



Gender Performativity in Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with The Dragon Tattoo*

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Abstract

This study investigates the issue of gender performativity in Stieg Larsson's novel *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* (2008). Judith Butler's ideas on gender performativity serve as the theoretical framework of this study. A qualitative method is preferred as the study is heavily permeated with textual-analysis. The main objective of this study is to center on Larsson's presentation of Lisbeth Salander in challenging boundaries in terms of how gender is presented and perceived. The study also provides analysis of other female characters, to see if they challenge or conform to the socially accepted notions of what it means to be a woman. The findings show that Stieg Larsson imbues his novel with the idea of challenging female stereotypes by developing fluidity within Salander's gender identity. Larsson further ingrains gender performativity in all the female characters – they perform their gender identities differently in order to protect themselves from male-dominated society. However, the novel proves to be paradoxical as it shows an incessant reference to female characters in inferior circumstances.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender as a Social Construction

Gender is not fixed attributes. To think otherwise will only strengthen traditional perspective that implies women to always be associated with their feminine characteristics, and that is how a particular gender is being stereotyped. Butler asserts that gender is “an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 1990, p.140). The repetition of act involves behaving in ways that are supposedly specific to a particular gender, and to constantly continue behaving in this way. The repetition is manifested in “the ways that individuals style their bodies and carry themselves, and also in how they speak and move” (Johnson & Repta, 2011, p. 28). A person who identifies himself to be masculine, for instance, would maintain his masculinity by displaying these traits: independent, non-emotional, aggressive, and competitive. And this process needs to be repeated and revaluated every day for otherwise, the identity (being masculine), may be subject to change: if a ‘masculine’ man does not maintain his performance as ‘masculine’, society may begin to view him as less than a man. This highlights that gender identity is a performance, rather than an inherent part of an individual.

Judith Butler believes that gender does not simply place men as masculine and women as feminine. Not only is this pattern designed to keep men in power whilst women remain powerless, but Butler also points out that gender is not inherent; as previously said, gender is a stylized repetition of acts. Given this point, it is possible that a person’s gender can change. It changes through “different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (Butler, 1988, p.520). The breaking of the repetition of acts implies that the person might escape from these narrow gender identities—if the ‘accepted’ identity is just construction/performance that has become accepted over time, then the individuals have the

possibility of constructing their gender differently, and this can work to empower them.

The society established its ‘natural’ configuration of masculine men and feminine women through several practices. Judith Butler says that punishment is one of those media that could shape an individual’s gender. Every individual has been imposed upon his/her sexed body historical possibilities that mostly determine his/her identity: “The historical possibilities [for the body] materialized through various corporeal styles are nothing other than those punitive regulated cultural fictions that are alternately embodied and disguised under duress” (Butler, 1988, p.522). Butler makes it clear that our culture has shaped our gender identity through punishment, i.e. that we would be punished if we deviate from our sexed body. Butler reasserts that “gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences... we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (Butler, 1990, p.139-140). And Butler implies that the society would marginalize those who fail to comply with those regulated cultural fictions (Butler, 1988, p.528). In line with Butler, Whittle proclaims that people are pushed to adopt the “correct” and “corresponding” gender based on their sexed body. Those who fail to do so would face the punitive consequences: discrimination, violence, and even death (qtd in Johnson & Repta, 2011, p.25). However, society will legitimize their gender identity should they conform to the norms. The norm here refers to the norm of heterosexuality. Butler, through performativity theory, tries to subvert and displace masculine hegemony and heterosexist power. Those two aspects have been reified and naturalized by the society to create illusions of identity (Butler, 1990, p.33-34). People are driven to follow these illusions of identity and are forced to believe that heterosexuality is natural. Society has naturalized and reproduced that assumed truth through punishment.

Demystifying Gender Identity

In this heterosexual-dominated world, Judith Butler further identifies the extent of

society's effect on the person's identity. She underlines the role of society as an apparatus through which the female body is entangled with the notion of femininity. Indeed, the individual has to hold on to the norms of her sexed body, which means that the person should stay within her corridor of her own 'imposed' gender identity. In regards to this topic of 'body', Butler says that the term 'body' "appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretative will determine a cultural meaning for itself (Butler, 1990, p. 8), and she further claims that "body is a historical situation, and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation" (Butler, 1988, p.521). In some countries, women should cover their bodies (chest in particular) in public, while men have the privilege not to cover their bodies. This very example shows a dichotomy between the two genders. It is fair to say that this 'body' has been one of the hindrances that ties femininity inescapably to female gender identity. This 'history' of the female body is carried out from one generation to another. This recursive process has made 'history' seemingly natural and fixed. However, this practice leads theorists to question this 'assumed' truth. They begin to think that gender identity is all imposed by society; it is neither natural nor fixed.

