

**EXISTENTIALIST FEMINISM  
IN LAUREN SCHMIDT HISSRICH'S *THE WITCHER* (2019)**

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**Abstrak**

Tujuan dari studi ini adalah untuk meneliti diskriminasi berdasarkan gender di film *The Witcher* (2019) oleh Lauren Schmidt Hissrich. Studi ini menjelaskan diskriminasi terhadap gender apa yang dialami oleh tokoh utama perempuan di series ini, Yennefer, dan aksi apa yang dilakukan Yennefer untuk bangkit dari diskriminasi berdasarkan gender yang dialaminya dalam film. Diskriminasi berdasarkan gender terhadap wanita masih terjadi di lingkungan sosial kita, dan orang-orang masih tidak menyadari tentang isu penindasan terhadap wanita. Yennefer menderita dari diskriminasi terhadap gender di film ini. Hanya karena jenis kelaminya, Yennefer hanya dinilai berdasarkan penampilannya. Ketika dia tidak memenuhi standart kecantikan yang ditentukan oleh masyarakat, dia dipandang sebagai makhluk yang tidak bernilai. Studi ini menerapkan analisis feminis menggunakan teori feminisme eksistensial oleh Simone de Beauvoir (2010) dan juga teori Bahasa perfilman oleh Timothy Heiderich (2012) dan Warren Buckland (2015). Ditemukan dalam film bahwa Yennefer mengalami Diskriminasi gender terhadap wanita. Dia diperlakukan dengan buruk hanya karena penampilannya. Ketika Yennefer menyadari bahwa dia mampu bangkit dari diskriminasi gender yang dia alami, dia memutuskan untuk mengambil kesempatannya dan membebaskan dirinya dari keadaan yang membelenggunya.

**Kata kunci:** Diskriminasi gender; Penindasan terhadap perempuan; eksistensialis feminis; feminis; sinema.

**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine the gender discrimination in Lauren Schmidt Hissrich's *The Witcher* (2019). It explains what gender discrimination suffered by the female main character, Yennefer, and what actions did she take to rise from gender discrimination in film. Gender discrimination toward women is still happening in our society, and people still not being aware of this women's oppression issue. Yennefer is suffering gender discrimination toward women in the movie. Because of her gender, Yennefer has only seen her based on her appearance. When she doesn't meet people's standards of beauty, she was seen as a creature with no value. This study is a feminist analysis that applies Simone de Beauvoir's (2010) existentialist feminism theory as well as Timothy Heiderich's (2012) and Warren Buckland's (2015) cinematographic language. The findings show that Yennefer is suffering from gender discrimination toward women. She is mistreated because of her appearance. When Yennefer realize that she can rise from the gender discrimination she suffered, she decided to take her chance and freed herself from her condition.

**Keywords:** gender discrimination; women oppression; existentialist feminism; feminism; cinema.

**INTRODUCTION**

Male domination over women can be found in our society. The domination is not limited only to power, but could also include a male's domination in

the economic sector, social status, and political role. Women did not have the right to defend themselves when they were treated unequally in society. Based on Walby (1990), this act of discrimination is called patriarchy. This patriarchy can be found in many forms of literary work, either in prose, drama, or

poetry. Bandel (2006) says that in the literature, women are merely the objects of men's writing, with all their perspectives and their biases. This idea makes a woman only a submissive being that is not more important than a man, or what can be called a second-class being. It either means women cannot have a chance to talk for themselves, or that women's voices are not important and are already represented by men. The issue of men's domination over women was seriously taken as a discrimination issue.

The idea of feminism is that women had the same rights in society as men do. Women have the same rights as men and stand on the same ground as men. It means that discriminating against an individual based on their gender is wrong. Both men and women are equal, so women should get as many chances as men. With the chance given, women could show that women deserve the rights that were exclusive to men. Karen Offen (1988) stated in her article, "feminism makes claims for a rebalancing between women and men of the social, economic, and political power within a given society, on behalf of both sexes in the name of their common humanity but with respect for their differences" (pp. 151-152). Under this understanding, the feminist movement is struggling for women's rights in every aspect and against the discrimination of gender without being disrespectful to men. It never has the idea of being against all men or rising the idea of women's superiority over men. Feminism is only against the patriarchal system itself, a social system that has made women suffer under gender discrimination for a long time. Both men and women should get their individual freedom and responsibility in society. The waves of the feminist movement happened to raise people's awareness of this issue. After those feminism waves, women could speak to defend themselves against the idea that women are objects of men.

