

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This section presents a brief overview of the present study. It begins with background of the study which illustrates the rationale background and context for the current study. Second, research questions which address the central issues of the study. Third, objectives of the study serve as a guide in conducting the study. Fourth, significance of the study elaborates the contribution of this study both theoretically and practically. Lastly, scope and limitation of the study are presented to clarify the constraints and boundaries within the study.

1.1 Background of the study

Rape has always been framed as something “natural” almost “inevitable” occurrence in women’s life. For over centuries, women are forced to believe that their lives cannot be separated from the issue of rape. Historical evidences showed that rape had been existed since the early days of humankind, often manifested in several religious texts such as in Bible, written in Genesis 34 about the rape of Dinah (Keady, 2018) and mythological narratives such as from Greece and Rome (Jenkins, 2020). These indications support the idea that womenhood and rape are inseparable.

Rape against women is not a contemporary phenomenon, but one that has been firmly established in society, notably patriarchal society. Patriarchal society centred on the belief of domination and ownership, particularly one which men have to control women (Dougé-Prosper, 2018). When women are seen as object to be owned and dominated, her autonomy is decided by the owner. This perception not only denies women’s agency but sometimes supports the legitimation of sexual violence and rape as the social order. In result, these practices are not considered as crime and violation of human right, but as instrument of control.

In classical period, the use of rape to control women was institutionalized in legal, cultural and social structure (Lomazzi, 2023). For instance, historical records of the marital rape, in which bonded the victim and the rapist, the glorification of rape by Mythological God in cultural narratives, and wartime rape clearly demonstrate the normalization of rape in both public and private spheres

(Jordan, 2023; Keady, 2018; Lomazzi, 2023). Together, these practices emerge as structural elements which focus to maintain the idea of controlling women.

The issue of rape in women's life is also evident in modern patriarchal society. In modern era, the idea of rape operates in subtly even invisible way, yet remained powerful enough to control society. The control it has is manifested through normalization attitudes and unspoken social norms (Kessel, 2022). These phenomena are often represented in contemporary media and platforms such as in film, news, television show, even cultural narratives including retelling mythology, legend, short story and novel (Cuklanz, 2020). The recurring representations through various media illustrate the foundation of rape culture.

Understanding rape culture is essential to comprehend how such practices are normalized even remain sustained. The term rape culture was first used in 1970s by US feminist. This term then used as the title of film in 1975 in order to raise awareness about the reality behind rape within society (Prior, 2019). According to Sweeney (2020), rape culture refers to "social setting in which ideas about gender and sexuality normalize sexual assault and shift blame from perpetrators to victims". While Kessel defines rape culture as set of understanding related to the interpretation of rape victim and the perpetrator, which one is innocent and guilty, which one asserts power and powerless. This understanding keeps reproducing a culture in which rape is considered as effective way to strengthen relation of subordination between genders (Kessel, 2022).

Another perspective which also supports the previous definitions is proposed by Jordan. Jordan defines rape culture as a condition preserved within a particular society which put the prevalence of rape, sexual violence and sexual assault making them understandable even logical (Jordan, 2023). Rape culture emerges from the gender inequalities practices and it is interconnected with misogynistic and sexist attitude towards women. Sexism distinguishes women from men, while misogyny divides women into *bad* or *good* categorization according to patriarchal standard (Manne, 2018). Moreover, Jordan argues that rape culture is supported by two systemic mechanisms namely, Silencing and Objectification (Jordan, 2023). Silencing is manifested in three forms, including active, passive and self-silencing (Jordan, 2023). While Objectification is evident in the form of

devaluing the victim, projecting the victim as “Other”, male gaze, even self-objectification (Jordan, 2023).

As mentioned before, rape culture is also manifested in cultural narratives. One of the most famous prominent narratives linked to rape culture is the myth of Medusa. In Ovid’s epic version of Medusa’s myth, *Metamorphoses*, Medusa was known as a mortal woman who got raped by Poseidon in the temple of Athena (Fröhlich & Peters, 2022). This accident led to the maiden Goddess, Athena herself, being mad, thus made Athena punished Medusa by changing her into a Gorgon with ugly, terrifying appearance and petrifying gaze. Within feminist perspective, Medusa’s myth was interpreted as the most obvious testimony of victim-shaming and victim-blaming. The way Medusa was punished for getting raped clearly erased and ignored her voice.

While the original myth tends to strip away Medusa’s voice and agency, contemporary retellings of her myth bring fresh formulation towards this story. These stories restore Medusa’s perspective and allow her expressing her pain. In several contemporary retellings, Medusa’s image as seductive, ugly and fearsome creature has been shifted into something new brand. She is no longer seen as monstrous and villainess, instead, people see her as a symbol of female power, female rage and resilience (Ali, 2024; Kehr, 2025).

