

FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THREE FANTASY NOVELS BY LEIGH BARDUGO

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ABSTRACT. Three fantasy books by Leigh Bardugo, *Shadow and Bone* (2012), *Six of Crows* (2015), and *Ninth House* (2019), feature three female characters in an ambiguous position by giving them conflicting characteristics. This study aims to demonstrate how these young adult novels portray female characters in an ambiguous stance and how they exhibit characteristics typical of women's writing. This study is done by analysing the female characters through the narrative of the story and the characters themselves. We found that the narratives present the three female characters by employing contradictory actions, associating both characteristics of witches and heroes, which then allows for an ambiguous stance. Furthermore, by incorporating modern struggles that women face, the three books demonstrate the characteristics of women's writing. It can be concluded that by employing contradictory actions through the characteristics of witches and heroes in the three female characters, an ambiguous position can be portrayed. Through them, the characteristics of women's writing can be observed.

Keywords: ambiguous, fantasy, female character, women's writing, young adult literature

KARAKTER PEREMPUAN DALAM TIGA NOVEL FANTASI KARYA LEIGH BARDUGO

ABSTRAK. Tiga buku fantasi karya Leigh Bardugo, *Shadow and Bone* (2012), *Six of Crows* (2015), dan *Ninth House* (2019), menampilkan tiga karakter perempuan dalam posisi ambigu dengan memberi mereka karakteristik yang saling bertentangan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menunjukkan bagaimana novel-novel remaja ini menggambarkan karakter perempuan dalam posisi ambigu dan bagaimana mereka menunjukkan karakteristik khas tulisan perempuan. Penelitian ini dilakukan dengan menganalisis karakter perempuan melalui narasi cerita dan karakter itu sendiri. Kami menemukan bahwa narasi tersebut menampilkan tiga karakter perempuan dengan menggunakan tindakan yang kontradiktif, mengaitkan karakteristik penyihir dan pahlawan, yang kemudian memungkinkan adanya posisi ambigu. Lebih jauh, dengan menggabungkan perjuangan modern yang dihadapi perempuan, ketiga buku tersebut menunjukkan karakteristik tulisan perempuan. Dapat disimpulkan bahwa dengan menggunakan tindakan yang kontradiktif melalui karakteristik penyihir dan pahlawan dalam tiga karakter perempuan, posisi ambigu dapat digambarkan. Melalui mereka, karakteristik tulisan perempuan dapat diamati.

Kata-kata Kunci: ambiguitas, fantasi, karakter perempuan, tulisan perempuan, sastra remaja

INTRODUCTION

The most crucial idea in the analysis of narrative texts is the narrator. The text's unique personality is a result of the narrator's identity, the extent and style of that identity's indication in the text, and the inferred decisions. In reality, without the narrator, there wouldn't be a narrative; the narrator is an essential component of all stories. The challenge is figuring out the narrator's persona and how it fits with the story being delivered. Character is also one of the formal components the author inserts to become the story's actor and the reader's centre of attention. To set the character apart from others, the author gives them a distinct personality. There are additional, less evident elements that contribute to the creation of great literature in addition to characterisation, which

is a crucial component of narrative theory. But what would happen if the character exhibits both good and bad characteristics?

Our world has always seemed to have needed the idea of heroism. We find tales of heroes performing great deeds and rescuing their people dating back to the earliest recorded history, but this historic heroic tradition has frequently excluded women. Women often perform tasks rather than represent unique personalities when they appear in the storyline. They frequently also have to deal with an unavoidable ending, such as death in a tragedy or the conclusion of a romantic or comedic story through marriage.

Adolescent girls are not and cannot be the heroes in this story. At best, they serve as the hero's

bride—his reward for monster-slaying. The girl's exclusion from heroic selfhood, while affecting all girls, does not affect them equally. It is crucial to note that whiteness and physical ability are seen as indicators of heightened, fantasy femininity. These heroes provide a blueprint for what it means to be a hero, an embodied way of living and being in the world that subverts the violent hierarchy, isolates individuality, and erases the differences typical of traditional heroes. By doing this, they challenge preconceived notions of what it means to be a hero, a woman, and even a person.

