The interdisciplinary approach adopted in this study can serve as a model for analyzing other texts where power operates beyond visible institutional structures.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the witches in *Macbeth* are not peripheral figures but central agents who reveal the limitations of patriarchal control. Their supernatural power, linguistic authority, and resistance to fixed identity challenge the assumption that authority is stable, natural, or exclusively masculine.

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