CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Over the past decade, contemporary fiction has seen a proliferation of female protagonists who embody deviance and agency in ways that defy traditional gender expectations (Ladzekpo et al., 2024). One prominent expression of this trend is what Rosie Couch (2024) terms the "Gone Girl effect", a cultural and commercial fascination with dangerous femininity, sparked by the success of Gillian Flynn's Gone Girl (2012). In her chapter *The "Gone Girl Effect": "Girling" the Femme Fatale in Gillian Flynn's Gone Girl*, Couch argues that Flynn's novel marked a turning point in popular crime fiction, intensifying audience interest in flawed, violent, and emotionally detached female characters. This phenomenon is reflected in a series of "bad girl" narratives such as *The Girl on the Train* (2015), *The Girls* (2016), and *Girls on Fire* (2016), all of which challenge traditional notions of femininity through deviant female agency.

This shift is echoed by Gillian Flynn herself, who in a 2013 interview with The Guardian critiqued the narrow range of acceptable female representation in fiction. She notes: *"Is it really only girl power, and you-go-girl, and empower yourself, and be the best you can be? For me, it's also the ability to have women who are bad characters."* Flynn expresses frustration with the idea that women are innately good, innately nurturing, and critiques how literature often reduces "bad" women to clichés— "trampy, vampy, bitchy types"—rather than allowing them to be "just pragmatically evil, bad and selfish."

In response to this, Flynn declares: "I don't write psycho bitches. The psycho bitch is just crazy – she has no motive, and so she's a dismissible person because of her psycho-bitchiness." Her statement challenges dominant cultural narratives that continue to limit the scope of female characterization. Instead of making female characters evil for a reason—such as trauma or instability—this new wave of fiction, including Flynn's own work, creates space for women to be bad simply because they choose to be. It gives space for female characters to have agency, even when that agency is selfish, cruel, or violent, without turning them into clichés or excuses.

Beyond theoretical and cultural analyses, empirical research has also revealed systemic disparities in how agency is distributed across gender in fiction. A comprehensive computational study by Stuhler (2024), titled *The Gender Agency Gap in Fiction Writing (1850–2010)*, analyses over 87,000 works of fiction spanning more than 160 years. The study introduces a syntax-based method to identify character interactions and define agency relationally—based on whether a character initiates or receives action. The results reveal a persistent bias in agency attribution: male characters are consistently portrayed as more agentic than female characters, especially in cross-gender relationships. While this gap has narrowed over time, it remains significant in 21st-century literature, with men initiating approximately 53.6% of actions in cross-gender dynamics, compared to 46.4% for women. Notably, actions associated with physical strength and villainy remain overwhelmingly male-coded, while emotional expression is more equally distributed.

These findings underscore how deeply narrative structures have internalized gendered assumptions about power and action—reinforcing traditional stereotypes even as literary representation evolves. Within this context, contemporary satirical works such as Chelsea G. Summer's A Certain Hunger (2020) stand out for their radical portrayal of female characters who commit violence with intentionality, irony, and agency—subverting expectations both structurally and thematically.

This cultural discomfort extends beyond the courtroom into fiction and popular media. While violent men are often given psychological depth or antihero status, women who merely assert themselves are punished by audience reception (Callens, 2009). Characters like Skyler White (*Breaking Bad*), Betty Draper (*Mad Men*), and Lori Grimes (*The Walking Dead*) are vilified not for criminal acts, but for challenging their husbands or resisting the role of idealized motherhood. The more Betty asserted her independence, the more audiences resented her. This reflects a persistent expectation that female characters remain morally stable and self-sacrificing—regardless of what male characters are allowed to do.

Even when female characters are narratively positioned as "rough heroines," they are often perceived as antagonists—too immoral to be womanly, too assertive to be sympathetic (Clavel-Vazquez, 2020). Many are labelled "too much" simply for being angry, emotional, or controlling, even when male characters behave far worse. This reveals a clear double standard: men are allowed to be complex, while women are expected to stay likable, soft, and selfless. When they don't, they're seen as unfeminine and impossible to relate to.

This perceived deviation from femininity is frequently pathologized. Because women who commit violence are often seen as doubly deviant—violating not only

3

the law but also fundamental gender roles—their actions are rarely interpreted as expressions of conscious agency. As Braidotti (2016) notes, difference in women is often read as inferiority, and when expressed through violence, as monstrosity. As Weare (2013) highlights, women who commit violent crimes are rarely understood as fully agentic individuals. Instead, they are often sorted into limiting categories: the "mad," the "bad," or the "victim." These labels serve to neutralize the unsettling idea of female violence by linking it to mental instability, deviant sexuality, or helplessness. Research has shown that young women's deviance is often understood through narratives of individual pathology or trauma, rather than as political or rational action (Allen, 1987; Henning, 1995; Hudson, 1990; Maher, 1997). This tendency reduces complex acts of violence to symptoms of mental instability or emotional damage, reinforcing the notion that female offenders are victims before they are agents.