Simone de Beauvoir explained in her book, *The Second Sex* (2010), that women's role is defined as the 'other'. She wanted us to understand that in patriarchy, women are only a subject to men. She tried to say that in society, women are treated as if women are not more or not as important as men. Beauvoir contrasts the way society raises the girls with the

boys'. Boys from age 3 to 4 told that they are the "little man", while the girls are forced to accept the femininity imposed on them by society. One of Beauvoir's famous lines from this book is "One is not born but becomes a woman". It means that the feminine role attached to women is not gained from the day a girl is born but is imposed by society. Women were forced to accept their fate to become a subject to men. Women are forced to accept that their voice did not matter.

According to Beauvoir, there is some way for women to refuse discrimination. First, women can work. Sure Beauvoir understands that working in a patriarchal environment is hard and exploitative. Especially if it makes women work in both their office or factory and their home. Nevertheless, Beauvoir believes no matter how hard and tiring it is. Women will be able to claim their status in society. Second, women can be intellectual. Beauvoir said that intellectual activity is an activity when a person thinks, sees, and defines, and is not inactive when a person becomes the object of thought, observation, and definition. It means that by becoming an intellectual, women can actively decide and give their opinion toward society. Finally, transcend the boundaries. Women can refuse to accept the feminine role given by society. Accepting the feminine role means that women accept to become merely an object of men.

This gender discrimination issue can also be found in the *Witcher* series created by Lauren Schmidt Hissrich, which is based on a book with the same title by Polish writer Andrzej Sapkowski. This series has eight episodes in season one and was released with all of its episodes in December 2019 on Netflix. The *Witcher* series takes place in a fantasy, medieval-inspired land called "The Continent." The series is telling us the story of a witcher who works as a monster hunter called Geralt of Rivia, who is linked to Princess Ciri by destiny. Lauren Schmidt Hissrich, the writer of this series, is an American screenwriter and television producer. She was raised in Westerville, Ohio, and she graduated in 2000 with a BA in English Literature and creative writing from Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio. In the *Witcher* series, she takes the role of the executive producer and the

showrunner. She also wrote the scripts for her past works titled "The West Wing and Justice." She has also written and produced shows such as Parenthood, Daredevil, The Defenders, and The Umbrella Academy.

In this study, we will not discuss Geralt of Rivia, but we will instead focus more on a side character in this series called Yennefer. Yennefer is a poor, hunched-back, and defenseless woman who has been abused by her family. Then she was bought by a sorceress named Tissaia de Vries. There, she was trained to cast and perform magic by Tissaia de Vries in her magic academy. She was seen as a promising talent in her studying process. Later in the show, Yennefer will do everything she can to obtain everything she wants. Yennefer's actions of doing everything to secure her dreams are what makes her the perfect model for this study. We can see in real life that things like this have also happened. Some women these days want to be freed from the patriarchal culture and stigma. They want to prove that patriarchy is not suitable anymore in this era. That is why a lot of women pursue their careers, and some of them will neglect the feminine roles that they feel do not fit anymore in their lives and they are free to express it because women are not a tool of men (Beauvoir, 2010)

This thesis proposes two statements of the problem: "How does Yennefer in *The Witcher* experience gender discrimination?" and "What actions did Yennefer take that show women's rise from gender discrimination?" The objectives of the study are to explain how gender discrimination happens in *The Witcher* series and how women's resistance to gender discrimination is showed in the movie. Based on the objectives of the studies, this study has two significant. First, this study helps the readers to understand gender discrimination experienced by women in *The Witcher* series. Second, this study can be a reference for further study of *The Witcher* series or feminist existentialism in other literary works.