That being said, gender performativity is meant to combat the common assumption that women are weak and inferior to men. And one literary work that centralizes gender performativity is Stieg Larsson's renowned novel *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* (2008). To find the performativity in Larsson's work, this study unearths an in-depth analysis on Larsson's main character, Lisbeth Salander, as a force to challenge female gender's presentation as inferior to men. Judith Butler's gender performativity is used as the platform to dissect Salander's fluidity in the text. Furthermore, I intend to show the different ways in which other female characters adhere to or challenge the socially-accepted notions of gender identity.

METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach. Michael Quinn Patton proclaims that a well-suited research methods for any feminist-related research might be a orientational qualitative inquiry. It is due to the fact that this research "begins with an explicit theoretical or ideological perspective that determines what conceptual framework will direct fieldwork and the interpretation of findings" (Patton, 2002, p.129). The fact that the object of the study is a novel, a textual analysis will be deployed as the main method. Therefore, the outcome of this study is mainly interpretative but fully well-founded.

To collect the data, I begin with conducting an extensive reading on feminism. It is followed by finding a proper text that might heavily linked to feminist movement. Stieg Larsson's novel *The Girl with The Dragon Tattoo* serves as an appropriate object of the study after several close readings. Since feminism is a broad theory, I narrow it down to Judith Butler's theory on performativity to dissect the object of study. The theory offers measurable approach to analyze gender fluidity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Women's Oppression in *The Girl with The Dragon Tattoo*

The novel *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* was partly inspired by Larsson's own experience as a young boy: "At the age of 15 he [Larsson] witnessed a gang rape and never intervened, according to longtime friend Kurdo Baksi. Days later, ridden with guilt, Larsson asked the victim for her forgiveness, but she refused" (James, 2010). It is not possible to prove with a direct statement Larsson's intentions in writing this novel, as the book was published posthumously. However, some critics believed that the novel was a way to make amends to the victimized woman. Unsurprisingly, then, violent assaults on women are a central feature of the novel. Larsson poured most of the assaults on Lisbeth Salander, and

many of the other female characters have also suffered from some form of assault. What is clear, then, is that the numerous assaults that take place in the novel are not there to entertain the readers, but to make a point about the horrifying prevalence of violence against women in Sweden.

Harriet Vanger is one of the victims of the assault. This character is filled with positive attributes. However, as the story unveils, her characteristics swiftly change to be more introverted, passive, weak and fearful (Larsson, 2008, p.100). It is a result of being repeatedly raped by her own brother and father. She is 'narrated' through male perspectives which show how helpless she is. In fact, she seems to be the most inferior female character compared to other female characters.

Harriet's mother, Isabella, does little to save her daughter. Her inability to save her daughter is based on her 'inferiority' and a resulting inability to deal with male characters who abuse Harriet. She simply cares little about her daughter's well-being. Henrik says of her, "She travelled a great deal in Sweden and abroad, and lacked all sense of responsibility... a mother who was forever leaving them [Martin and Harriet]" (Larsson, 2008, p.99). Henrik further mentions how Isabella is happy to see her daughter move out to live with her uncle, Henrik, for she believes "it was just fine to be spared the responsibility for her daughter" (Larsson, 2008, p. 104). This proves Isabella's inept handling of being a parent. Isabella might not have the positive feminine qualities that her daughter has, such as being kind, nurturing and caring. However, she has particular 'feminine' traits. Isabella might not care about her own behavior towards others, but she is concerned about her looks, as she maintains an outward appearance of femininity. Henrik Vanger describes Isabella as a beautiful, stylish, conceited and elegant woman, and likens her to some famous actresses, Greta Garbo and Ingrid Bergman. Blomkvist even compares her beauty with Lauren Bacall, and he reckons that "she looked like an ageing vampire—still strikingly beautiful but as venomous as a snake" (Larsson, 2008, p.209).

Isabella, in the general sense, is feminine when it comes to her appearance, as well as the perception of her as being extremely emotional, but lacks what are seen as 'positive' feminine attributes.

