

MEN WHO

HATE WOMEN

AND WOMEN

WHO KICK

THEIR

ASSES

**STIEG LARSSON'S
MILLENNIUM TRILOGY IN
FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

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Accounts of Violence against Women

The Potential of Realistic Fiction

Roberta Villalón

Reading Stieg Larsson's trilogy, I am struck by the power of his fictional stories of violence against women. His detailed depictions of torture, sexual harassment, rape, and battering, far from being overdramatic or exaggerated, are shockingly realistic. His prose is so close to the experiences of real women that I often forget that I'm reading a novel. The passages describing how Nils Bjurman rapes Lisbeth Salander remind me of the testimonies of actual survivors of sexual assault and intimate partner violence. The kidnappings, torture, and murders in Hedeby in the first volume, Nykvarn in the second, and Skederid in the third echo the violence of the military regime in Argentina, which survivors detailed in the report *Nunca Más* (CONADEP 1984). When I read about how Salander's psychopathic father abused her mother, and how this affected Salander and her sister, I recall the many affidavits I gathered as an advocate for Latina immigrant survivors of violence in Texas.

Larsson's realism both attracts and repels readers. Graphic depictions of violence against women are repulsive, yet they can also serve as a potent resource in the struggle to end that violence. The Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN) has already used Larsson's work as a platform to educate a wider public about the real experiences of women who have been beaten, raped, and tortured by men. Their 2010 *Dragon Tattoo* program provided copies of the Swedish films based on Larsson's first and second novels to interested organizations, along with materials for discussion and information on services for victims and survivors. The organizations then held screenings and workshops to address "the real life effects of sexual violence on victims and survivors, emphasizing the importance of getting help" (RAINN 2010). RAINN found that, given their realism and popularity, the films are "a great educational tool to expand the conversation about incest and sexual violence and emphasize that these crimes have long lasting effects that affect survivors and their families, all of whom need and should get help" (Hull 2011). Over 250 rape crisis centers, colleges, and other groups across the United States have offered RAINN's *Dragon Tattoo* program. Most report that it has been a useful method for dealing with the pervasive issue of gender violence in all its forms (Hull 2011).

Larsson's novels and films can also be useful in university classes. Professors need to be aware of the difficulties of reading or watching graphic depictions of gender violence. There is the very real possibility that students (and their family members or acquaintances) may be survivors themselves. It is also possible that without guidance, students may focus too much on the fictional aspects of the violence, as opposed to the realistic ones; given the hypersexualized and violent culture in which we live, some students may simply enjoy the spectacle of violence uncritically. These issues need not be taken as deterrents. They can serve, instead, as jumping-off points for determining how to use Larsson's novels and films effectively to educate and inform students about the problem of men's violence against women.

Comparing the Fictional and the Real

Throughout his three novels, Larsson describes various episodes of violence in a manner that mirrors the experiences of real survivors. For example, when Lisbeth's newly appointed guardian rapes her, she initially experiences a lack of physical control, the inability to fight back, confusion, and helplessness. The cases of many Latina immigrants in the United States echo Salander's abusive experiences and are equally important for us to hear. Compare Salander's experiences to Angela's:

We began to argue because he was saying bad things about my kids. He didn't love them. He had a rifle in his bedroom, and he took it out while I was still lying on his bed. He shot it inside the room, towards the other wall. The bullet bounced off of the brick wall, but didn't hit me. I was terrified. I tried to leave, but Richie hit me in the back and pulled me onto the bed. Then he raped me. I was very scared. I never told anybody what had happened that night. (Villalón 2010, 28)

Like Salander, Angela experienced lack of physical control, an inability to fight back, an overwhelming sense of helplessness, and a reluctance to report the abuse. Similarly, Ana, who was repeatedly abused, reports:

I went to pick up the kids, and there he was, with all of them. I went in the house to pay [his aunt for taking care of the kids], and then he forced me into a room. I resisted. His aunt was in the living room, but she didn't pay attention; she thought we were talking. Once in the room, he raped me. As soon as I was able to leave, I ran away. I was very scared and upset. . . . I ran away from the house and told the kids to get in the car quickly. I was all beaten and my clothes were torn. He ran towards the car and pulled my hair to stop me from leaving, but I managed to start the car and leave. (Villalón 2010, 64)

While Salander eventually fights back against her aggressors, and her agency grows fantastical over the course of the trilogy, we can still compare women like Angela and Ana to Larsson's fictional character. Salander at first submits to Bjurman's sexual demands to get what she needs from him, and later, to survive. Similarly, real women must weigh the advantages and disadvantages of their options given the circumstances constraining them. There are times when submitting to an assault may be wiser than resisting it, staying with an abuser may be better than leaving him, and appeasing an attacker may be preferable to defying or humiliating him (Salcido and Adelman 2004; Dunn 2005; Utas 2005; Villalón 2010). It is important to analyze and discuss this controversial, complex, and nuanced issue in order to educate the public about the real experiences of women who are victims and survivors of sexual violence.