## METHOD

The method used in this study is the qualitative method. The data will be collected qualitatively by

watching the series multiple times and paying attention to its dialogue by reading the script of the series. The source quotations of the series will be taken from the series' script. The dialogue will be analyzed carefully in order to obtain a full understanding of the true meaning of the words spoken by the characters in the show.

In addition, to examine the language of cinema in the film, this study used Cinematography Techniques: The Different Types of Shots in Film (Heiderich, 2012) and Film Studies An Introduction (Buckland, 2015). Yennefer of Vengerberg, the character from *The Witcher*, is the individual who is evaluated utilizing these forms.

To make the readers easy to understand and avoiding from the analysis that is out of topic. This study will be using Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism theory. The focus of this study will be on the gender discrimination that happened to Yennefer in *The Witcher* series (2020) and the actions are done by one of the characters named Yennefer from the series in an attempt to rise from the gender discrimination.

## DISCUSSION

This part will be discussing the questions asked in the first chapter. They are "How Yennefer in *The Witcher* experience gender discrimination?" and "What actions did Yennefer take that show women's resistance to gender discrimination?". The first part of the chapter will be discussing the answer to the first question and it focuses more on the gender discrimination experienced by the main character. Meanwhile, the second part of this chapter will be focusing on the actions taken by the main character to rise from gender discrimination.

### Gender Discrimination Experienced by Yennefer

Yennefer was a hunched-back girl from a poor family. Because of her appearance and gender, she was abused by her family and her surroundings. As an ugly-looking girl, her family sees her as a person with no value. Just because of her appearance and gender, she was treated badly. This case will be different if Yennefer was a man. If it was a man who

got this body trait, people will see other values of him. Not like women when they have no beauty, people will see them as a thing with no value. In comparison, a character named Geralt of Rivia is different from a normal human. He is still praised because of his skills in taking down dangerous monsters. The difference in the treatment they experienced is the discrimination.

In the episode two Yennefer is sold by his father to a witch named Tissaia. She was sold for less than a half of a price of a pig. It means that she is no longer seen as a human. Her father has seen her as a creature that is lower than a pig. He also stated that Yennefer is not her child.



**Figure 1.1. (Hissrich, 2020, episode 2)**

Yennefer's father

*she's no daughter of mine*

In this scene, the director uses a full shot to let the audience get a full picture of what is happening to Yennefer. We can see that Yennefer is shown as the inferior object in the frame. she is abused by her father, she was pushed to the ground because her father did not want her existence near his pigs. She is shown as a weak subject and treated as if she is his object. the dialogue above showed that Yennefer's father no longer cares about her daughter. He even treats her as a creature that is lower than a pig. Even if Yennefer is begging her father to not sold her. Her father still did not care and said that she is already sold. When Yennefer tried to seek help from her mother, her father interrupted and dragged her forcefully even if Yennefer is refusing.

In The Witcher, Yennefer experienced hard times living due to her condition. Not only treated unequally but she is also treated as if she is not human. The fact that she is sold to Tessaia by her father for a less than half a price of a pig showed that she is not Beauvoir (2010) stated in her book that women's role as the other sex is not carried when they were born, but it was given to them by the society. In Yennefer's case, she was abused and treated as if she is not human. She was sold at a lower price than the price of a pig. She was oppressed and her existence is not important.

### **Actions Yennefer Take to Rise From Gender Discrimination**

After realizing her position as the oppressed, Yennefer did several things to rise from gender discrimination. She is struggling to get into a position at the level of men, so she could not be discriminated against again. Beauvoir (2010) stated that women are having the same right as men, and women should be at the same level as men stand. Women should know their capabilities and they could elevate themselves. Based on her feminist existentialism theory, she gives awareness to women to be able to determine their own life and actualize their existence without any direction or dictated by others. To fulfill this existence, women must achieve these 3 things, namely; 1. Become Intellectual, 2. Being Herself, 3. Women's Freedom to Actualize Themselves.