Unlike Isabella, Cecilia Vanger shows more of her positive feminine traits, which makes her more affable than Isabella. In fact, she is one of the women for whom both Henrik and Blomkvist have the highest regard. Cecilia goes through some difficult times, like the other female characters. Quite similar to Harriet, Cecilia suffers from male abuse. Cecilia struggles her entire life to be freed from the sense of being inferior to men. Her marriage with Jerry Karlson is filled with nightmares: "Blows to the head, violent shoving, mood threats, and being knocked to the kitchen floor...the attacks were not often so severe that she was actually injured. She had become used to it" (Larsson, 2008, p.280). Her suffering comes not only from her husband but her father as well, as he "began to berate her with humiliating invective and revolting remarks about her morals and sexual predilections. He snarled that no wonder such a whore could never keep a man" (Larsson, 2008, p.280-81). Cecilia later expresses how her childhood had been ruined by her father and brother. However, that predicament does not defeat her. Cecilia, unlike Isabella, is still able to keep her self-control. She does not simply act viciously against male counterparts like most of them did to her. Instead, she improvises in a way the males around her would eventually respect her. She maintains her feminine traits—caring, nurturing, and empathetic within herself, but she also shakes off the sense of being inferior to the men around her. Henrik Vanger proclaims that Cecilia Vanger is "one of my relatives for whom I have the highest regard" (Larsson, 2008, p.147). This gives a brief summary of how respectable she is in front of another character. With these three women, Larsson seems to suggest three responses to the performative construction of women as 'less than' men. Harriet seems to maintain a pose of victimhood, Isabella rejects the 'softer' and therefore 'weaker' aspects of constructed

womanhood, while Cecilia manages to find a balance between strength and softness.

The female character least known for her femininity is Lisbeth Salander. Unlike the aforementioned characters who are known for their femininity, either through their appearance or behavior, Salander's gender identity challenges the norm. She is known for her masculinity throughout the story. However, at some points, she shows some subtle hints of her feminine traits and appearance. Salander shows her tenderness and sympathy towards certain people. She becomes more sensitive when it comes to her mother. Her emotion is evident during her visit to her mother on Christmas Eve at the Äppelviken Nursing Home in Upplands-Väsby, "She had brought presents... She drank coffee as she watched the forty-six-year-old woman who with clumsy fingers was trying to untie the knot on the ribbon" (Larsson, 2008, p.79). She also reveals her feminine trait when she wanted to give Blomkvist a gift, which ends in disappointment. For Lisbeth Salander, to perform femininity is to suffer, to be controlled, to be abused. She learns this from watching her 'feminine' mother constantly be abused by her father. She realizes instantly that being feminine is also being inferior. Salander feels sorry for her mother, saying "No, Mum. You're not stupid. But life is unfair" (Larsson, 2008, p.80). Her words do not suggest the absolute necessity of succumbing to male-dominated society, but she is trying to convince her mother that her compliant behavior in treating her husband as her superior is not just her mistake. Salander realizes from that moment she cannot follow her mother's footsteps, to be inferior. What she experiences and she sees from her mother, strengthens the idea that to perform feminine traits might only bring sufferings.

The idea of femininity is severely disempowering in this context. Each female character has to suffer by performing either an outward appearance of femininity or through their behavior. Harriet, Cecilia, and Salander's mother are clear examples of how their behavior makes them vulnerable. Even at some points, by only performing the appearance of femininity,

Erika Berger has to suffer from public stereotypes. She is seen as incompetent woman who only cares about her appearance. The idea of femininity seems to be discouraging, yet the question remains whether performing masculinity would help those female characters avert mistreatment from men.

Challenging Femininity

To combat the powerlessness, those female characters must challenge the idea that they must naturally be 'feminine' by performing more 'masculine' identities. In a general sense, the term masculine requires the individual to be dominant, independent, controlling, assertive, relatively directive and autocratic (Eagly, 2002, p.1074). In addition to that, Mosse adds several qualities that a masculine individual should also possess: "manly virtues" such as power, honor, self-restraint ("real men do not cry") and courage (Mosse, 1996, p.3-4). Mosse believes those projections on manly virtues are relevant in many contexts from time to time. Therefore, I would like to do a character analysis of each female character to see if those female characters possess these masculine qualities. On top of that, the analysis will see if those masculine acts will help them to overcome their predicaments.

Harriet Vanger's masculine traits are not apparent in the beginning of the story. As the story unfolds, the other characters gradually open up about her life right after she runs away from her family. Harriet is courageous as she shoves her father into the river, trying to defend herself. She might be doing it out of desperation, but the fact that she makes sure that her father dies in the first place shows how dangerous she is. Harriet further reveals her audacity by moving to Italy on her own at the age of 16, to live in a convent for four years (Larsson, 2008, p.535). Her self-reliant personality is able to bring her out of tumultuous years of sufferings brought about by her own family. At the end of the story, she proves to be a successful woman as the owner of Cochran Farm, "one of the largest in all of Australia" (Larsson, 2008, p.531). In Harriet's case, her 'masculine' trait, being independent, has paved her way to

live a much better life. In exchange for her triumph, Harriet has to run away from her loved ones, namely her uncle, Henrik, and her cousin, Anita.