Combining these two reasons, we realised that in Leigh Bardugo's *Shadow and Bone* (2012), *Six of Crows* (2015), and *Ninth House* (2019) she chose a female character to be the main character in the story. We were expecting the usual heroic storyline where they save the day by doing good, as they are the main characters, only to be surprised by the blurry lines of good and evil.

This study will delve into the three fantasy works by Leigh Bardugo mentioned above and discuss how the three female characters in the books exhibit ambiguous characteristics. These works feature three young female characters who exhibit the characteristics of both a hero and a witch, facing relatable problems that women encounter in modern times. This study will also explore and discuss how Bardugo's three female characters overcome the issues.

This article is supported by numerous frameworks to reach a comprehensive conclusion. One theory that this study will use is Mieke Bal's understanding of narratology. According to Bal, once we come upon a thorough description of a character who has already been described, we can legitimately claim "that the information — the portrait — 'belongs to' the character, it 'creates' the character, maps it out, builds it up." (Bal, 1997, p. 116). This is essential in analysing the female character's actions throughout the narrative to determine whether they are ambiguous. In discussing the characteristics of women's writing, this study will draw on Catherine Riley's (2018) explanation of feminism and women's writing, as well as other relevant frameworks. The fourth wave of feminism is influenced by its inclusion of female characters who reflect some of fantasy literature's most progressive thoughts on gender roles. After all, gender, sexuality, and body perceptions in a woman's self-concept may take on a different, possibly more prominent, shape than they do in a man's. These studies have drawn attention to the underrepresentation of women in both the social and political spheres, as well as in science, where

women are still predominantly defined as wives and mothers. Gender equality, on the other hand, has never been taken as seriously as it is now, and the fantasy genre, like literature, is not an exception to the rule. Feminist gender theory allows critics to look at how women are portrayed in literature, to question traditional depictions of women in (particularly) influential literature, and to look at power dynamics between the sexes (Barry, 2020). Judith Butler's (2004) constructivist theory, which presents a complex view of gender that emphasises social and cultural influences over innate attributes, provides a key framework for studying gender identity. When applied to women, the concept of "identity" is paradoxical in itself, implying both sameness and uniqueness, and the contradictions multiply (Gardiner, 1981).

METHOD

In this research, we will be looking at the main female characters who have powers in the three young adult novels, namely Alina Starkov, Nina Zenik, and Galaxy 'Alex' Stern. The methods used in this research involve collecting the narration and dialogues surrounding the female characters and analysing them based on Mieke Bal's (1997) explanation of narratology, particularly fabula, characterisation, and focalization. The aim is to identify and learn how the novel presents the female characters in an ambiguous position. This result will be further studied to understand how Bardugo utilises the characteristics of superheroes and witches, drawing on Mike Alford's (2006) definitions of heroes and villains. The presentation of the ambiguous identities of the three young female adults will then explain how the novels demonstrate the elements of women's writing as described by Catherine Riley (2018).

To analyse the characteristics of women heroes and witches, we based the research on discussions in gender studies. Gender studies began with the second wave of feminism in the 1960s. The phrase "women's studies" has only been widely used since the 1980s (Whelehan, 2004). These studies have drawn attention to the underrepresentation of women in both the social and political spheres, as well as in science, where women are still predominantly defined as wives and mothers (Whelehan, 2004). Gender equality, on the other hand, has never been taken as seriously as it is now, and the fantasy genre, like literature, is not an exception to the rule. Feminist gender theory allows critics to look at how women are portrayed in literature, to question traditional depictions of women

in (particularly) influential literature, and to look at power dynamics between the sexes (Barry, 2020). Judith Butler (2004), in discussing constructivist theory, which offers a complex picture of gender that emphasises social and cultural influences over innate attributes, represents a key perspective on the theory of gender identity. When applied to women, the concept of "identity" is paradoxical in itself, implying both sameness and uniqueness, and the contradictions multiply (Gardiner, 1981).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

When portraying female characters, fantasy authors frequently employ what is known as "the princess dramatic persona," in which female characters follow a sexist arc in which the "princess" waits for the male hero to save her (Lin, 2010). Although Bardugo's series shares the same characteristics as those found in children's literature, she does not shy away from making her characters flawed. She demonstrates how the female character can choose her fate and break free from the stereotype that has been built around her. While males in various moments support female characters in breaking free from difficult situations, they are usually the ones who ultimately save themselves (Dellivers, 2020). The evolution of women's rights in Bardugo's series is shown through their actions, words, or sacrifices. After all, gender, sexuality, and body perceptions in a woman's self-concept may take on a different, possibly more prominent, shape than they do in a man's.

