

**Mapping out Images of Warrior Women in Stieg Larsson's *The Millennium Trilogy* (2005-2010)****Saadia Ayub¹, Samina Ayub²**¹ Lecturer, Department of CARBS, Superior University, Lahore, Pakistan.Email: saadia.ayub@superior.edu.pk² Lecturer, Department of English, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Pakistan.Email: samina.Ayub@lcwu.edu.pk**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i1.1666>****Abstract**

This paper explores the portrayal of miscellaneous warrior women in Stieg Larsson's *The Millennium Trilogy* (2005-2010). It not only analyses the existence of these queer women in their various avatars such as masculine women, tomboys and fighter women, but it also debunks the misconceptions associated with them by the hegemonic Swedish society. Judith Halberstam's queer theory provides a lens to study how these unconventional female identities along with the complexity of their unremitting conflicts transition into being empowered women from being mere survivors in the past. It further lends a deeper insight into their survival and fighting mechanisms such as an inclusive sisterhood, formation of a second identity, undaunting sense of selfhood, and silent observation of their surroundings. The trilogy's feminist narrative shows that mindful social change is indispensable to eventually end female isolation, exploitation and marginalization by creating acceptance for women who possess a strong sense of self and individuality in the 21st century milieu.

Keywords: Warrior women, queer women, masculine women, second identity, sisterhood, survival, empowered women

Introduction

In the world of journalism and literature, Larsson is a "revolutionary socialist" (Forshaw, 2013, p. 39) who belongs to an unconventional school of feminism. The redeeming feature of his prose lies in his projection of female courage as a warrior. His female characters operate in a criminal Swedish world where crime is padded for vengeance and protection when abused women learn to use it. His brand of feminism shows both sides of the coin hence, the series become "a bitter sweet experience" (Forshaw, 2013, p. 45) because it incorporates the striking images of both; the exploited and champion women simultaneously.

In the early crime literature and pop culture, the representation of female masculinity was constructed in a negative way by showing how desperately a woman claims her personal motives or revenge, even through the use of violence. The past understanding of female masculinity shows a reductive image of a woman as an avenger, fury, enabler of justice or punishment, manipulative and cunning. The common characteristic of a female avenger is that she abandons her feminine self in the process and appears as an emblem of the insurgency. Consequently, she becomes an alien to the conventional society and to her own self. Often, there is no initialization of the process that leads towards self-actualization.

Larsson creates the image of a woman warrior in the third novel, *The Girl Who Kicks the Hornet's Nest* (2010) by employing a number of allusions to ancient female warrior armies and mythical female soldiers in the introductory preface of each part of the novel. In his opinion, the traces of female warriors were erased by

male historians over the centuries in order to construct another archetype of a woman that would strengthen patriarchal system. He breaks the stereotyping by introducing a male hero who plays a secondary part in the progression of the plot and who embraces his weaknesses openly. Moreover, Larsson places his female protagonist outside the archetypal female mould where she lies within the category of a *masculine female* because of her intellectuality, armoured willpower, fighting spirit, manly looks and unique modus vivendi.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are:

1. How does the trilogy represent the images, characteristics, and struggles of queer women?
2. How does Larsson explore and debunk the misconceptions associated with the avatars of warrior women in the trilogy?
3. What survival and resistance strategies do Larsson's warrior women employ while navigating patriarchal Swedish society?

Literature Review

Stieg Larsson's literary legacy made a mark in the Scandinavian crime fiction and it shaped the future representation of this genre. His bent towards female crime fiction is one the reasons that motivated him to highlight female struggles in such a complex society. The integrated universe of *The Millennium Trilogy* (2005-2010) offers a dark social commentary. According to Nathaniel Rich, Larsson had a strong "desire to learn about... fringe groups [that] gave his life meaning, and eventually took the form of an obsession" (Holmes, 2010). Likewise, *The Millennium Trilogy* (2005-2010) has a preoccupation with fringe groups among women. For this very reason, Maureen Corrigan considers *The Girl with Dragon Tattoo* (2005) an "unflinching ... commonsense feminist social commentary" (Stenport, & Alm, 2009, p.160).

