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## Abuse or Be Abused: Traumatic Memory, Sex Inequality, and Millennium as a Socio-Literary Device

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## Abstract

This article applies the research of French psychiatrist Muriel Salmona to literary analysis of Stieg Larsson's protagonist, Lisbeth Salander, in the *Millennium* trilogy (*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, 2008; *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, 2009; *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, 2010). It suggests that Larsson's novels may be useful in raising awareness of childhood sexual abuse, through reading neglected signs linked to the neurology of traumatic memory. In the tradition of Nordic noir novels, hyperboles in Salander's sensationalized identity serve to magnify and bring to light a misunderstood social problem. The article draws mainly on Salmona's book, *Le Livre Noir Violences Sexuelles* (2013) which has been influential in France but has not yet reached the rest of the world. The ground-breaking implications of Salmona's work explaining traumatic memory and linking it to sex inequality are explored and used for literary analysis. This socio-literary approach treats literature as a laboratory for better understanding real-life problems. In this case, it is akin to the rising trend of narrative medicine including in literary criticism, particularly, critical discourse analysis. Salmona's theories and Larsson's fictional character share many features, suggesting Larsson, like many writers, was ahead of his time. Not bound by scientific constraints, novelists can forge ahead with how they perceive the current world, shaping it in turn through raising awareness in readers.

## Keywords

Stieg Larsson, Muriel Salmona, trauma, literature, feminism, post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, ACE study, adverse childhood experiences, traumatic amnesia

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## ABUSE OR BE ABUSED: TRAUMATIC MEMORY, SEX INEQUALITY, AND *MILLENNIUM* AS A SOCIO-LITERARY DEVICE

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### ABSTRACT

This article applies the research of French psychiatrist Muriel Salmona to literary analysis of Stieg Larsson's protagonist, Lisbeth Salander, in the *Millennium* trilogy (*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, 2008; *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, 2009; *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, 2010). It suggests that Larsson's novels may be useful in raising awareness of childhood sexual abuse, through reading neglected signs linked to the neurology of traumatic memory. In the tradition of Nordic noir novels, hyperboles in Salander's sensationalized identity serve to magnify and bring to light a misunderstood social problem. The article draws mainly on Salmona's book, *Le Livre Noir Violences Sexuelles* (2013) which has been influential in France but has not yet reached the rest of the world. The ground-breaking implications of Salmona's work explaining traumatic memory and linking it to sex inequality are explored and used for literary analysis. This socio-literary approach treats literature as a laboratory for better understanding real-life problems. In this case, it is akin to the rising trend of narrative medicine including in literary criticism, particularly, critical discourse analysis. Salmona's theories and Larsson's fictional character share many features, suggesting Larsson, like many writers, was ahead of his time. Not bound by scientific constraints, novelists can forge ahead with how they perceive the current world, shaping it in turn through raising awareness in readers.

### KEYWORDS

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Psychologist Dee Graham has suggested in *Loving to Survive* (1994) that ordinary male-female relationships follow the basic pattern of the Stockholm syndrome, whereby those in captivity or subordination absorb and identify with the values and worldviews of those holding them hostage (literally or figuratively), in order to assure their own survival. Neurological research on psychological trauma suggests how cycles of violence function (Bremner, Vythilingam & Vermetten, 2003; van der Kolk, Hopper, & Osterman, 2001; Kendler *et al.*, 2000), while French psychiatrist Muriel Salmona has contextualized such findings

in light of sex inequality.<sup>1</sup> Salmona has worked for decades in a clinical practice specializing in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) resulting from sexual violence in childhood.<sup>2</sup> Her therapeutic approach has cured many people, including those misdiagnosed with other conditions, and assisted countless women in leaving prostitution and abuse. She has intervened in courts to protect children and has been instrumental in increasing public awareness of abuse and PTSD, including through her nonprofit organization Association *Mémoire Traumatique et Victimologie*. She has led or participated in many key studies including for UNICEF (Salmona, 2017; 2016; 2013). Her main findings are on traumatic memory and traumatic amnesia, widely misunderstood subcategories of PTSD, including sex roles and inequality (Salmona 2013, 2015, 2018).