In terms of character development, the series shares many of the same characteristics as children's novels that support women's rights, as well as those found in the early stages of young adult literature. Despite the female characters in the series being able to be both protagonists and minor characters in the plot, they often save the male characters on several occasions while still embracing their femininity, albeit at the cost of losing something that was once a part of who they are. Of course, character growth is crucial to help progress the plot of the story. Figuring out the difference between the stereotypical female character and Bardugo's will help highlight their personality characteristics and how, in the Grisha verse, a woman does not have to lose anything by being in a female character's position in the story. This series breaks the stereotype that is built around preconceptions that a woman's duty is as a homemaker rather than a public figure, to stop the continued belief that the ideal woman is still one who is gentle, loving, and non-violent.

This study will examine the discussion of the characteristics of women writers that are presented in

the characterisation of the three female characters: Alina Starkov, Nina Zenik, and Galaxy 'Alex' Stern. Nina, with her wild and wayward ways, exemplifies defiance of gendered norms and can serve as an inspiration for those who read Bardugo's work. Alina, who takes control of every aspect of herself, welcomes and refines herself to her highest and most significant potential. Alex, who trusts herself and follows her instincts and suspicions, even when underestimated, turns that to her advantage.

In *Shadow and Bone* (2012), a young adult fantasy adventurer, Alina Starkov, a nobody who becomes someone important in a single day, discovers a power she didn't know she possessed to save her childhood best friend. She finds herself at the centre of the country's attention. Alina is a teenage girl who grew up in an orphanage in Keramzin, Ravka, with Malyen (Mal) Oretsev. They're both in the First Army to serve their country, and as they march through the Unsea (also known as the Shadow Fold), a bleak, constantly dark stretch of land that separates Ravka from the sea, they encounter *volcras* who live in the Unsea. The *volcra* attack them during their passage, and Alina saves Mal with an incredible Grisha gift. The Grisha are individuals who possess the ability to summon fire, wind, and control hearts, as well as other elements, and utilise them as weapons. The majority of Grisha refer to their powers as Small Science and describe them as "extensions" of the natural world. Alina can conjure up light. The Darkling, the leader of the Grisha, sends Alina to Os Alta, claiming that her power is unique and precious, making her a target for assassination by Ravka's enemies.

In this novel, Alina is seen as a means to an end by the Darkling, the most powerful character in the story. He can control the Fold—the universe of the novel—as he wishes, as it is made out of Darkness, a power that he possesses, and with Alina under his control through the antlers, he controls the Light, Alina's power. She is treated like an object, something that almost all women sadly have to face at some point in their lives. Because women are often treated as objects of exchange between men, they are not considered capable of heroic deeds (Campbell, 2014). They are constantly underestimated and cast aside to be used whenever it suits them.

"He can use *you*," Baghra said softly.

"Morozova's stag is no ordinary amplifier. He will hunt it. He will kill it. He will take its antlers, and once he places them around your neck, you will belong to him completely. You will be the most powerful Grisha who has ever lived, and all that newfound power will

be his to command. You will be bound to him forever, and you will be powerless to resist.” (Bardugo, 2012, p. 239)

At first, Baghra revealed that Darkling was responsible for the creation of the Shadow Fold. When Alina doesn't believe her, Baghra explains that she is Darkling's mother to prove her point. Once Alina understands the situation, she listens to Bagra and takes off to escape from the Darkling's clutches. She is the one who decides what will happen. She is the one who controls her powers. She won't give in to the Darkling that easily.