Sexual Abuse and Political Power

Larsson's explicit narratives of sexual violence show how people in authority abuse their power, and he emphasizes the links between sexual abuse and institutional power. Salander's father, Alexander Zalachenko, is a criminal involved in various illicit affairs, most notably arms and sex trafficking; he is protected by government officers for political reasons, as is her pedophile psychiatrist, Peter Teleborian. The testimonies of survivors of state violence during the last Argentinean military regime show not only the realism of Larsson's depictions of sexual violence and torture, but also the impunity of people imbued with institutional political and economic clout. Mónica, an Argentinean survivor, recalls in *Nunca Más* that:

I was taken to the torture room by some men who began to hit me because I refused to get undressed. Then, one of them tears off my shirt, and they throw me to a metal board to which they tie me by my hands and feet. I tell them that I am two months pregnant and Julian the Turk answers, "If such and such resisted the device being seven months pregnant, you are going to resist." Then he gave the order, "In any case, rape her!" (CONADEP 1984, 346)¹

The torturers also raped women in groups and in the hallways of the clandestine centers of detention. Mónica remembers that "they walked me through the hallway, naked, and raped me several times" while the other officers laughed and cheered (CONADEP 1984, 52). Rape was part of the military's systematic collective abuse.

From the testimonies collected in the *Nunca Más* report, we learn that military officials repeatedly violated both women and men, regularly targeting genital areas during torture. For example, A.N., who was a legal minor at the time, said that while she was tied up and naked, a group of officers "introduced a stick into my vagina and anus." She was raped on several occasions afterward in her jail cell, together with other women (CONADEP 1984, 49–50). In the Millennium trilogy, the targeting of genital areas comes up in Bjurman's anal rape of Salander (*Dragon Tattoo*, 273–74).

Through Salander, Larsson ponders how these types of crimes go unnoticed and unpunished. He

concludes that the answer rests on the apparent irrelevance of the victims, who “were often new arrivals, immigrant girls who had no friends or social contacts in Sweden. There were also prostitutes and social outcasts, with drug abuse or other problems in their background” (*Dragon Tattoo*, 506). Ideally, all human beings should be equally valued and endowed with the same rights (particularly in countries such as Sweden, where Larsson’s novels take place), but power defines who is deemed worthy of protection and who is “disposable.” This is articulated by Kevin Bales (2004) in his work on human trafficking and is demonstrated in Melissa Wright’s (2006) analysis of the kidnapping, sexual assault, killing, and mutilation of *maquiladora* women workers in the Mexico-US border town of Ciudad Juarez.² Larsson’s brief but compelling description of the last two victims of Zalachenko’s and Niedermann’s sex-trafficking business in Skederid (*Hornet’s Nest*, 546–52) underscores this inequity, as does his description of tortured and mutilated women in Nykvarn.

Overcoming Limitations of Fictional Accounts

As a whole, Larsson’s trilogy can teach us about very important aspects of violence against women. However, to use his work effectively to further the struggle against gender violence, one should also be attentive to some possible shortcomings. While his stories of violence are realistic, the fact that they are fictional may encourage readers to enjoy such violence simply as a spectacle. Moreover, the extraordinary reactions of Salander in defying her aggressors may consign the books to the realm of the fantastic. In both scenarios, readers may not make the connection between the imaginary and the real, thus leaving unfulfilled the potential of Larsson’s novels to raise awareness of the complex and nuanced issues involved in the problem of gender violence.

These limitations, however, can be overcome. For example, advocates and activists can work with Larsson’s novels and films by emphasizing the realistic aspects and juxtaposing them with the narratives of real victims and survivors of gender violence in other books, reports, and documentaries. Additionally, they can reinterpret the fantastic fictional aspects and present them as affirmations of the incommensurable courage of real survivors, which can then be discussed in follow-up sessions where the agency of actual survivors is identified and legitimized.

Larsson’s trilogy is certainly not the first case in which advocates have used popular culture and art in their work to assist survivors. But that just underscores its potential to serve as a vivid and compelling resource to expose the reality of sexual aggression and torture and advance the struggle to end violence against women. I encourage readers to take Larsson’s depiction of gender violence as a truthful narration of its ruthlessness, to invite other people to read the trilogy through this critical lens, and to join the efforts of advocates and activists to raise awareness about sexual violence against women and promote action toward gender equality.

Notes

You can find an extended version of this essay at the author’s website: sites.google.com/site/robertavillalonphd/participation-in-professional-meetings.

1. The translations of CONADEP’s testimonies from Spanish to English are mine.
2. *Maquiladoras* are foreign-owned factories where imported parts are assembled by lower-paid workers into products for export. Initially located only in northern Mexico, *maquiladoras* can now be found in a number of Latin American and Asian countries as well.

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