

Physical battlefield: Body, power, and resistance in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*

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Abstract: *The crime novel The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo by Swedish author Stieg Larsson follows journalist Blomkvist's investigation into the disappearance of a teenage girl in the Vanger family, and tells the story of his collaboration with a marginal character, hacker Lisbeth Salander, to investigate serial killings. It deeply presents the multiple physical and psychological abuse suffered by women in Swedish society and their efforts to resist. The novel expresses its concern for the fate of women by focusing on the details of the characters' bodies. The characters' resistance to the patriarchal society serves as a call for women to fight for their physical rights, and also explores the body as a place to fight against oppression and gain power. At the same time, the novel draws the reader's attention to the limitations of the characters' resistance, connecting the victims in the story to the reality of women's situations in reality.*

Keywords: *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo; body; resistance; power*

1. Introduction

If you ever get the chance to meet Lisbeth Salander in real life, you will be tempted to give her a second look. It could be her billboard-worthy face, the tattoos on her neck and biceps, or her skinny, spidery body that attracts you to her. Stieg Larsson devotes considerable attention to describing Salander's body in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, so that the reader can visualize her in their imagination. However, not just Salander's body is emphasized throughout the narrative. Various depictions of the body are scattered throughout the story, making it nearly impossible to overlook. The book is replete with depictions of women's abused bodies, compelling readers to confront the issue of violence against women and prompting further thoughts on the oppression and resistance of the body. Accordingly, this essay will discuss the body writing involved in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* and demonstrate how the body is shaped as an object of power and a source of resistance.

2. Violence and Resistance: The body as a venue for power struggles

Previous research has established a correlation between body control and power dynamics. Foucault, for instance, presents the body as a place for the manifestation of power, claiming that "power relations controls, interfere, mark, torture, train it to perform certain tasks and rituals" ^[1]. Consequently, the body is perceived as the ultimate target of power, and the torture and the control of women's bodies within the novel reflect the dominant males' aspiration to create "docile and capable" ^[2]²⁹⁴ female bodies.

The male expresses their desire to control women's bodies through violence. In the book, the men who hate women are those who have an unlimited desire to control women. For instance, Cecilia is frequently abused by her husband Karlson. She suffered from "blows to the head, violent shoving..."^[3]¹⁹⁹. After that, her father uses this as a reason to assault her, saying "No wonder such a whore could never keep a man" ^[3]¹⁹⁹. Here, Cecilia's father and husband take her body as their property, asserting male ownership over her. Her body is used by her husband to vent his emotions, and it is considered worthless by her father when it no longer belongs to her husband.

Similarly, Gottfried and Martin show the same desire for control in Harriet. They try to break Harriet's desire to resist by beating and raping her, and make Harriet surrender her body to their control. Martin explains, "Gottfried tried to teach her. We thought that she was one of us and that she would accept her duty..." ^[3]³⁵⁰. Their atrocities are intended to domesticate Harriet's body to exert their power of dominance. Furthermore, when Gottfried murders young girls, he tortures the girls by burning, tying, or cutting their bodies, according to the punishments for guilty women as written in Leviticus. He seems to

have received the authority of God to control the bodies of these women according to the instructions from God. These perverted killings show his crazy pursuit of power. Perhaps he believes that he is given a kind of justice by Leviticus, saying that he has the power to inflict punishment on the victims because they are women, Jews, and sinners. Thus, the men in the novel often use physical violence to show their dominance and total control over women, and use patriarchal status or the so-called will of God to justify their atrocities.

In the novel, the dominant male sees torturing the female body as a pleasure, while all the physical oppression inevitably leads to female resistance. Eagleton argues that the female body possesses an inherent tendency for rebellion^[4]. While the body is a victim of power, it also serves as a potential source of resistance. In the novel, Salander and Harriet regain their freedom through various means and take back control of themselves on the battleground of their own bodies.

Violence against women's bodies is first resisted by the most primitive fight. A prime example of this is Harriet's fightback. Harriet has endured a long period of torment at the hands of her father, Gottfried, and brother Martin, who physically abused her and raped her. Rape is seen as a metaphor or image, for the "continuum of sexual [verbal/physical] violence that women confront on a daily basis"^[5]. The physical violence Harriet suffered left her with severe psychological trauma, and she could clearly recount every detail recorded by her body after so many years: "He put a T-shirt around my neck and pulled it as tight as he could. I blacked out. he really was trying to kill me, and for the first time that night he managed to complete the rape"^{[3]384}. In response, her resistance was done physically. She pushed her drunk father into the water and used an oar to control him until he drowned^{[3]384}.