Lisbeth Salander, the protagonist of Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy, appears to be a literary incarnation of Salmona's theories. The protagonist's circumstances showcase (as does Salmona) how trauma and inequality work together to preserve male privilege. Through his sensationalized literary lens, Larsson exposes inner psychological states and their link to social misrepresentations that allow abuse to go unpunished. In this paper, I will analyze Larsson's novels as socio-literary devices for heightening awareness of abuse, inequality, and trauma, as well as their implications and consequences.

The record-breaking bestsellers of the *Millennium* trilogy and the two major films (one Swedish [2009] one Hollywood [2011]) have been frequently studied in a variety of academic disciplines. Entire books discuss *Millennium* in light of feminism (King, 2012); psychology (Rosenberg & O'Neill, 2011); philosophy (Bronson, 2011); rape (Astrom, 2013); and even a book about autism (Loftis, 2015) contains a chapter on Salander. This diversity of analyses suggests interpretations of *Millennium* are vast in their implications, and perhaps the intentions of Larsson (a dedicated feminist) have been as misunderstood as his protagonist, Salander, is by those around her. Incidentally, PTSD and many other conditions are regularly misdiagnosed as autism, according to Salmona (2013), as are many disorders typically considered as endogenous and incurable (schizophrenia, depression, bipolar, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)). These are often triggered by trauma, particularly sexual abuse in childhood (Read, Fink, Rudegeair, Felitti, & Whitfield, 2008; Kendler, Bulik, Silberg, Hettima, & Myers, 2000).

The ground-breaking Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) (Felitti et al., 1998) study has quantified beyond any doubt the effects of childhood trauma on all aspects of adult health. Perhaps the unprecedented popularity of *Millennium* reflects a thirst for understanding of the prevalent and consequential, yet highly neglected issue of society's failure to protect children from abuse. Despite all of the attention this trilogy has earned, the pivotal theme of trauma has not yet received adequate consideration; a surprising lacuna insofar as trauma is a key defining

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<sup>1</sup> Here I use "sex" instead of "gender," in keeping with Monique Wittig's statement that sex is also an imposed category, thus the distinction between these two (one "natural," one "man-made") is false. Classifying humans based on reproductive systems is a choice based on domination. (Wittig, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> An influential psychiatrist and feminist activist in France, Salmona has not yet reached a wider readership since her books (from one of France's main publishers) have not been translated. Recently in 2018, a summary in English of her research appeared on the website of her organization, [www.memoiretraumatique.org](http://www.memoiretraumatique.org), a valuable resource that was lacking. I came across her research in 2005 while working in France and met her personally through feminist networks.

element in contemporary western identities, widely explored with regards to Holocaust literature, African-American literature, Magical Realism, and other fields.

### Why Fiction?

Techniques of fiction-writing may enable a more accurate portrayal of trauma than mimesis or memoir, due to literature's ability to reshape language and its freedom from conventions and canons of discourse determined by historical forces linked to domination (Roussos, 2007). Literary techniques give voice to inner states of characters, possibly increasing readers' empathy with real people. With the flourishing of trauma studies for decades, and the rise of narrative medicine (Charon et al., 2017), employing literary texts to express, contextualize, and possibly treat PTSD in actual people is no longer a new idea.

Contending the therapeutic value of depicting trauma through novels, some suggest that fictionalizing may deny, trivialize, or sensationalize the experience of survivors. With the goal of giving voice to those who were silenced and stripped of their humanity, it is questioned whether it is ethical to employ literary techniques (particularly by writers who are not themselves trauma survivors); likewise, for men writing about women being raped. This concern figures in critiques of Larsson; for example, his depictions of rape, deemed unnecessarily graphic, may trigger survivors' anxieties (Ferber, 2012, p. 12). However, being able to understand triggers, and trace them back to horrors endured, may be crucial for eliminating trauma's effects (Salmona, 2013, p. 316).