Apart from a number of contemporary studies based on the trilogy's feminist agenda, several critiques paint Lisbeth in a new light as David Denby comments that, "she [Lisbeth] is both a victim and an avenger, a woman damaged, abused, yet defiantly sexual" (2011). Nina Bjork extends this argument further by calling Lisbeth "a model of the conventional male action hero, but her sex is different" (Stenport, & Alm, 2009, p.171). Additionally, David Denby argues that Lisbeth has more in common with male action heroes than women. Laura Salinas views Lisbeth in the similar fashion and calls her dynamic because she stands on a dividing line between male and female worlds.

Lisbeth's portrayal as a hero is constantly challenged and reinterpreted by several critics and researchers. For instance, Laura DeMarco explains Lisbeth's character arc in terms of an anti-heroine. Apart from rendering Lisbeth's antihero profile, some critics associate her with the classical hard-boiled femme fatale who is dangerous and seductive in her ways. Zoë Brigley Thompson admires her femme fatale avatar, calling it 'the most powerful' (2013, p. 151). In contrast, Christina Stimpson acknowledges Lisbeth Salander as a non-femme fatale in both the novel and the film.

In nutshell, the above-mentioned insights either lack detail-oriented analysis or they always revolve around Lisbeth overlooking all the other female characters. Secondly, another persistent issue is the fixation on the first part of the trilogy. Thirdly, only certain researchers imply a connection with the exploration of female masculinity, but not as a part of womanhood at all.

This research fills the gaps in the existing literature by providing a detailed analysis of all the major and minor female characters, addressing the trilogy in unison and constituting an ideology of womanhood that is inclusive of female victims, tomboys, masculine women, warrior women and sisterhood.

Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative research method. It also includes critical theories, textual analysis and literary criticism. It uses the lens of queer theory by Judith Halberstam to critically examine the ideology of

womanhood that leads to empowered women. This research uses the information from primary sources i.e., Stieg Larsson's novels i.e., *The Girl with Dragon Tattoo* (2005), *The Girl Who Played with Fire* (2006), *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* (2010), biographies, online and written interviews. Besides, the secondary sources include research articles, theoretical works, novels, short stories, critiques of Larsson's works, T.V programs and newspaper columns.

Discussion and Analysis

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all her one lone, all these [women] together ought to be able to turn it right side up again, and now [that] they is [sic] asking to, the men better let 'em. (Murphy, 2011, p. 66)

In *The Millennium Trilogy* (2005-2010), the women who deviate from conventional codes of femininity are suppressed, rejected and eventually victimised by the prejudiced men. Over the course of centuries, such nonconformist women are addressed through the negative labels such as *witches, rebels, threats and queer*. The trilogy presents a few *masculine female* characters as queer and it begins a discourse about the female masculinity that is either repeatedly ignored or labelled as a taboo in the contemporary society. The feminist theorist, Judith Halberstam argues that the social practice of “reduc[ing the masculinity] down to the male body” suggests overlooking the existence of masculine women (Goodwill, 2009, p. 355). Consequently, the social alienation and uprootedness force these women to stand on the threshold of the gender-divided world for they do not belong to the conventional male or female gender roles.

Plurality of Masculinity

The Millennium Trilogy (2005-2010) shows that the phenomenon of masculinity is multidimensional for it is practised by the female and male characters equally. Due to this “plurality of masculinities” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 362), the diverse forms of masculinity exist such as; *excessive masculinity, insufficient masculinity, female and male masculinity, dominant masculinity, heroic masculinity and lesbian and gay masculinities* etc. As the most popular form of masculinity, the heroic masculinity overwhelms all the other alternative masculinities. The traits of heroic masculinity can be observed in individuals, irrespective of their gender. The trilogy's powerful representatives of female masculinity are; Lisbeth, Harriet, Erika, Susanne, Figuerola and Modig. The main narrative shifts from the graphic trivia of their victimized lives to the actualization of their empowered self. The trilogy critically explores the mechanisms of female masculinity along with its representation, conflicts and empowerment as Halberstam quotes that Larsson, “ratif[ies] the masculinity produced by, for, and within women” (p. 362).