The Darkling wanted to use me. He tried to take away the one thing that had ever really belonged to me, the only power I'd ever had.

I got to my feet. I wasn't going to make it easy for him anymore. (Bardugo, *Shadow and Bone*, 2012, p. 241).

From second-guessing everything to being sure of herself, Alina has changed since then; she is no longer frightened to travel alone because she has learned survival skills and fighting techniques. When facing an enemy, Alina has demonstrated the ability to summon all of her strength (Bardugo, *Shadow and Bone*, 2012, p. 188).

In *Ninth House* (2019), Galaxy 'Alex' Stern, a girl with the ability to see ghosts walking the streets of Los Angeles, was rescued from near death by an unknown cabal of powerful individuals who wanted to give her a second chance at a decent life in exchange for the temporary use of her powers to monitor the bloody, eerie, and dangerous activities of the secret societies that covertly rule over the fortunes of countries, markets, and the entire world. Lethe has no idea that she can possess the spirits of ghosts and draw power from them. Alex winds up in Yale, where she is persuaded to join Lethe, the Ninth House, which is in charge of planning the events and rituals for the other eight "Houses of the Veil"—the purported secret societies who possess a variety of magical abilities that wealthy young people have been abusing for years that operate there—*Skull and Bones*, *Book and Snake*, *Scroll and Key*, and five others.

Alex was urged to leave the murder of Tara Hutchins behind because no one was counting on her to handle it. Dean Sandow certainly thought Alex wasn't right for the job and didn't trust her enough. Detective Turner, who Alex knows is working with Lethe, definitely doesn't want her anywhere near the

case, only because he thinks that Alex would hinder him in doing his job.

She wanted to throw her phone across the courtyard. Rest easy? If Sandow intended to handle the murder directly, why had she wasted her time—and her coin of compulsion—visiting the crime scene? She knew the dean didn't trust her. Why would he? ... Rest easy. Everything else went unsaid: I don't expect you to handle this. No one expects you to handle this. No one expects you to do anything but keep from drawing unwanted attention until we get Darlington back. (Bardugo, 2019, p. 81)

But Alex doesn't heed Detective Turner's warnings, nor does she listen to Dean Sandow's advice on laying low while they figure out how to get Darlington back. She went behind their backs and investigated the case, despite having little knowledge about it, with the help of magic.

So since Tara couldn't talk, her body would have to. Alex had discovered a ritual to reveal harm, something simpler and lighter, used for diagnosis or when a patient or witness was unable to speak. Girolamo Fracastoro had invented it to discover who had poisoned an Italian countess after she'd keeled over, foaming at the mouth, at her wedding feast. (Bardugo, 2019, p. 155)

Alex found her solution in the library, in a book filled with ways to deal with the dead. From there, she came up with a plan to get to the bottom of Tara's murder without Dean Sandow or Detective Turner finding out.

In many parts of the world today, and across many cultures, women continue to be defined by domestic duties that reinforce the 'feminine' gender role (Riley, 2018). The female characters in these three books defy categorisation as 'feminine'. Bardugo managed to create powerful and daring literary female characters that challenge categorising women as housewives, mothers, or sexual objects, and/enable the study of alternative gender conceptions.

In *Shadow and Bone* (2012), Alina was conflicted between her feelings towards the Darkling and Mal. While training with Baghra, her mentor, she encourages Alina not to hold back any hidden talents. Baghra thinks Alina ought to be content because she is a talented woman. A skilled woman who can compete on an equal footing with males. With that in mind, Alina made an effort to let go of everything

and accept what had transpired. How everything she knew was uprooted, how she had to separate from Mal, her lingering feelings for him, her homesickness to feel something familiar amid everything new, even learning about her power for the first time. After sorting through her feelings, Alina felt at peace, and she made an effort once more to tap into the power she had suppressed and buried deep within. Alina was able to release the light from within her body without Baghra's assistance, although it required some effort on her own. Even the light she emitted was brighter and more intense than it had been before.