Similar violent counterattacks are much more common with Salander. Since elementary school, she taught David Gustavsson, who harassed her, a lesson about pain and bleeding with her fists^{[3]177}. In middle school, she got into fights with boys who were much stronger than her, and her body showed such incredible resistance that no one could ever get benefits from her^{[3]178}. Just before her eighteenth birthday, she kicked a man in the head at a subway station who tried to harass her^{[3]123} As Foucault states, "When power operates on the body, it turns out that it is also resisted by the same body"^{[2]169}. Salander's tit-for-tat story culminates in a violent revenge against Advokat Bjurman. She replicates everything Bjurman has done to her body: she removes his clothes, handcuffs him to the bed, and uses the same plug on him "without a lubricant"^{[3]200}. Then she brands on Bjurman's body. After that night, the tattoo of shame on his body, "I AM A SADISTIC PIG, A PERVERT, AND A RAPIST"^{[3]204}, will serve as a constant reminder of his abuse of power over a woman's body. His rape ultimately leads to violent physical resistance, resulting in his permanent loss of complete control over his own body.

The resistance of the body is a manifestation of the demand for liberation from patriarchy. After completing the first stage of violent revolt, Harriet soon realizes that the oppression of her body persists. Her brother Martin assumes the role of her father and tries to take over Harriet's control of her body. According to Corradi and colleagues, "The fundamental principle of patriarchy is power; Unequal distribution of power between men and women; Violence is a tool used by men to control women"^[6]. This suggests that the ongoing physical violence against Harriet is a direct reflection of the entrenched patriarchy in the Vanger family. In this case, she decides to run away from home and leave her family's control over her. This means that while she chooses to escape her brother's physical abuse, she also refuses all the protections of the Vanger family. Her departure signifies a rejection of everything that patriarchy attempts to impose upon and take away from her body. By leaving her hometown and embarking on a career in Australia, she effectively prevents the exertion of patriarchal power over her body, thus gaining true freedom.

Although Harriet's escape seems somewhat cowardly compared to Salander's direct resistance, it exemplifies the way women defend themselves in situations of limited strength. This method is gentler, but also more in line with the common control that the woman has over her body.

3. Female desire and the feminine appearance: the body as a place of self-expression

In addition to the violence, the body's resistance is also evident in Salander's assertion of free sexual relationships. It is a backlash against the long-lasting oppression of women's desires within a patriarchal society. When Bjurman probes her about sexual life in the name of her guardian^{[3]156}, Salander's lies reflect her resistance against the patriarchal discourse's encroachment upon the female body. In this case, Bjurman represents the absolute power of institutionalized patriarchy; as Salander's government-appointed guardian, he represents the power of state agencies; as a wealthy, upper-class intellectual with a respectable career and substantial assets, he embodies a typical decent man in society. Salander refuses

to talk about her true sexual experiences to him, probably due to her disgust towards his voyeurism, but also reflects her undermining his desire for dominance over women's bodies. For Salander, a young woman who "regards sex as an enjoyable pastime"^{[3]182}, the right to have sexual relationships belongs to her and does not require surveillance or control by men, guardians, or any form of state power.

In addition, controlling one's body requires confronting one's instincts and physical desires, and ignoring gender stereotypes. According to Foucault, sexuality, which is closely connected to the physical body, plays a significant role in the power dynamics that regulate the body's strength, emotions, and sexual pleasure^[7]. Salander's body, as an outward representation of her inner rebellion, directly resists the traditional heterosexual order. In the book, though Salander can be described as bisexual, she "did not give a damn about labels"^{[3]254}, and she chooses her sexual partners based on her instinct and pleasure. For example, the physical relationship with Mimmi is entirely in response to physical satisfaction, because Salander feels "it was nice lying close to Mimmi's warm, soft body"^{[3]254}. This challenges the hegemony of heterosexuality - when women can take the initiative to choose the gender of their partners, they cease to be objects waiting for men to pursue and rely on men for sexual satisfaction. Instead, they take control of physical pleasure in their own hands. This is also reflected in Salander's intention of a sexual relationship with Blomkvist. Salander's invitation to have sex frightened Blomkvist^{[3]309}. She openly expresses her desires and dominates the intimate interaction between herself and Blomkvist in bed. This deconstruction of male dominance in sexual relations is a declaration of war against men who regard the female body as a passive object.