Halberstam believes that the masculinity is a tool to acquire “power, legitimacy and privilege” (p. 356) in the hands of a man. Likewise, the trilogy shows that most of the male characters exercise the extreme version of normative masculinity in the authoritative roles i.e., heads of gangs or companies, violent misogynists and advantageous murderers. Firstly, Bjurman misuses his power as a legal guardian when he rapes Lisbeth, sadistically forces her to be a sex slave and cripples her financially. Secondly, *The Girl with Dragon Tattoo* (2005) begins with Wennerstrom scandal; a case against a powerful businessman who commits fraud but he is an honest person in the public's eyes. Thirdly, Zalachenko is the most privileged yet a wicked male character in the entire trilogy. Every time he commits a crime, the intelligence agency covers the crime scene. He physically and sexually abuses his beloved and mother of his daughters. These men are not conscientious but they could see their wrongdoings. In nutshell, their gender, social strata and money are pertinent elements of their dominant masculinity.

Though any patriarchal society often perceives female masculinity as an imitation of male masculinity and “rejected scrapes of dominant masculinity” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 355), yet these women are indispensable to the dominant masculinity's continuum. Halberstam claims that the dependence of “dominant masculinity on minor masculinity” (357) is one of the factors that ensures its existence in a society. The minor masculinity

exists in various forms of queer masculinities such as tomboy and masculine female. The primary concern of the trilogy's narrative is masculine women because they are the most useful agents in exposing the workings of dominant masculinity. The trilogy's police officers or agents of dominant masculinity treat women as *others* to affirm their social and biological superior positioning.

As we see that, Officer Sonja Modig gets abused by the sarcastic remarks of alpha males in the police force. At one point, Ekstrom instantly doubts her skills but Bublanski notices the offensive undertone and asserts that Modig is "thirty-nine, just about [Ekstrom's] age, and besides, she's exceedingly sharp" (Larsson, 2006, p. 271) which is proved when she concludes that Lisbeth is involved in the unfolding of tragic events but she is not the serial killer. Modig as a model of minor masculinity, leads the investigation in the right direction that speaks of reliance of dominant masculinity on minor masculinity.

Characteristics of Masculine Women

Larsson, the author of 'misfits in one form or another', ardently portrays a number of masculine women who break the archetype of orthodox female beauty and become misfits in the society (Goodwill, 2009, p. 29). He portrays these women as real human beings who are experiencing maltreatment from patriarchal strictures. These women are roughly divided into two categories; the one's possessing exceptional skills and the others with strong physical attraction and sharp wit. For instance, Lisbeth is constantly judged for her edgy appearance, tattoos and anorexic figure. She is aware that elite class like Henrik Vanger and Erika would never talk to her on the street but the same people need her only for her extraordinary analytical and hacking skills. In contrast, Larsson challenges the binary of beauty with wit by introducing Inspector Monica Figuerola. She is a beauty with brains, but her dilemma lies in being recognized solely for her striking looks. Her feminine masculinity is represented through her distinct figure, "She was thirty-six... a top-level gymnast in her teens... She trained so hard and her body was so muscular that malicious colleagues still called her Herr Figuerola (2010, p. 323).

The trilogy introduces Figuerola first through her feminine masculinity in appearance and then shows that her intelligence often "intimidate[s]" a great number of her male co-workers at police base where she is "more of a police officer than a desk warrior" (Larsson, p. 323). She struggles to avoid unwanted attention by male onlookers amidst secret missions. Her strained romantic relationships define that a woman with a strong masculine body poses a physical threat to her lover by turning into a "wearisome sort of arm-wrestling contest" because she was "stronger than he was and he couldn't bear it" (Larsson, p. 503) and all her romantic partners eventually "start challenging [her] and looking for ways to dominate [her]. Especially if they discover [that she is] a policewoman" (Larsson, p. 504). Thus, her doomed love life is a result of the *internalization* of fixed gender ideologies by toxic men.

All the masculine women express masculinity in a unique and versatile manner. Their expression of female masculinity is "a sign of independence and self-motivation" that leads them towards "a stable sense of a girl identity" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 358). In Lisbeth's case, her firm sense of selfhood emerges from self-individualized rules, ideals and aims. She possesses the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. She religiously follows a self-devised code book, *Salander Principles*. On her first encounter with Blomkvist, he confronts her for documenting his sex life in her detailed investigation for Milton Security. She calmly explains that according to her ethical codes "a bastard is a bastard, and if I can hunt a bastard by digging up shit about him, then he deserves it" (Larsson, 2005, p. 492). After grounding her logic in moral principles, she immediately clarifies that she has excluded Blomkvist from her harsh criticism because his biographical account explicitly represents his upright disposition. As a woman of principle, her moral values shape her sense of judgement and they also render her a clear vision of herself as an individual and as a woman.