Fiction's therapeutic potential hinges on how stories invite complicity in the listener or reader through intimacy with others' struggles as well as potential contextualization of one's own patterns (Brooks, 1994, p. 67). While survivors typically discover their own ethics and means of managing PTSD, with behaviors incomprehensible to those around them (Salmona, 2013, p. 195-196), *Millennium* may assist readers in recognizing behavioral patterns and tracing them back to unacknowledged stories. Analysis of *Millennium* in light of Salmona's findings on traumatic memory provides insights into biblio-therapeutic approaches to literature, both as a social tool and to foster individual healing. I am not arguing that Larsson was in any way familiar with Salmona's work (he almost certainly was not), nor that he understood the neurological findings on which her work is based. I do, however, venture to say that he grasped the mechanisms of traumatic memory in their individual and social implications, and also that he discovered how to make these blatantly obvious to a large number of people. Learning to read and teach novels with a goal of understanding trauma can assist professionals and survivors. Using novels like Larsson's' (page-turners that require little effort compared to papers on neurology from peer-reviewed journals) may be a way to increase awareness and deepen knowledge, in a world where traumatic memory is severely ignored or misunderstood.

In the tradition of Nordic noir, Larsson uses the plot devices of crime fiction to shed light on social problems (Forshaw, 2012; Bergman, 2014). His juxtaposition of meticulous mimetic details and sensationalist hyperboles situates the reader far from the real. Literature's ability to depart from the real in order to better represent it, through conveying complex and unacknowledged realities existing in emotional states and suppressed languages, makes it an ideal tool for exposing and combatting oppression, filling in the gaps in what society acknowledges (Roussos, 2007).

The hyperbolic horrors Larsson portrays situate the reader within Salander's mental and social universe. Inner states of Salander are shown through the graphic violence which has *colonized* her life (term used by Salmona [2013, p. 168], also by Roussos [2007]). This is comparable to how post-colonial, indigenous, and Afro-American literatures fill in the blanks of traumatic historical memory, favoring techniques such as magical realism to represent horrors that cannot be voiced through strict mimesis, and uncovering or reinventing truths that cannot be located in historical sources, from cultures and languages lost. Toni Morrison's novels are emblematic of this. Though the techniques chosen are very different (as are their subject positions) both hers and Larsson's writings use sensationalist hyperboles to incarnate emotional realities that cannot be expressed through ordinary language and discourse determined by domination. Both highlight trauma as a socio-historical and individual determinant.

Larsson's meticulous attention to detail corresponds to Salander's mental states including heightened awareness and plots her anesthetizing, dissociative, and danger-seeking patterns. According to Salmona, the majority of survivors live in a superimposed world of traumatic recollections that cannot be translated into narrative. Whether the emphasis is on remembering or forgetting, fragmented recollections and associated triggers colonize survivors' lives. Healing involves piecing together a narrative memory that can be contextualized and understood. In the therapeutic method, Salmona has perfected, lacunae in memory are filled through the survivor and therapist painstakingly reassembling scattered fragments of recollections, nightmares, and symptoms such as compulsions, phobias, aversions to certain times, places, sounds, etc. This is distinct from psychoanalysis in several ways, perhaps most importantly that it is combined with an awareness of how society fails to protect the most vulnerable and how cycles of abuse endure. It also provides a model that applies to almost all survivors – the normal response when faced with the unthinkable.

### **Trauma's Lingering Legacy**

The largest study ever conducted on childhood trauma, the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) (1995-1997) study, leaves no doubt about the effects of early trauma on later health. Of the ACE Study's 17,337 adult health maintenance organization (HMO) members (middle to upper-class Americans), 22% were sexually abused during childhood; furthermore, the main cause of health problems at age 55 was found to be neglect or mistreatment in early years. Those who suffered adverse childhood experiences were at a significantly higher risk for physical and psychological disorders, substance abuse, suicide; sexual risk behaviors were also much more prevalent, especially in women (Hillis, Anda, Felitti, & Marchbanks, 2001).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from childhood sexual abuse is similar to PTSD following combat and prolonged torture, these together being the most devastating psychologically; the first is distinct in that it is most often unacknowledged, and that the most frequent perpetrators are those who should be protecting and nurturing the victim (Salmona, 2013, p. 52, 130-132, 220). Behavioral patterns linked to PTSD include repeated abuse and contact with abusers, disassociation, and danger-seeking. The consequences of inaccurate diagnoses resulting from a failure to detect childhood sexual abuse include not only inadequate treatments (often lasting a lifetime) but also narcissistic, suave perpetrators going free (Salmona, 2013, p. 261); it also may be that innocent but less articulate caregivers are wrongly accused. As a small but significant number of the abused become abusers, this feeds