Harriet's mother, Isabella, maintains an outward appearance of femininity, but rejects it through her behaviour. She possesses masculine traits, such as independence, fearlessness, and being controlling. Her fearlessness is apparent during her first encounter with Blomkvist, when "Isabella raised her cane and pressed the handle against Mikael's chest...he took a step back in surprise"; she then tells him to stay away from her, and all he does is stand "where he was, looking like a man who has just met a real live-comic book character" (Larsson, 2008, p.210). In other words, Isabella has shown a glimpse of what kind of person she might be. In addition to that, Isabella's cold-blooded husband Gottfried is afraid of her. Despite the fact that her husband is also being unfaithful to her, Isabella does not seem to mind, "My father had women, but for some strange reasons he was afraid of Isabella. He stayed away from her, but he couldn't get a divorce" (Larsson, 2008, p.539). Isabella has made herself the most feared female character, rejecting all pressure to be nurturing or caring.

Isabella's identity to some extent has been constructed by her past. Butler once said that, "If gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of **improvisation** within a scene of constraint" (Butler, 2004, p.1). This term "improvisation" is what I believe occurs to Isabella. Some characters fail to notice her turbulent past, before she is married to Gottfried. Henrik says, "Isabella was born in 1928 and is still alive. She was eleven when the war began, and you can imagine what it was like to be a teenager in Berlin during the aerial bombardments. It must have felt as if she had arrived in paradise on earth when she landed in Sweden" (Larsson, 2008, p.99). Henrik implies how the war and post-war regime had a huge impact on her psychological state. As it stands,

the life of a woman during the Nazi era was extremely depressing. According to Trueman, "women were not expected to work... their lives were controlled...were not expected to wear make-up or trousers...dyeing of hair was not allowed nor were perms. Only flat shoes were expected to be worn...discouraged from slimming... encouraged to have a well built figure as slim women...also discouraged from smoking" (Trueman, 2016). Also, he proclaimed that Hitler even gave an award for the woman who had given birth to the largest number or had produced eight children. It is quite perplexing to know that the government in this era encouraged unmarried woman to have children. With all that was happening around her, Isabella had to find a way to deal with her current situation. Instead of finding her peaceful retreat, she ends up living with "father [husband]—son serial killer team" (Reburn, 2012, p.225) – another horrifying example of male dominance. It seems to me that Henrik himself overlooks the reason of Isabella's way of living: she is lazy, wrathful and neglectful. Again, these are not 'feminine' traits. All he knows is that she "sometimes is not all there" (Larsson, 2008, p.147), revealing Isabella's current state of mind. Isabella is indeed traumatized by her past. Her "improvisations" to deal with her present situation are to ignore it completely. Isabella indeed knows what her daughter suffers, as Harriet reveals: "Of course she knew [about the rape]. Nothing ever happened in our family without Isabella knowing. But she ignored everything that was unpleasant or showed her in a bad light" (Larsson, 2008, p.539). To ignore her surroundings, and performatively create the identity of someone spiteful and tough, has made her untouchable. She successfully gets away from male dominance by constructing her own characteristics that are universally disliked. Even if it means others are sacrificed or suffered, like her daughter, Harriet.

While Isabella uses her masculine 'mask' to cope with male dominance, Cecilia Vanger also learns that she has to perform masculine behavior to survive in society. Cecilia, having

survived abuses from her 'loved ones', distances herself from being emotionally involved. She seems more cautious when it comes to being in a relationship with a male counterpart, which is reflected by her commitment of having no partner for years. Blomkvist's arrival in Hedestad changes her course of life. She might fall in love eventually, but she is a changed woman. She sets her own codes in their relationship: "She didn't want anyone to know they were meeting; she wanted him to come over only when she called and was in the mood; and she didn't want him to stay all night" (Larsson, 2008, p.263). Not only that it implies her unwillingness to go deeper into a relationship, but she also wants to make sure that she is in control. Her stance of being an independent woman can be seen from her statement, "I do best on my own" (Larsson, 2008, p. 240), and by taking on the role of headmistress of Hedestad preparatory school she further exhibits her power, which strengthens her masculine identity. However, her identity of being 'masculine' fades as Blomkvist comes along. The novel states that "the problem is that I like him too much, she thought. He's going to end up hurting me. She sat for a long time wishing that Mikael Blomkvist had never come to Hedeby" (Larsson, 2008, p.279). That excerpt divulges Cecilia's current state, prior to Blomkvist's parting. Blomkvist tears apart her image of an independent and controlling person. However, it is clear that for Cecilia, maintaining (masculine) control and independence has not entailed giving up her feminine traits.