Once she found out about the Darkling's plans to use her power to rule Ravka, she escaped with Baghra's help and fled. A few scuffles occurred, which caused her to bump into Mal, who was searching for the Stag that the Darkling is desperate to find. After teaming up with Mal and telling him that the Darkling planned to kill the Stag to acquire its powers, Alina tries to find an alternative way to obtain its power without destroying it. Here, Mal confesses his feelings towards her. After managing to find the Stag, Alina decides to show mercy and not kill it, only for the Darkling to ambush them and kill the Stag. With Mal wounded and the Stag dead, the Darkling had them surrounded and took them back to the camp near The Fold, back to where it all started. The only difference was that Alina was no longer a map-maker.

With the antlers around her neck, Alina's power is under the Darkling's control. Alina does everything in her training to will her power to come out, but it doesn't work; she worries about Mal, who, when she last saw him, was wounded. The Darkling uses Mal as leverage and is amused at Alina's efforts in trying to defy him.

"You think you'll find a way to him, don't you?" he asked, his voice bemused.

"You think that somehow, if he's alive, you'll find a way." He shook his head and gave a short laugh. "I've given you power beyond all dreaming, and you can't wait to run off and keep house for your tracker."

I knew I should stay silent, play the diplomat, but I couldn't help myself. "You haven't given me anything. You've made me a slave." (Bardugo, 2012, p. 324).

Here, the Darkling mentioned that Alina is playing house, referring to the traditional view of a woman's position in a household, where she cooks, cleans, and performs domestic activities. Alina has made the conscious decision to shed her dependence on

romantic impulses and unrealistic expectations. Alina strives to become a powerful woman who harnesses her power and transforms into Grisha, who will bring about Ravka's hopes by eradicating the Shadow Fold. Mal's honesty about his feelings towards her made Alina happy, but she didn't want to let herself get carried away with her emotions once more or lose her composure, much less her strength.

And while Alina herself doesn't try to contradict that part of the speech, she does disagree with the statement made before it, namely that The Darkling has given her power beyond imagination, when in fact it is her power. Alina has always had that power. She never received her powers from the Darkling; the Darkling only helped her nurture them along the way, amplifying them with the antlers, but it was never his to give.

Six of Crows (2015) is about Councilman Hoede testing a drug lethal to humans and addictive to Grisha called Jurda *parem* on a Grisha Healer. The substance enhances her skills in unexpected ways, enabling her to control and influence human minds with ease. She manages to flee after paralyzing Hoede and a few guards, but she is discovered dead a few days later. Jan Van Eck, a wealthy merchant, tells 17-year-old criminal prodigy Kaz Brekker about Hoede's experiment and assigns him the task of rescuing the drug's inventor from the Ice Court, a military stronghold in Fjerda that has never been infiltrated before, and preventing the drug's existence from being revealed to the world. Kaz agrees to a hefty amount and starts recruiting a crew: Inej Ghafa, his right-hand spy, whom he had saved from a pleasure house called the Menagerie two years before; Nina Zenik, a Grisha Heartrender, who joins upon learning of his intention to free and employ Matthias Helvar, a former Fjerdan *drüskelle* or Grisha-hunter detained at Hellgate Prison because of Nina; and Jesper Fahey, a Zemeni sharpshooter with a gambling addiction. This thieving posse of mismatched characters manages to break Matthias out of prison. He promises to help in exchange for a pardon that will allow him to reclaim his *drüskelle* status. Kaz also enlists Wylan Van Eck, Jan Van Eck's wayward son, as a demolition specialist and leverage if Van Eck breaks their agreement. Now with the crew complete, they attempt a seemingly impossible prison break with their special skills and powers.

Nina is never idle; before anything else, she was a Grisha and a soldier. The Fjerdans have a traditional way of thinking about how women are to be venerated and protected. Her offence towards the Fjerdan's way of thinking can be seen in how she questioned why the Fjerdans won't let their women

fight, and joking about how it is most likely that the women will win when they do fight shows that her thinking is the opposite of the Fjerdan.

“Why don’t Fjerdans let girls fight?” she asked him one night as they’d lain curled beneath a lean-to, the cold palpable through the skins they’d laid on the ground.

“They don’t want to fight.”