the cycle. According to Salmona's research (although this is admittedly a controversial point) there is little chance of someone becoming an abuser who has not been abused. This is due to the neurological mechanisms of traumatic memory, and studies with infants suggest that empathy is a natural and universal innate human trait (they are not born monsters, but become them). She has also shown that if both are abused, males are steered towards abusing, and females towards being abused. Understanding this pattern through recognition of traumatic memory can contribute tremendously to individual and societal healing, as well as equality. It coincides with the schema described by Graham (1994), in which ordinary male-female relations, romantic and otherwise, are determined by exploitation and dependence, this norm invisible through its pervasiveness (the idea that it is natural). In other words, "normal" male/female behaviors and relations are results of an abused/ abuser model, just as rape culture is the norm of mainstream romance and masculinity. This is evident in pornography's sexualization of violence, though Graham discusses more subtle and omnipresent facets. Graham suggests that the Stockholm syndrome is the core of the dual behavior model that governs society. What is considered feminine behavior is a trauma-rooted and fear-based phenomenon, and conventional masculinity is based on the abuser's role. Although some may not take this analysis as far as Graham does, it is certainly relevant to the analysis of trauma's largely unacknowledged role in shaping society. Salmona takes it one step further, demonstrating how these roles are grounded in traumatic memory.

### **Addicted to Fear**

Larsson's protagonist Salander could choose to avoid many of the dangers and risks that characterize her life, but instead seeks and embraces them. This may be viewed as a plot device to heighten suspense, propelling the novel forward through accumulating hazards. However, in light of the Nordic noir genre and of Salmona's theories, it seems Larsson is creating social awareness as well as intrigue.

Risk behaviors are widely misunderstood, and neglected factors in awareness of PTSD and are a key component of what Salmona identifies as traumatic memory. The neurological mechanisms are linked to emotional anesthesia. A normal emotional reaction, when faced with life-threatening danger, is paralysis of the psyche (*la sidération*), like an animal "playing dead." This happens when the adrenaline and cortisol produced would be too strong and result in death otherwise. Like an electrical short-circuit, the system shuts down; the brain's hypothalamus (responsible for narrative) cuts off from the amygdala ("alarm system"), trapping the memory of violation in the place of raw emotion where it cannot be coherently related as a narrative. Only the terror remains. This is the normal, usual response in the human brain.

Simply put, risk behaviors renew the dose of adrenaline and cortisol, on which the body has become addicted. The only way to stop this immediately is to shut down through disassociation. Disassociation, during a traumatic event, and long afterward, is frequently cited by survivors. The bridge between neurology and sociology has rarely been made; this is the uniqueness and importance of Salmona's discovery of traumatic memory.

While on the one hand survivors seem to court dangers bearing a striking similarity to the original trauma, they also put in place shields around their lives in order to navigate through the minefield. In PTSD, it is well-known that small things can

trigger a memory, an emotion, an anxiety, reliving the terrors endured. Again, it is less discussed how these triggers can be used to reconstruct a narrative.

Survivors are often told to forget the past and get on with their lives and build their lives tiptoeing around the triggers. Salmona's approach is the opposite, using the triggers to access the memories that are cut off from the narrative part of the brain. Traumatic amnesia is a bomb ready to explode at any time. Risk and avoidance behaviors are two sides of the same coin. Emotions and sensations are frequently uncontrollable and incomprehensible to survivors, making them feel estranged to themselves and the world and ill-adapted to life. This pattern can nonetheless be countered by detailed recognition of the original trauma and its symptoms, leading the brain to repair itself. Brain modifications related to disassociation following psychological trauma are visible in magnetic resonance images (MRI) (McFarlane 2010; Shin, 2006). Many of the neurological studies that helped with Salmona's discovery were conducted in the United States, yet these highly specialized papers are largely ignored.