Unlike Cecilia who is left shattered by his disappearance, Blomkvist's other lover, Erika Berger, seems the only female character who is able to stay unwavering. Blomkvist leaves Erika, too, in search of the missing girl, Harriet. Her assertiveness and resolute nature can be seen in the beginning of the story. The way she handles her marriage, for instance, might reflect her principle, in which she takes control over of whom she wanted to be sleeping with. Her husband is aware of his wife's relationship with Blomkvist. Their relationship might have ruined Blomkvist's marriage with his (now) ex-wife

Abrahamsson (Larsson, 2008, p.62), but not Erika's marriage. Moreover, Erika is not keen on taking her relationship with Blomkvist further. Instead, she keeps on rejecting the notion of a more serious relationship with him by turning down Blomkvist's idea of moving in together, "They had talked of moving in together. He had wanted to...It wouldn't work, she said, they would risk what they had if they fell in love too" (Larsson, 2008, p. 67). This implies the reverse of the usual situation, where it is the man who maintains emotional distance while the woman is expected to want a more stable relationship. In addition to her position of superiority here, Erika shows her dominance at her workplace, "she was a part owner—the majority partner, in fact—and editor in chief of her own magazine, which gave her prestige and the control over publicity" (Larsson, 2008, p.72); this puts her above Blomkvist in the hierarchy. Moreover, Blomkvist's perspective on her suggests that she has both self-control and an undaunted personality: "She was an organiser who could handle employees with warmth and trust but who at the same time wasn't afraid of confrontation and could be very tough when necessary" (Larsson, 2008, p.71). Erika's masculinity is apparent, giving her control and independence, and she firmly holds true to her principle throughout the story.

Lisbeth Salander's Masculine Performativity

The only female character who displaces makes the most of being associated with masculinity is Lisbeth Salander. Salander is the only female character who seems to have all the masculine qualities that Mosse and Eagly mention: power, self-restraint, courage, independence, control, assertiveness and directness. First of all, Salander might be the bravest character in the story, but being brave is not the only thing that makes her prevail to live in a male-dominated society. The key to her action, according to Joey Beth Smith is that "she is clearly able to identify her oppressors, and she *fearlessly* fights against them" (Smith, 2013, p.59). A clear example can be seen in her reaction

towards her legal guardian and eventual rapist, Bjurman. In dealing with Bjurman, firstly, she does not want any intervention from authorities as she executes her plan. She realizes that the authorities would side with Bjurman, for he is more powerful in terms of the social strata, not to mention that Salander has, officially, a bad reputation. Therefore, she has to find her own way to punish him, which proves to be effective. That example also shows that she does not act on her angry impulse. Salander even has her own ideal named "Analysis of the consequences" (Larsson, 2008, p.267). It comprises of what follows after Bjurman's death. She lists two problems, saying that "Bjurman's death would not of itself give her back control of her own life, and there was no guarantee that Bjurman's successor would be an improvement" (ibid). Therefore, the options of using guns, bombs, knife, poison, and any other alternatives to end his life seem quite futile. To think of those alternatives under enormous stress shows her immense self-control or composure, and contradicts the notion of women as hysterical and emotional.

Apart from her actions, Lisbeth Salander's masculinity can be seen from her façade as well. It is known that Salander is small in stature. Her skinny figure, however, does not make her less intimidating; in fact, "Much stronger boys... learned that it could be quite unpleasant to fight with that skinny girl" (Larsson, 2008, p.250), which is because her hobby is to box against "the guys in a club in Söder" (Larsson, 2008, p.428). Therefore, being involved in physical combat against men is her routine. In regards to her physical attributes, Salander tends to have an androgynous look. The term androgyny itself means "the embodiment of an identity defined through... cross-gender identification" (Hargreaves, 2005, p.3). Thus, she refuses to identify fully with either the masculine or feminine identity.