“How do you know? Have you ever asked one?”

“Fjerdan women are to be venerated, protected.”

“That’s probably a wise policy.”

He’d known her well enough by then to be surprised. “It is?”

“Think how embarrassing it would be for you when you got trounced by a Fjerdan girl.” (Bardugo, 2015, p. 239)

When Nina was caught by the Fjerdan ship where she met Matthias, she had to remain silent about her position as a soldier to prevent revealing the location of the rest of her troops. But she didn’t stay down when caught. She bided her time and used a tin cup to drink water from, thereby breaking free from her bonds. It was with luck that a storm had come and toppled the ship over, making the escape easier.

When trying to find land, after being thrown into the sea, Nina saved Matthias. Together, they swam in the freezing sea, using Nina’s power to keep Matthias warm so he could swim them to the nearest shore. After reaching land, Matthias contemplated leaving Nina, but he realised that what Nina had done was a blood debt. So he tells her about a hut that could potentially have something they could use to survive. On the way there, Nina warmed up to Matthias, whereas Matthias tries to stay clear of her. When Nina asked him what he thinks is so weird about her shedding her clothing to let them dry and so that she doesn’t freeze to death, Matthias retorts with his uptight upbringing in Fjerda.

“Are all Grisha so immodest?” he asked defensively.

“Boys and girls train side by side together in the First and Second Armies. There isn’t a lot of room for maidenly blushing.”

“It’s not natural for women to fight.”

“It’s not natural for someone to be as stupid as he is tall, and yet there you stand. Did you swim all those miles just to die in this hut?” (Bardugo, 2015, p. 229)

As we saw at the beginning of this research, the narrator has a significant role in a narrative. The

primary narrator’s telling voice and its external audience are not connected to the story itself.

However, in the end, the primary narrator remains the one who tells all the secondary narratives. Characters in the story tell the metanarratives, and their narratees are other people in their immediate surroundings.

Every character, as the analysis shows, embodies both the traits of a hero and a witch. Alina is a Grisha; for the people, she is their saviour, tasked with destroying the Fold. For the Darkling, she is the key to controlling the country. And because we see things from her perspective, we discover the turmoil she’s experiencing, being in the middle of it all. Her disobedience to authorities, in this case the Darkling, while trying to save the country, makes her an ambiguous character. Nina, also a Grisha, is their healer, though for Matthias, who has been brought up to kill Grisha, she’s the bane of his existence. Nina has killed before and is no stranger to violence. Being a thief, while also having a strong sense of justice and compassion, puts her in a limbo of being both a hero and a witch. Alex, through her act of discovering Tara’s murderer and her use of trickery to get even, is both a trait of a hero and a witch. Her knowledge of the darker side of the world gave her an edge nobody was expecting from her, topped with her trauma and problems. She is someone who walks down the road of ambiguity, following every step of the way.

CONCLUSION

After considering the results of this research, it can be said that the conceptions of good and evil are not inherently contradictory; instead, they are contextual and can vary according to the specific situation and narrative. So, good and evil are not binary opposites, and similarly, neither are heroes and witches. A witch also possesses many heroic traits, including love, compassion, and a strong sense of justice. In contrast, heroes are also contaminated with many evil characteristics, such as the normalisation of violence.

With time, the grand narratives of good and evil found in other classical stories have faded, and today, in the postmodern world we live in, there are an increasing number of stories that feature morally obscure characters where anyone can be the hero of their tale while also serving as the villain in someone else’s. They straddle the delicate line between black and white, just like everyone else in the world who deals with ambiguity in their own lives, which is why they are often portrayed as ambiguous characters.

Women who frequently struggle to express their emotions to others and feel uneasy about themselves can find inspiration in the stories of the

three female characters. Alina, who possesses a hidden power, Nina, who struggles with her emotions and morals, and Alex, who grapples with accepting herself, can all be compared to a more modern situation that women often find themselves in, even though this is based on a fictional novel. Echoing the theory of women's writing, Bardugo's young adult trilogy shows that women could have various personalities, and they could have weaknesses and strengths at the same time.

Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc.

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