The emergence of contemporary retellings of Medusa’s myth have attracted scholars to analyse it. These retellings have explored untold side of Medusa’s story, allowing new perspective towards her character. Among these, Jessie Burton’s version of Medusa stands out with fresh plot and narratives. A novel entitled *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* by Jessie Burton also engages with the theme of rape culture, trauma and women’s power. This story is inspired by Medusa’s myth, exploring the issue of victim-blaming and normalization of violence towards women. Unlike her original myth, this story is written from Medusa’s perspective. At the beginning of this story, Medusa asks a question: “*If I told you that I’d killed a man with a glance, would you wait to hear the rest?*” (Burton, 2021, p.16). This dialogue emphasizes the thirst Medusa has for people to hear, recognize and see her story from her standpoint.

Several studies had examined Medusa's myth, either the original myth or its contemporary retellings. However, only few of them had engaged directly with Jessie Burton's novel *Medusa: The girl Behind the Myth* as the primary source of data. First is the study conducted by Fröhlich & Peters in 2022 entitled *Medusa: How the Mythological Monster became a Feminist Icon* (Fröhlich & Peters, 2022) which focused on analysing Medusa's story through feminist perspective. Second, a study entitled *Medusa's Evolution: From Mythological Monster to Feminist Icon: A Reflection of Shifting Societal Narratives?* (Ali, 2024). This study also focused on Jessie Burton's novel *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* by applying Feminist-Psychoanalysis as the theoretical framework. Additionally, A study entitled *Representations of Rape in Shakespeare's Selected Works: A Feminist Perspective* by Bobaru (2025) examined the reinterpretation of sexual violence in two Shakespeare's works, notably *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus* by applying multidimensional frameworks. This study applied theory of performativity by Judith Butler, male gaze by Laura Mulvey and Rape culture by Jan Jordan.

While some previous studies employing feminist approach mainly focused on the shift of the reinterpretation and representation of Medusa's image from monstrous figure into feminist icon, these studies prioritized Medusa's symbolic meaning while ignoring the rape as the social system which becomes the main issue within Medusa's narrative. Addressing this gap, this study also pursues feminist approach by focusing the analysis onto the rape which experienced by Medusa, criticizing the systemic mechanism played behind the rape itself. This study also aims to examine Medusa's initiatives in tackling the mechanisms and remaining survived by applying the theory of rape culture proposed by Jordan. By focusing the analysis on the structure which generates the rape and elaborating strategies to tackle this culture, this study offers fresh perspective towards Burton's novel, *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* and expands the theoretical application of Jordan's work.

1.2 Research Question

Based on the aforementioned background and context, the writer addresses the following questions as the central of this study:

1. What are the forms of Objectification experienced by Medusa in the novel *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* by Jessie Burton?
2. What are the forms of Silencing experienced by Medusa in the novel *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* by Jessie Burton?
3. How does Medusa resist rape culture practices which portrayed in the novel *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* by Jessie Burton?

1.3 Objectives of the study

Related to the research questions presented, this study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify the form of Objectification experienced by Medusa in the novel *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* by Jessie Burton.
2. To identify the form of Silencing experienced by Medusa in the novel *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* by Jessie Burton.
3. To describe how Medusa resists any rape culture practices portrayed in the novel *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* by Jessie Burton.

1.4 Significance of the study

This study brings up the issue of systemic mechanism of rape culture which is generally normalized and preserved within our society, often resulted in the practice of victim-blaming. This study is expected to offer both theoretical insight and practical significance. Theoretically, the significance of this study lies in its contribution to the development of academic research, particularly in the field of literary criticism. This study advances literary analysis related to the issue of rape culture in Medusa's myth through Jan Jordan's concept of rape culture.

Practically, this study delivers the valuable insight for future researchers on the application of the critical framework of rape culture theory proposed by Jan Jordan (2023) by examining the practice of Rape Culture in the novel *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* by Jessie Burton. Additionally, this study is also expected to contribute in raising awareness of the role of cultural narratives and operations in preserving rape culture practices and building victim-blaming tradition.

1.5 Scope and Limitation of the Study

The scope of this study is grounded in Jan Jordan's analytical framework, the twin mechanisms of rape culture, which is stated in her book *Tackling Rape*

Culture: Ending Patriarchy (Jordan, 2023). This study focuses on the analysis of rape culture practices implemented in the contemporary retelling of Medusa's myth entitled *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* by Jessie Burton and how the main character of this novel, Medusa, challenges those practices. However, the data of this study were limited to the use of textual evidences drawn from the novel *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* by Jessie Burton, mainly taken from the author's narration and character's utterances which directly related to the research questions addressed in this study.

Considering this study centred on the practical evidences of rape culture, victim-blaming and reclaiming agency of rape victim in *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* by Jessie Burton, any discussions related to other Greek myths of Medusa will not be included. Furthermore, this study focuses only on literary analysis and will not engage in psychological, medical and sociological studies of rape culture.