Exploration of Sisterhood

Lisbeth's identity as a masculine woman shapes her philosophy of an inclusive sisterhood. The notion of

sisterhood remains non-existent until she learns that other women are in peril amidst Martin's serial killings. Her experiences gradually reshape her perception. In *The Girl with Dragon Tattoo* (2005), she feels "some sort of group solidarity" with the members of her hard rock music band but simultaneously, she is "on the fringe of the group and rarely contribut[es] to the talk... [she] was allowed to sit in silence over her beer all evening" (p. 339). Through Harriet, Lisbeth begins developing an appreciation and comprehension of womanhood. In the beginning, she is certain that Harriet Vanger is guilty of murdering her father. She states that if that "bitch... had done something in 1966, Martin Vanger couldn't have kept killing and raping for thirty-seven years" (p. 339). Blomkvist defends Harriet in these words, she "knew about her father murdering women... She fled from a brother who raped her and then threatened to reveal that she had drowned her father if she didn't do what he said" (p. 339). Lisbeth completely refuses to acknowledge the situation but later finds herself in "exactly the same position" as Harriet. "She suddenly [thinks] of Harriet Fucking Vanger, who had also been tormented by her father and her brother" (Larsson, 2010, p. 814). She conscientiously concludes that having her highly desired revenge by killing them would have indispensable consequences. In the trilogy, the female characters identify with each other over traumatic past experiences. Thus, mutual understanding and open mindedness are the primary fundamentals of sisterhood.

Lisbeth's childhood trauma shapes her identity as a victim and stops her from building deep relationships. Once she bonds with Harriet's plight on an emotional level, she extends a helping hand to other women in turmoil. In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005), she harshly criticises Henrik Vanger for insisting on keeping Martin's killing escapade quiet. She only cooperates with Henrik upon learning that the disclosure of event would "crush" Harriet's reputation (Larsson, p. 732).

Sisterhood - A Path to Female Empowerment

Owing to her ability of rebuilding her identity from a victim to warrior, Lisbeth serves as an emblem of female empowerment within the female community. In *The Girl Who Killed the Hornet's Nest* (2010), Lisbeth resolves Erika's cyber stalking issue despite being "up to her neck in her own problems" (Larsson, p. 526). Lisbeth comes a long way from hesitantly crossing the threshold of sisterhood to join hands with another woman. At this point Lisbeth is mentally and physically struggling to survive because she is hospitalized under police surveillance awaiting her trial for alleged murders but she immediately acts to help Erika and employs her hacking skills to track the stalker. The trilogy shares Larsson's vision of a dauntless woman who courageously fights to ensure the liberation and security of other women.

Often, the sisterhood is considered a mere reaction to the hegemonic masculinity but Larsson depicts sisterhood in various forms; explicit or implicit and ambivalent or empowered. In a secret sisterhood, the stealth is often indispensable for the survival of one party in the sisterly bonding. Their implicit sisterly ties are also the reciprocation of care, trust and responsibility towards each other. For example, Lisbeth does not share any details of Erika's stalking incident with Blomkvist; a man with whom she shares an intimate bond. Another characteristic of Larsson's sisterhood is that it is inclusive of both major and minor female characters. There are several female characters who discretely embark on a mission to assist other women in turmoil. Though the search for Erika's stalker is initiated by Lisbeth but it is later on continued by Susanne Linder. When she joins the feminist cause, she explains that the reason behind joining the police force is her friend's gang rape so, "I became a police officer because I thought ... that the police existed to prevent crimes like that" (Larsson, 2010, p. 507).

In *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* (2010), Susanne heroically fulfils her promise to Erika about retrieving her stolen pictures and videos. She gives Fredriksson (stalker) a final warning in these words; "[i]f you ever go near her house again, or send her email or otherwise molest her, I'll be back. I'll beat you so hard that even your own mother won't recognize you... You will disappear from her life and move out of Stockholm" (Larsson, p. 589). Thus, the sisterly bond offers a sanctuary that enables women to share their secrets and seek remedies of their problems. These women always have multifaceted personalities yet a similar

driving force to achieve a goal.