There are several studies that explore how women who commit crimes are represented in the media. One important example is (Sandman, 2022), in Familiar Felons: Gendered Characterisations and Narrative Tropes in Media Representations of Offending Women 1905–2015. This study analyzes how the Swedish press has portrayed female offenders over a period of 110 years, using discourse analysis to identify patterns in media narratives. Sandman argues that while previous research often focuses on extreme or sensational cases, her study highlights a broader and more nuanced set of character types, such as the "passionate woman," "the uncontrolled woman," and "the foolish woman." These representations frequently move between or combine the familiar categories of "mad," "bad," and "sad," showing how female criminality is made intelligible through emotional tropes and

gendered expectations. The study concludes that media does not always represent women as extreme or monstrous, but often uses familiar narrative frames to normalize their deviance and discipline femininity through subtle forms of meaning-making.

(Callens, 2019), in "AMC's Infamous Criminal Partnerships: Suppressing the Female Antihero", analyses how female characters in AMC's most successful drama series are rarely accepted as antiheroes. Using a feminist lens and rhetorical criticism, she examines pairings like Walter and Skyler White (Breaking Bad), Don and Betty Draper (Mad Men), and Rick and Lori Grimes (The Walking Dead). The study identifies three main reasons for audience rejection: the characters' refusal to perform traditional femininity, the lack of narrative depth or backstory for the women, and the way male characters frame them as unequal. As a result, audiences often view these women as obstructive or unlikable, particularly when they are dominant, emotionally opaque, or challenge their partners. The study argues that motherhood plays a major role in this bias—women who are childless or not centered around care are seen as violating gender expectations.

Atisha Srivastava & Shailendra P. Singh (2023) in their article "Navigating Gendered Landscape: The Power of Female Agency in Anuradha Roy's The Folded Earth", explore how women assert agency within a deeply patriarchal context. Using feminist theory and close reading, they analyse the character of Maya and others who resist oppression, reclaim autonomy, and support fellow women in a conservative Himalayan town. The study highlights how Maya rejects widowhood customs, asserts her sexual autonomy, and builds solidarity with other women like Charu and Ama. These female characters navigate social expectations, personal

loss, and systemic subjugation by resisting norms, embracing education, and building communal support systems. The authors argue that the novel portrays agency as something cultivated through resilience, love, and sisterhood, even within restrictive structures. However, the female characters' assertion of power remains rooted in personal growth, care, and relational resistance, rather than overt or violent disruption.

Doughman & Khreich, (2025), in their article "Beyond the Spotlight: Unveiling the Gender Bias Curtain in Movie Reviews", investigate how gender biases shape the critical reception of films with female-led casts. Using a dataset of 17,165 professional movie reviews and a language model-based detection system, the authors identify high levels of both benevolent and hostile sexism in reviews of female-dominated films. Compared to male-led movies, female-led films receive 44% more benevolent sexism and 149% more hostile sexism on average. These biases persist across genres and significantly affect how female characters and creators are perceived. The study also highlights how professional criticism contributes to the financial, emotional, and career consequences for women in the film industry. Although this work focuses on the film industry, it reveals the larger cultural discomfort with women who take up space, authority, and narrative control—especially when they subvert gender expectations. The findings support the idea that women in media are not just judged by what they do, but by how they fail to conform to traditional femininity.

(Rahil et al., 2022) in "The 'Cool Wife' turned 'Nasty': A Reading of the Femme Fatale in Gillian Flynn's Gone Girl," analyse the transformation of Amy Dunne into an "ultra nasty femme fatale" and a modern "female trickster." Drawing

on feminist theories by Piotrowska and Jurich, the study examines how Amy uses manipulation, deception, and narrative control to assert power over men, media, and institutions like marriage and motherhood. Her calculated performance of roles—Cool Girl, victim, wife, mother—becomes a strategy to destabilize patriarchal norms and reshape her reality. Unlike the traditional femme fatale, Amy survives and triumphs by embracing both domesticity and deviance. This reading positions Amy not as a cautionary tale, but as a prototype for female characters who use trickery and amorality as forms of liberation—offering a valuable lens for understanding contemporary protagonists like Dorothy.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate a growing interest in the representation of deviant women in both media and literature—from the labelling of female offenders as "mad, bad, or sad," to the audience rejection of female antiheroes, and the critique of critical reception biases in female-led narratives. However, most of these works remain focused on external framing: how female deviance is explained, contained, or softened through trauma, social critique, or moral ambiguity. Few studies analyse characters who embrace violence as a conscious, aesthetic, and autonomous act—without remorse or justification. This presents a gap in the literature, particularly regarding female characters who claim narrative control while rejecting likeability, redemption, or victimhood. This study addresses that gap by examining Chelsea G. Summer's A Certain Hunger, a satirical novel that challenges the boundaries of femininity, agency, and morality through its unapologetically violent female protagonist.