Lisbeth Salander confirms Butler's idea that a person's body holds a pivotal role in determining his/her identity. Salander constructs the significance of her body by performing more

of the manly or masculine façade. She breaks away from the 'historical situation' where woman should follow the path imposed by a patriarchal society, which is to adhere to the demands of the feminine exterior. Butler asserts that "the body" or the "sexed body" is "shaped by political forces with strategic interests in keeping that body bounded and constituted by the markers of sex" (Butler, 1990, p.129). And the one that has profited from this political interest is men. In addition to that, Judith Butler called "the body" a "passive medium", where cultural meanings are inscribed. And the embodiment of Salander challenges the idea of the female body as feminine. She perhaps reinscribes her own cultural meanings. The underlying feminine ideal itself, according to Marchessault, is "tall, thin, and busty Barbie-doll stereotype" (qtd in Grogan, 2008, p. 41). And Grogan also adds, based on her research, that most women in her study tended to maintain a "feminine" look, that is "defined as having a hair-free body and clear skin" (Grogan, 2008, p.68). Those attributes are the ones that Lisbeth Salander is not known for. She does not qualify for the 'ideal' requirements of that feminine look. As it is told in the novel, she "was a pale, anorexic young woman who had hair as short as a fuse, and a pierced nose and eyebrows" (Larsson, 2008, p.41). Anorexia here does not simply refer to the eating disorder. Instead, the narrator even said, "she seemed to consume every kind of junk food" (Ibid). It implies that she refuses to adhere to the kind of external discipline exerted over female bodies—they are meant to be more restrained, not to consume these pre-prepared or packaged foods that have low nutritional value

Apart from her stature, there are other significant aspects that help to build her masculine exterior. Lisbeth Salander's fierce look is amplified through her tattoos, implying an unconventional way of presenting a woman's image. She disrupts a traditional conception of women and tattoos, which states that "In the early 20th century, tattoos were stigmatized (even illegal in some jurisdictions) because of their association with raunchy male imagery. Middle-

class women who were tattooed knew they would be considered “loose” or seedy if they showed their marks” (Heller). Out of curiosity, Blomkvist takes a chance to count her tattoos, “He looked down at the dragon on her shoulder. He counted her tattoos. As well as a wasp on her neck, she had a loop around one ankle, another loop around the biceps of her left arm, a Chinese symbol on her hip, and a rose on one calf” (Larsson, 2008, p.459). Her tattoos not only function as a medium to defy the aforementioned assumption, but also posit some cultural meanings in themselves. Cahill and Riley believe that body art or tattoo is used as a way to reclaim female “bodies from either child abuse, rape or other traumatic events... as a means of rebellion... and as a means of resisting Othering” (2001, p.154 & 168). Just by looking through this lens, it is clear that Lisbeth might have her tattoo as a reminder of her past, and also partly as a symbol of rebellion. The dragon tattoo for instance, this fiery legendary animal, is generally considered as a symbol of power, chaos and “demonic” images (Dunn,2010,p.74). Throughout the story, the images of Salander created in the novel tend to be chaotic and also feared by many. The wasp is an aggressive insect, and unlike bees, the wasp could sting repeatedly (Beckley,2008, p. 4). The wasp might be a perfect representation of Lisbeth’s character. The wasp could even be deadly, especially when someone tries to take down its nest. Similar to the characteristics of the wasp, Lisbeth is only aggressive to those who do her harm, like Bjurman.

Despite her unconventional and modified appearance, she attracts many male characters around her, including her own boss, Dragan Armansky: “The attraction, Armansky thought, was that Salander was a foreign creature to him. He might just as well have fallen in love with a painting of a nymph or a Greek amphora. Salander represented a life that was not real or him, that fascinated him” (Larsson, 2008, p. 46). The novel tries to disseminate a new idea of beauty through her character, and it is represented in her rose tattoo.

Besides her tattoos, her piercings also serve some meaningful representations as well. As the novel states, Salander has several piercings on her body (nose and eyebrows). On piercings and their meaning, Cahill and Riley explain:

Body art, we would argue, goes one step further in this dominance/subversion struggle in that it’s very visibility/invisibility offers multiple levels of resistance. Resistance can be overt, the eyebrow pierced and decorated; or covert, so that the visible outer appearance is one of compliance, but the private/invisible reveals a very different story. (2001, p.168)

Therefore, it can be said that visible piercings (eyebrows or nose) are meant as a subversive way to show her identity, and also as a symbol of her struggle. In support of this theory, Sarah Grogan claims that “recent work has suggested that people with piercings today present them as acts of rebellion and self-identity” (2008, p.39). Piercings, then, can be seen as a statement to claim full control of the body. Salander proves that she does not intend to submit or conform to what her society expects of her as a woman. Like tattoos, piercings here are basically meant to symbolize her existence in the novel as an unconventional woman and to show that she has full control of her body. It can be said that those tattoos and piercings not only convey symbolic meanings, but also construct her own identity and redefine the ideal of beauty.