However, none of the female characters blindly follow the facade of a universal sisterhood. In contrast, they recognize their differences and often disapprove each other's actions. After learning about Cecilia and Blomkvist's love affair, Erika jealously names Cecilia a "femme fatale" and "Miss Big Tits" (Larsson, 2005, p. 408). A day later, Erika's perception entirely changes after meeting Cecilia in person and she accepts her as Blomkvist's lover. She warms up to Cecilia and treats her as a friend. On an analytical plane, the scene shifts from invading a woman's space to mutually sharing the space. The trilogy's sisterhood is a space that requires the prerequisites of appreciation, acceptance, trustworthiness to enter it and a sense of sound self to strengthen it.

Evolution of Second Identity in Queer Women

Through Lisbeth, the trilogy critically evaluates the identity of a tomboy and masculine women in the *queer* and *straight* spaces. The notion of *passing* implies that a woman's appearance and demeanour prove her standing as a woman in a social sphere hence, the female passer *becomes* or takes an identity of the gender she demonstrates the attributes of. For gender deviants, an identity is a "process with multiple sites for becoming and being" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 366). For instance, Lisbeth's tour to a real estate office becomes another occurrence of her *passing* with an identity that collides with her self-identity. Despite her serious deportment and "stone-cold glare", she *passes* as a young school girl and the real estate agent patronizes her by "escorting her towards the door... He pinch[es] her good naturedly on the cheek" (Larsson, 2006, p. 89). As a social territory, the real estate office animates Halberstam's *the bathroom problem*; a space that blindly follows the rules for a stereotypical woman existing within a binary gender system. Perceived with an elevated sense of femininity, a woman's bathroom turns into a "little girl's room" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 368) where a queer becomes invisible and gets reduced to an immature *young girl*. In conclusion, most of Lisbeth's public occurrences of *passing* and *becoming* connote her female masculinity into deconstructive labels.

The process of *passing* also offers a contrapuntal perspective of representing an unconventional gender identity on multiple levels. Firstly, Lisbeth is shown through individual *passing* as "odd" (Larsson, 2005, p. 489), tomboy and "teenager" (Hornet's *Nest*, 2010, p. 04). Then, the *passing* on a collective level occurs when the mainstream media campaigns forge her alternate villainous identity as a criminal in Enskede's murder case. Resultantly, her authentic selfhood is revealed by a different process of collective *passing* but this time the people sketching her profile are her allies and they describe her as a "little angel", "an exceptional researcher", "moral" person and "secret weapon" in a boxing ring (*Played with Fire* pp. 332,292,309,38). Their descriptions show that they are able to see beyond her unconventional female persona because they have accepted it as her self-expression of femininity. This new constructive discourse about Lisbeth's personality is a complete antithesis of her public profile constructed by the media.

In a *straight space*, Lisbeth's presence is an ultimate rejection of the gender role as a *feminine mystique* but she resorts to creating a second identity and proves that she breaks the socially devised gender codes intentionally. She becomes Irene Nesser occasionally; an elite class business woman who uses an elegant feminine appearance to her advantage to ensure economic stability in dealings with banks. Her new identity with an explicit feminine aura is "readable at all times" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 368) and accepted by the male gaze without any perplexity.

In "Lisbeth Salander Lost in Translation- An Exploration of the English Version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*", Kajsa Paludan argues that Irene is the "second-wave feminist alter ego" (p. 15) of Lisbeth. He implies that both Lisbeth's true self and secondary identity are preoccupied with a feminist agenda but her real female masculine identity creates bigger ripples than Irene. Without losing her fighting spirit, ambition and moral codes, Lisbeth uses Irene as a vehicle of movement, ultimate ally and a foil to her primary identity.

Question of Silent Observation or Survival?

Besides the fact that the most distinct journey of survival is made by Lisbeth, Larsson's minor female characters also have the potential to actualize their acute sense of survival through individualized and ever-evolving survival techniques to become an emblem of warrior women. Moreover, these warrior women are conscientious of the need of hour that exists either in the form of a silent observation or vigorous fighting. Erika employs both of these practices when she quietly tries to detect her cyber stalker and she actively devises a plan to defend herself during her home break-in. She recalls Blomkvist's rescue by Lisbeth, picks up an iron golf club like Lisbeth.