This research aims to gain some significant new insights. First, by going beyond diagnoses of psychopathy or trauma-based explanations, we gain a more

complex understanding of female agency. This research aims to show that agency is not always positive or heroic; it can also manifest in terrible and transgressive forms, yet it remains a conscious choice rooted in a personal philosophy.

Second, by applying the combined framework of Barbara Creed and Rosi Braidotti, this study offers a new, more comprehensive analytical model for approaching female "monster" figures in contemporary literature. Rather than focusing solely on their physical actions (as emphasized by Creed) or solely on their consciousness (as emphasized by Braidotti), this study demonstrates how the bodies and minds of these monsters work synergistically. This provides a richer tool for understanding the new wave of "unlikable" female protagonists in fiction.

Finally, this research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how contemporary literature actively deconstructs gender norms. By showing that Dorothy's monstrosity is an articulated philosophical project, not merely a deviation, we can see how novels such as A Certain Hunger not only depict violence but also cleverly critique and subvert cultural expectations about how a woman should think, desire, and exercise power.

This makes a character like Dorothy Daniels in A Certain Hunger (2020) all the more disruptive. She is not only violent and calculating, but also unapologetically aware of her own power. Dorothy doesn't kill because she's traumatized or unstable—she kills because she wants to, and because it brings her a sense of pleasure, authorship, and control. In doing so, she breaks almost every cultural and narrative rule outlined above. She is not likable, not remorseful, and not a victim. Yet she is fully agentic. Her character pushes the limits of what female

deviance can look like when it's not mediated through guilt, madness, or moral redemption.

As previously mentioned, this study aims to examine how female violent agency is represented in Chelsea G. Summer's A Certain Hunger (2020). The novel offers a unique portrayal of a woman who not only commits violence, but does so with full awareness, aesthetic intent, and no moral justification. This kind of representation is especially relevant today, as mainstream culture continues to frame violent women through lenses of victimhood, trauma, or mental instability. By focusing on a protagonist who refuses those narratives, this study challenges dominant ideas about femininity, power, and narrative control. The research will use a descriptive-analytical method and apply feminist theoretical frameworks to understand how agency, violence, and gender intersect in the novel. The writer believes this study can contribute to broader discussions on gender representation in literature and deepen our understanding of how women's autonomy and transgression are portrayed in contemporary fiction.

1.2 Research Question

Based on the reasons for choosing this topic and the background of the study, his study intends to answer the question:

1. How is Dorothy Daniels' 'monstrous subjectivity' constructed through the embodiment of Nomadic Subjectivity in *A Certain Hunger*?

2. How do the manifestations of The Monstrous-Feminine in Dorothy's violent agency challenge traditional gender norms and expectations of femininity?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purposes of the studies are:

1. To analyze how Dorothy Daniels' "monstrous subjectivity" is constructed through the embodiment of Nomadic Subjectivity according to Rosi Braidotti's theory.
2. To analyze how the manifestation of The Monstrous-Feminine in Dorothy's violent agency challenges traditional expectations of femininity, according to Barbara Creed's theory.Scope of the Study

This study will focus on the character of Dorothy Daniels in Chelsea G. Summers' *A Certain Hunger*, specifically analysing her violent agency and motives through a feminist psychoanalytic lens. The analysis centres on how Dorothy's actions and choices challenge traditional stereotypes of femininity and societal expectations of female offenders. By examining her autonomy and self-awareness, the study explores how her character resists common portrayals of women who commit violence—particularly those rooted in victimization, trauma, or psychological instability. The scope is limited to the themes of gendered agency, motive, and stereotype within *A Certain Hunger*, and does not extend to broader representations of female violence in other literary works or media.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This research makes a significant contribution to the study of gender and violence in contemporary literature by applying a dual theoretical framework to analyse the character of Dorothy Daniels in A Certain Hunger. Using Barbara Creed's, The Monstrous-Feminine theory, this research not only identifies Dorothy's violent acts, but also analyses them as manifestations of the *femme castratrice* and archaic mother archetypes, thus offering a reading of female agency as a force that actively deconstructs the norms of femininity. Furthermore, by applying Rosi Braidotti's theory of Nomadic Subjectivity, this research goes beyond a simple diagnosis of psychopathy and provides a philosophical framework for understanding Dorothy's unremorseful consciousness as a practice of nomadic subjectivity. As such, the synthesis of these two theories offers a comprehensive new analytical model for understanding transgressive female figures in contemporary literature, not as common criminals, but as complex embodiments of agency, monstrosity, and alternative subjectivities