#### **1. Become Intellectual**

Yennefer was brought by Tissaia to Aretuza, a magical academy for young ladies located on Thanned Island. Yennefer realizes that she has no other option but to learn magic. She thinks that it is a better option for her than return to her old life and got abused again. She is not one of the brightest students. She is struggling with her lesson. She even doubts herself. She needs more time to master a spell to lift a stone. She can not read her partner's greatest fear using telepathy. Then she failed to catch the lightning in a bottle. Discouraged by her failure, yennefer flees to the greenhouse. There she meets Istredd, a boy that later encourages her to pursue magic.

In the world of *The Witcher*, mages could get a high position in society. By learning magic, a girl could raise her status and not be discriminated against because she has her own value for standing on her own feet. By becoming an intellectual, a woman could get equal rights in life. It is not only because she is useful to the men, but becoming an intellectual can make a woman knows her worth to live freely and realize that they are not merely a tool for men.

Yennefer also changed into a better person after she is becoming an intellectual. In episode 3, she recalls when the first time she met Istredd and mentions how weak she was. A scared girl who knows nothing about her potential.



**Figure 2.1. (Hissrich, 2020, episode 3)**

*Yennefer*

*Remember that scared girl who tumbled at your feet in this cave... totally unaware of her power?*

The director uses a close-up shot to capture Yennefer's expression when she is recalling her old self. The director wants the audience to see how Yennefer realizes that she is already changing, she is not the weak Yennefer anymore. Yennefer said it to Istredd. She said it with a confident face. She recalls her past self which is still weak and vulnerable. It shows how much she has changed. She states that now Yennefer is not a weak girl who is knowing nothing about her power anymore. It shows that now she is sure that she can stand on her own feet. Becoming an intellectual has changed Yennefer this much. From a weak girl into a strong mindset woman.

Beauvoir (2010) stated that in order to achieve their existence in society, women should become an intellectual. She reveals that by becoming an intellectual, women can decide what is good for them. They could determine their own choices without being dependent on men or being dictated by men. Yennefer has shown the progress revealed by Beauvoir. After Yennefer's ascension to a mage. She becomes aware of what she is capable of. After becoming an intellectual, She is now having confidence in herself and she could admit that she was a weak woman that could easily be discriminated against.

## **2. Being Herself**

Lauren Schmidt Hissrich shows that women could be themselves and not bound to men's will through Yennefer. Yennefer demanded a meeting with the council after she acknowledge that she was being sent to Nilfgaard rather than Aedirn as promised before. Tisssaia revealed that this decision is for Yennefer's good, but Yennefer refused it. She chose to decide her own fate by her own hand, so she refused to attend the initiation. She even rejected Istredd's offer to bring her with him. Despite the fact that Istredd was being offered a seat on the research chapter by the brotherhood so he can provide Yennefer a good life. Yennefer rejected his offer because she wants more than a life of being other people's object.

Istredd confronted her and said that she is only afraid of losing the chance to be beautiful. Yennefer admits it, and she added that she wants more than being beautiful. She also wants power.



**Figure 2.2. (Hissrich, 2020, episode 3)**

*Yennefer*

*I will not be schooled by a man. who pimps the world as some romantic adventure.... My world is cruel. Unpredictable. You enter, you survive, you die*

In this scene the director wants the viewer to focus on Yennefer's resistance to Istredd's dominance by using a medium shot to capture the scene. It is shown that Yennefer is angry at Istredd because he holds her decision, and also shows that Yennefer is not having any doubt in her decision. Yennefer confronts him and tells him to let her go. Yennefer's dialogue above shows that she is not interested to be dictated by men. She does not want to be controlled by the other. She wants to determine her own choices. She wants to be herself.

This scene is suitable with Beauvoir's (2010) statement about women being themselves. She stated that women who are aware of their freedom will be able to freely determine their way of life without coercion from others. Yennefer shows that she is aware of her rights. She acknowledges that no one should determine her life other than herself. She shows that any woman can be free to be herself and should not be dictated by anyone because women have the right to carry their own decision in their life. No man and no one should be able to stop a woman from being herself.