Another example is Lisbeth's reaction to both of her rape episodes. She neither sheds a single tear, apart from the "tears of pure physical pain" (Larsson, 2005, p. 362), nor goes into stagnation after being overwhelmed with the aftershock and plight. She *refuses* to live the life of a rape victim. The reason for her refusal resides in her mother never confronting Lisbeth's abusive father because she believed that her silence would ensure her survival, however a severe brain injury and lifelong hospitalization proved her wrong. So, Lisbeth opts to fight for her survival unlike her mother.

The later rape reversal episode shows Lisbeth inverting the role of a victim and assailant. This scene is longer than her rape narrative which proves that Larsson is more interested in breaking the bad faith. Their roles shift when Lisbeth "leads" him to the bedroom; an action that "puzzles" (Larsson, 2005, pp. 365-366) Bjurman. The role reversal between prey and predator also shifts the power dynamics. Lisbeth rapes Bjurman in the similar manner he raped her a week ago. He experiences the pain and fear but his first reflection is about how "[s]he had taken control. Impossible" (370). He perceives the entire event in terms of power game. Interestingly, even though she lives at the border of the society, she aptly analyses her assailant's mind and informs him that "[i]n the future I'm going to have control over your life" (p. 375). This scene proves that Lisbeth is not a fury as often described by several critics. Amidst her anger triggered by rape, she is perfectly in control and does not neglect to search for a permanent remedy for her situation. She gives clear instructions to Bjurman to write positive monthly reports on Lisbeth's performance as a ward of the State. Her ultimate goal is to achieve legal freedom and security, not to torture someone to satisfy her inner *Underground Man*. Moreover, warrior Lisbeth employs both her cognitive and combative skills equally to ambush her oppressor. Much like Lisbeth, Larsson's other minor female characters also have a resolution to strike back because they are aware that no second chances will be available once they fail. Instead of experiencing a peril to their social repute like in Henrik and Zalachenko's case, these women encounter real death threats such as Erika's house invasion and Harriet experiencing violence. Lisbeth's soliloquy reflects this mindset, "if I'm going to survive, I have to fight dirty" (Larsson, 2010, p. 469). The strong survival instinct in other female characters of the trilogy is a prerequisite for their survival. Tina Varies explains that the "real" violence means that "women's aggressive response to male aggression...[is] a last resort to an intolerable situation that they can't deal with in any other way" (McCaughy 2001, p. 231). Hence, the women of trilogy employ real violence rather than action violence shown in the movies as their last option.

Self-Preservation: The Mark of a Warrior

The element of self-preservation in the female characters manifests itself as both; a natural defence mechanism and a product of circumstances. After Lisbeth's bloody duel with her father and brother, she is severely wounded. At this particular moment, Blomkvist realizes that he is not anxious about her because he naturally "assumed that she would survive. Any other outcome was unthinkable" (Larsson, 2010, p. 68). In the similar fashion, Lisbeth's long time legal guardian Palmgren states that, "I have great belief in her ability to land on her feet. She may be hard up, but she's a survivor" (Larsson, 2006, p. 635). Besides these two allies, the rest of the people who take Lisbeth for a stereotypical victim are those without any real knowledge of her struggle and authentic-self.

Amidst all the female characters, Lisbeth possesses the most extraordinary skills for survivorhood. The grave burial incident serves as an apt example. The critics claim that she tries to kill her father because he brutally

hurts her mother and beloved. They conclude that she confronts her father by acting out on impulse and anger. Whereas at this point in the plot, Zalachenko is the one who desires revenge on his daughter for burning him alive years ago. The critics overlook primary facts such as Lisbeth lives all her life in permanent “fear of the man [her father]” and she does a complete “risk assessment” (Larsson, 2006, p. 685) of her forthcoming actions. She faces her father because she realizes that Zalachenko will not stop until he kills her and brands her forehead with the label of a killer for the murders committed by him and her brother. Hence, she chooses to fight back for the matter because it becomes a question of her survival, only to be beaten up, verbally abused, shot three times and buried alive in a grave by her father and brother. After several hours, she finally wakes up and panics upon learning that she is buried alive. This scene establishes that composure, quick thinking and resourcefulness are the prerequisites of survivorhood. The novel presents a graphic picture of her self-preservation in these lines:

... she felt carefully to determine which parts of her body were functional...She discovered that she had a cavity [of air] within her fetal position, between her elbows and her knees...Minute by minute she worked in a semiconscious state. She scratched sandy earth from her face and pressed handful after handful into the cavity beneath her. Gradually she managed to free her arm so that she could shift the soil away from the top of her head. Inch by inch she enlarged the space around her head. She felt something hard and was suddenly holding a small root or stick in her hand. She scratched upwards... Salander’s fingers emerged like something dead from beneath the earth (Larsson, 2006, pp. 708-709).