The analysis above shows that each female character shows that gender is indeed performative. Each female character undergoes gender re-construction by breaking their feminine style to something more masculine, which is meant to challenge male-dominated society. However, it is important not to overlap the idea of gender performativity and gender that is being performed. In an interview with bigthink.com, Judith Butler proclaims that gender that is performed is different from gender as performativity. Gender that is performed “mean[s] that we’ve taken on a role or we’re acting in some way and that our acting or our role playing is crucial to the gender that we are and the gender that we present to the world” while gender performativity “produces series of effects; we act and walk and speak and talk in ways that

consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman”; Butler further claims that gender is performative, saying that “nobody really is a gender from the start” (2011).

To show that gender is performative, Salander ‘makes fun’ of her ‘feminine looks’ in the novel. Her performances as Irene Nesser and Monica Scholes can be considered a kind of drag. Apart from being undercover, the drag performance suggests that she can be detached from the traditional view, which entails that females should act and look feminine. At this point, she starts disguising herself as Irene Nesser, a Norwegian with shoulder-length blonde hair, and later as Monica Scholes. As mentioned earlier, she transforms herself through makeup into the Barbie-doll ideal of femininity. This idea of ‘Salander-as-feminine’ is meant to make fun of her unfitting exterior. As it stands, Salander’s ‘true’ self is the one who dresses masculine; Salander herself admits that her ‘new persona’ makes her feel exhausted, showing that it is a performance rather than natural: “When she locked the door to her compartment, she could feel that for the first time in two days, her adrenaline level had returned to normal” (Larsson, 2008, p.619). The implied meaning of this juxtaposition of her drag persona and her true identity shows that gender is not an internal facticity built within a person over a constant lengthy period of time. Rather, it is something that can be put on or taken off as necessary, as Salander does, without compromising her own non-normative identity. Thus, Salander actions and identities throughout the novel are shown to be purely performative. The feminine façade is purely a mockery, with Irene and Monica showing everything that Lisbeth is not.

Judith Butler further proves that gender is social construction by claiming that gender has its own punitive consequence for those who challenge their ‘natural’ or socially constructed gender identities. The punishment is meant to realign any individuals deviated from their sexed paths. In regard to this social punishment, Judith Butler states:

The social punishments that follow upon

transgressions of gender include the surgical correction of intersexed persons, the medical and psychiatric pathologization and criminalization in several countries including the United States of “gender dysphoric” people, the harassment of gender-troubled persons on the street or in the workplace, employment discrimination, and violence. (2004, p.55)

Thus, an individual is clearly shaped by these norms should s(he) break the norm of his/her gendered body. In line with this theory, Lisbeth Salander experiences a similar situation in her life. In her thirteenth year, Lisbeth Salander was sent to St. Stefan’s Psychiatric Clinic for Children for she was reported to be “violent towards her classmates and possibly towards herself” (Larsson, 2008, p.173). The truth is that she used to be harassed and assaulted by older boys, and her society thought of her as dangerous when the truth is that she tried to protect herself – but violence is ‘not natural’ for girls. In her casebook, Salander is described to be “lacking of self-awareness... introverted, socially inhibited, lacking in empathy, ego-fixated, psychopathic and asocial behavior, difficulty in cooperating, and incapable of assimilating learning” (Larsson, 2008, p.175). Salander’s introverted behavior and cynicism come as a result of her distrust towards society, as she learns from her mother’s fate that “life is unfair” (Larsson, 2008, p.80). The way she exhibits her no-nonsense manner and her ideology are plainly rejected by her society, and her unfeminine life makes her prone to being misjudged as a mentally-ill and disturbed person. All that she is doing, is simply improvising her gender identity. Her sexuality gives another reason why her society rejects her – she deviates from normalcy. Indeed, Salander is the only major character whose bi-sexuality is deemed as taboo in many countries. Prior to her meeting with Blomkvist, Salander was in a relationship with a girl named Mimmi. The novel states that “Salander—unlike Mimmi—had never thought of herself as a lesbian. She had never brooded over whether she was straight, gay, or even bisexual” (Larsson, 2008, p.357). Here, it is clear that she refuses to be categorised. She simply turns to women because men are mostly

insensitive, ignorant, and selfish individuals while women, she believes, are a “sweet compromise” (ibid). That being said, Salander seems unconcerned with society’s expectation of her. She constructs her identity as she deems fit. Lisbeth Salander’s action reflects Butler’s notion, which states that “Gender is a basically innovative affair, although it is quite clear that there are strict punishments for contesting the script by performing out of turn or through unwarranted improvisations”. (1988, p.531). Larsson tries to ‘normalize’ a twist within heterosexuality. Jordan Bernsmeier said:

Now lesbians and gays are marketed to in a way that emphasizes their “normalcy” as “heterosexuality with a small twist”. This newer version of hetero-with-a-twist marketing is meant to appeal not only to lesbians and gays but also to heteros who are “cool” or “down with the gays.”... Salander is “cool” because she is queer. Her queerness is normalized because Larsson describes her in the novel as, “quite normal woman, with the same desires and sex drive as every other woman,” even if she happens to occasionally have sex with women (Larsson, 2008, p.396, qtd in Bernsmeier, 2013, p 99-100)

It is clear that Salander performs another unwarranted improvisation, which is her uncommon sexual preference, and she is fully aware of the consequences that follow.

Salander realizes that her society is alienating her. Her position in society is presented through a cryptic message on her T-Shirt: “Salander was dressed for the day in a black T-shirt with a picture on it of E.T. with fangs, and the words I AM ALSO AN ALIEN” (Larsson, 2008, p.51). E.T. is a harmless alien from Steven Spielberg’s movie E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial (1982). However, Lisbeth Salander does not want to consider herself to be gentle or weak, so the added ‘fangs’ suggest that she could be dangerous. The words on the T-shirt imply two things: (a) they highlight her alienation within society; (b) that she is female, or what Beauvoir called as “Other”, but powerful. All in all, people are trying to force her to follow the norms of her sexed body. It is possible that her only way out of that distress is to apply a feminine attitude, like what society demands of her. Butler

once said, “Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment” (Butler, 2011,p.177). That is to say, there are consequences, which can lead to a severe punishment for those individuals who perform differently, outside their gendered mold. The kernel of the analysis reveals that by performing the socially sanctioned masculine traits, women can successfully overcome or challenge the male-dominated society. Unfortunately, some of the female characters have to deal with dismal consequences.

CONCLUSION

Stieg Larson’s novel proves to be heavily permeated with gender performativity. The author implies that women should challenge female stereotypes such as passivity and weakness. Most of female characters prevail when they perform masculine traits to combat male-dominated society.

As previously stated, Stieg Larsson’s novel *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* is a form of female empowerment. The empowerment that is meant here is that female characters need to detach their feminine attributes. In this case, Lisbeth Salander acts as an epitome of a non-conforming female. She challenges some of the traditional assumptions that claim women to be weak, inferior, and excessively sentimental. It can be said that Lisbeth Salander is the exact embodiment of Butler’s idea of performativity, which proclaims that “gender is in no way a stable identity...it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through the stylized repetition of acts” (1988, p. 519). Salander proves that she has to maintain her performative act as a ‘masculine’ female throughout the story.

However, incessant reference to female characters in inferior circumstances creates its own paradox. Female characters are often subjugated by men in Larsson’s novel. Judith Butler once said that “the subordination of

women by men is part of a larger social practice that creates gendered bodies (my emphasis)—feminine women and masculine men” (2004, p.55). Therefore, by normalizing female subordination, the segregation of feminine women and masculine men will always be hard to break. In previous part, it reveals that all of the female characters are to some extent stereotyped by their societies. For instance, Erika Berger is deemed incompetent by the media to lead her own magazine company. Harriet, Cecilia, and Lisbeth Salander suffer from male abuse. Harriet’s mother, Isabella, survives a traumatic period of Nazi regime. In other words, Larsson reproduces Butler’s notion of “a historical situation” to female bodies. Larsson shows that females are inevitably oppressed and placed in inferior positions.

In conclusion, Stieg Larsson imbues his novel with the idea to challenge female stereotypes by developing the fluidity within Salander’s gender identity. Larsson also instills gender performativity to all the female characters. The female characters exhibit masculine attributes to protect themselves from male-dominated society. However, it implies that female characters are, in fact, constructed as being inferior to males. The female characters are incessantly portrayed to be oppressed. Their bleak background stories indicate that Larsson has implicitly reinforced the idea of the weak feminine female. Most female characters display the lack of will to claim their agency, unlike Salander who is very determined to reclaim her agency even if it turns violent. All in all, to face the consequences in performing masculine traits within each female character’s identity is inevitable, but it can resolve the issues of living in male-dominated society by expanding the idea of what a woman can and should be.

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