### **3. Women's Freedom to Actualize Themselves**

Women have the freedom to actualize themselves, whether they want beauty to their ideal or the power to stand on their feet without being directed by anybody. Women who understand their freedom will be able to actualize themselves. Women's will to actualize themselves is already portrayed by Yennefer. She wanted beauty and power, so she is ready to go through everything she needs to obtain what she wants. She met with "the Enchanter", an artist who could modify someone's appearance into what they desire. She wanted to be reborn as the new Yennefer who is beautiful. She needed to obtain this beauty to actualize herself and make her freedom to rise from women's oppression.

Yennefer wanted to actualize herself to obtain what she desire. She refuses the fate bestowed upon her by the chapter. She did not want to follow their direction to be a mage positioned in Nilfgaard, because that is not what they promised. She is supposed to be a mage in her home kingdom, Aedirn, but the chapter suddenly changes their decision and sent her to Nilfgaard instead. Feeling that she is treated unfairly, Yennefer refuses to bow to the injustice, then she seeks power and beauty to make her way to obtain what she desires.

In her way to achieve beauty, Yennefer should pay her price. She needed to pass through an extremely painful process. Normally, the Enchanter would prepare the herb to make his client in unawake state so they would not feel the pain. Yennefer thought that it will take too long time to wait for the Enchanter to prepare the herb. She could lose her chance to achieve her desire, so she is ready and willing to endure the pain to get what she wanted.

*The Enchanter*

*Don't be foolish. You can't be awake during the procedure*

*Yennefer*

*I can*

The Enchanter warned Yennefer that the process will be extremely painful if she is awake while doing the procedure. Yennefer ensures the Enchanter that she can do it and that she is ready to pass through the procedure without she is being in unawake state.

It also mentioned that to be reborn, Yennefer will lose her ability to bear children. Her womb will be taken and used as a catalyst in the procedure.





**Figure 2.3. (Hissrich, 2020, episode 3)**

*The Enchanter*

*There is a cost to all creation. A sacrifice that is always made. To be reborn... you will bear no more*

The Enchanter warned Yennefer of the cost of her transformation to be what she wants. Yennefer nodded showing that she is agree with the sacrifice she will make to obtain her dream. Those things that she needs to pass through to achieve her dream have shown us how determined Yennefer is to chase her dream. She would not let her chance to get what she desire to slip out of her hands and chose to endure the process.



**Figure 2.4. (Hissrich, 2020, episode 3)**

The shot used in the scene above is a close-up shot. The director wants the audience to focus on Yennefer's expression while she is enduring the pain during the procedure. It also shows us how painful the procedure Yennefer has to pass through.

According to Beauvoir (2010), men are called "the self" while women are considered the

"others". She shows that in the patriarchal system men are placed in higher spaces or more superior to women. It means that in this system women are oppressed by men. To gain their freedom in expressing their existence, women should be able to actualize themselves. Yennefer tries to actualize herself by getting her desired power and beauty. Yennefer is willing to do anything and endure the pain in the process to obtain what she believes is a perfect condition for her to actualize herself. After she is done actualizing herself, then she proceeds to gain her dream to be a mage in her home country. Being a kingdom's mage and respected by the people of the kingdom, is what Yennefer sees as her desired existence.

## CONCLUSION

Gender discrimination suffered by Yennefer is shown in the series in a scene where her family abused her so badly and sold her at a lower price than a half price of a pig. Her father also rejected to claim Yennefer as his daughter. He gives Yennefer no chance in seeking help when he sold her to Tissaia. He dragged her aggressively as if she is not a human being that needs to be taken carefully.

Yennefer's struggle to rise from gender discrimination has shown in three ways according to Beauvoir. They are women's intellectual, to be themselves, and freedom of women to actualize themselves. Yennefer has won her struggle through various actions like becoming a mage, not bowing to others, and gaining her desired beauty. Yennefer has shown that she can rise from gender discrimination and obtain her existence in society. She is able to actualize herself and make people accept her existence.

The director uses close-up shots in this film to capture Yennefer's emotions while she is taking decisions about her life. The close-up shot is further used to show Yennefer's expression when she is struggling to endure the pain to gain her dream. The director also uses a full shot to let the audience see the full scene of what is happening to Yennefer. The director meant to use the supportive detail in the frame

beside the character to give additional information that is related to the scene.

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