This single episode also shows her transition from a survivor to a powerful fighter. Regardless of her severe injuries, she goes back to smash Zalachenko’s face, head and knee with an axe. The image of Lisbeth unwinding from a fetal position in the grave is akin to a *phoenix rising* from the ashes. When she is *reborn* with a stronger spirit, she goes back and challenges her assailants, they are intimidated by her will power and candour. They believe her to be “no girl, but a being from the other side of the grave who could not be conquered with human strength or weapons known to man” (Larsson, 2006, pp. 713-714). The scene ends with an unconscious Lisbeth who is holding a pistol in her hand with a fading breath; an image showing her survival spirit at its peak.

Survival Techniques

The male and female characters of the trilogy offer two alternative survival techniques. In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005), business tycoon Henrik Vanger lends a piece of advice on the survival to a disgraced Blomkvist amidst his self-imposed isolation. He explains that, “I’ve had many enemies over the years. If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s never engage in a fight you’re sure to lose...never let anyone who insulted you get away with it. Bide your time and strike back when you’re in a position of strength—even if you no longer need to strike back” (Larsson, 2005, p. 224). His survival technique devices his rules which are designed to protect an individual exclusively. He is extremely concerned about safeguarding his alpha male image in the business world. Another insight into the philosophy of survival comes from the fatally wounded Zalachenko who proudly claims from the hospital bed that he is “a survivor. [He] do[es] what [he] has to do to survive” (Larsson, 2010, *Hornet’s Nest* p.184). He omits the fact that the tale of his survival is written with the blood of the innocent women and the individuals who felt like a threat to him.

All the female survivors are “real firebrands” (Larsson, 2005, p. 227) who bring change by initiating a radical action. Lisbeth breaks the façade of Wennerstrom empire and, she also reveals the existence and decades long tale of cruel operations sanctioned by SIS; a secret branch within intelligence bureau. Another woman who makes a mark on a newspaper company is Erika. When she learns about her boss’ illegal means of earning, she leaves her job first and then launches a campaign at Millennium. Erika’s arch-rival, Holm, acknowledges the strength of her character in these words, “[d]amn it, Berger.... I didn’t think you were that tough. I never thought I’d ever say this, but if you’re that thick-skinned, I’m actually sorry you’re leaving” (Larsson, 2010, p. 599). Additionally, Annika Gianni wins violent battles for the victimized women in the capacity of a lawyer.

Suzanne Barchers states that the female heroes are those women who are “taking responsibility for their own beginnings and endings” (p. 117). Thus, Larsson’s women demonstrate a realistic portrayal of female heroes. In the trilogy, the beginning of these women’s journey marks them as survivors but at the end, they are all winners. They refuse to be confined by the labels of masculine women, tomboy and feminine mystique. They realize that only by building an inclusive sisterhood they could be supportive to their kind. When the dust of their battles settles, they emerge as empowered and liberated women with a refined sense of individuality. Stieg Larsson’s feminist narrative shows that a progressive social change remains indispensable for eradicating female exploitation and creating acceptance for such women who exude a strong sense of self and individuality.

Conclusion

This research shows that Stieg Larsson’s brand of feminism includes female victims, masculine women, rebels and tomboys as an extension of the womanhood. He writes a feminist narrative to represent empowered models of womanhood. The masculine women break the archetype of feminine mystique and replace it with the binary of beauty and wit. Moreover, the existence of an inclusive sisterhood assists these women in their survival. Every warrior woman with the spirit of a fighter, individually contributes in the establishment of an inclusive sisterhood. This research demonstrates that, through the multiple processes of becoming and passing, queer women form their social identities. It also shows their mechanisms of survival such as; upholding a strong sense of self-preservation, resourcefulness and untiring passion for a meaningful cause. Eventually, these warrior women successfully emerge with strong sense of independence and individuality. In conclusion, the universality of female experiences connects various female identities in essence that make them an integral part of womanhood.

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