If controlling sex is controlling physical desire, taking control of one's physical appearance is controlling the construction of one's identity. In the novel, tattoos are Salander's most prominent symbol, reflecting her attitude towards her body. Cahill and Riley view tattoos as a means of rebellion and resisting others^{[8]156}, which can be proved by Salander's choice of the wasp and dragon pattern. These two aggressive animals express the identity Salander wishes to construct, with dragons often symbolizing threat and power. The metaphor of the wasp is particularly interesting. Unlike bees who always die after attack because their stingers are left in their target, female wasps possess a rigid ovipositor (stinger) that will not remain inside their enemy. Thus, it allows repeated and long-lasting attacks. Research has shown that wasps are vindictive and will attack in groups when disturbed. Therefore, the wasp tattoo may be a self-reference for Salander, representing her strength, her ability to launch repeated attacks against those who harmed her, and foreshadowing her revenge on the murderers who tortured and killed women.

After her first assault by Bjurman, she decides to get a new tattoo on her ankle. Although it hurts, the tattoo serves as "a reminder"^{[3]197} to emphasize Salander's connection to her own body. In this way, her tattoo turns into a projection of her emotions. She forces her body to accept and remember the irreparable damage that has happened. As Atkinson argues, tattoos are considered a form of representation of one's degree of self-control^[9]. Salander's tattoos claim ownership over her body and assert her individuality through the pattern of the dragon and wasp. They signify her right to change her appearance, her right to control her body, and her right to seek revenge on Bjurman for the harm done to her body.

Besides tattoos, other depictions of this punk girl indicate that she has very little feminine clothing or adornment on her body, instead she has tattoos, piercings, and a punk-inspired style. These characters seem to imply her rejection of traditional femininity and mainstream beauty standards. In fact, Salander does not reject her feminine gender, as she also occasionally has body anxiety, hoping to own prettier breasts and hips^{[3]308}. What she rejects is to be defined by binary oppositions in social norms. Her self-identity is constructed independently rather than by the judgment of others. In the second half of the novel, Salander shows the reader her ability to disguise. By changing her makeup and dressing style, she can completely dress herself up as a very feminine beauty. It turns out that Salander (pseudonym "Irene Nesser") in disguise has excellent social skills, is good at communication, and is far more social than Salander. She is fully aware that she can gain better social acceptance by embracing the patriarchal aesthetic and catering to traditional female images, but she is unwilling to do so. In other words, she can cover up her tattoos and wear her identity as the blonde Irene Nesser, but she scoffs at this performance and chooses to remain "the girl with the dragon tattoo". In this way, Salander takes control of her physical appearance and exerts her power in constructing her identity.

The depiction of Salander challenges the superficiality of societal beauty standards. For instance, her boss Dragan Armansky finds himself is attracted to her. He is confused because she was clearly the opposite of the women he is keen on who are "blonde and curvaceous, with full lips that aroused his fantasies"^{[3]30}. This challenges societal notions of a woman's attractiveness defined by her appearance, suggesting that Salander's character and mystery are more appealing than just her appearance.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay explores the themes of body and power in Stieg Larsson's novel *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. The male characters in the novel use violence to assert their authority over women's bodies and attempt to oppress them into docile bodies. In contrast, female characters use their bodies to launch counterattacks. They use physical violence to carry out homomorphic revenge. They pursue freedom by escaping from the patriarchal control over their bodies. They subvert the social discipline and construct self-identity by controlling desire and appearance. Therefore, the body is not only a passive object of power but can also be a battlefield for resistance.

In a broader context, the female characters in the novel, Harriet and Salander, who successfully resist patriarchal violence, demonstrate their agency and ignite a spark of hope for countless women who are being oppressed. However, their cases are undeniably limited as templates to follow. In contrast to the other socially marginalized women killed by Gottfried and Martin, the authors seem to show that there are conditions for a woman's successful resistance. Specifically, she must be educated, have a prominent status, and be wealthy like Harriet, or she must be technologically savvy and adept at physical conflict like Salander. This is almost impossible to achieve for most victims who are anonymous and unable to call for help. As Larson writes in the preface of chapter one, "Eighteen percent of the women in Sweden have at one time been threatened by a man" [3]⁵. Most women who need to rebel do not have the power to break the silence, and their bodies become simple numbers of one victim after another. Thus, the novel once again echoes the plight of women in reality with an alarming significance.

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