Returning to Larsson and his protagonist Lisbeth Salander, criticisms of Larsson's depictions of graphic violence under that grounds that they may trigger survivors (Ferber, 2012) seem to imply a "get on with life" approach – while actual healing necessitates the use of triggers to trace symptoms and translate them into narratives. In this way, Larsson's descriptions may be useful as a biblio-therapeutic tool. His depictions are very different from the graphic sexualized violence of pornography. The goals are different, one being the empowerment, the other the subjugation of women, and they are not depicted from the same angle.

### **Navigating the Minefield**

Survivors frequently display uncanny abilities that they have developed in order to navigate the complex conjugation of a tortured inner world and an oblivious outer one (Salmona, 2013, p. 204). This may be exaggerated by Larsson, as Salander's boxing skills enable her to defeat several large men, while her hacking skills deter millions of dollars from ruthless corporations. Salander rescues many women and some men from abuse and murder, putting her own life at risk. Indeed, Salander engages in a variety of risk behaviors, including major Internet fraud, money laundering, theft, sexual promiscuity, overconsumption of alcohol, cigarettes, hard drugs, and confrontations with gangs and armed criminals in the course of detective work tracking down and battling Sweden's biggest enemies of women. Her superhero-like altruism can be explained, in Salmona's terms, as renewing disassociation through risk behaviors, effectively anesthetizing herself with the substances produced by her own brain.

In order to understand patterns typical of survivors' response to trauma in light of the neurological phenomena outlined above, I will discuss the traumatic past Larsson creates for Salander and its later life consequences. Again, Larsson sensationalizes and perhaps simplifies the events with a good and evil dichotomy; yet this clarity in content may be essential for suggesting some ideas that are indeed complex. In the real world, victims of sexual violence are blamed for their symptoms and told to get on with life; few want to know what happened to them. Invisible, they live in the margins, destroy themselves (less often others), and die quietly (avoidance) or go out with a bang (risk).

The usefulness of fiction is in creating characters readers wants to know, thus exposing them to the intimacy of the abused from a safe vantage point. By creating



her as a superheroine, object of envy, perhaps, as much as pity, Larsson nonetheless does not neglect to show Salander's inner torment, bizarre behaviors, or how she came to be. This is the Trojan horse Wittig described: readers think they are getting the gift of an enticing crime novel, not realizing what messages will sneak out in the night. In keeping with the defining social awareness of the Nordic noir genre, these messages expose how the uncanny behaviors of victims (trauma-related) partner with sex inequality, ensuring the lack of protection for society's most vulnerable. To show this, Larsson (an investigative journalist by trade) offers graphic descriptions of Salander's childhood, including shards of traumatic memory as she would live them constantly in the background of her mind. Though he may be simplifying or exaggerating, Larsson certainly calls attention to key realities of how abuse and trauma function as a lingering individual and social tragedy.

After emerging from a childhood and adolescence of torture within a psychiatric unit, Salander is appointed a legal guardian, the beneficent lawyer Holger Palmgren. Following his stroke, she is subjected to a new guardian, Nils Bjurman. Salander is now successful in her job at a private investigations firm, whose boss respects her as the firm's top investigator and tolerates her eccentricities. Nonetheless, Bjurman enforces his legal right to withhold her ample salary. In order to access her own money, she is forced to perform oral sex on him. During the following required visit, she allows him to rape her while filming it unbeknownst to him. She does not, however, use this evidence against him at the time, and instead tases him and tattoos on his chest that he is a rapist. Here, it is the rapist who is quite literally scarred for life. Salander's acts may make sense from someone who has been discounted by the justice system in the past. However, going so far as to allow the rape to happen and not going public with the conclusive evidence may seem unbelievable enough to discredit these otherwise "journalistic" novels (including realistic contextualization, names, dates, places). Salander's behaviors are nonetheless accepted by readers, suggesting that they sense a truth behind the hyperbole. This could be linked to how her acts correspond to behavioral patterns many people recognize but do not understand, which are explained by Salmona as neurologically-rooted responses to trauma. Particularly, traumatic memory requires repetition of violence due to an addiction to anesthetizing substances produced by the brain. According to this theory, Salander is treating her own traumatic memory by reliving violation and regaining disassociation (anesthetization). This does not, by any means, suggest that victims want to be raped; nor that this is a necessary, incurable pattern. Rather, recognition of traumatic memory and amnesia can lessen guilt and blame (within the victim herself and those around her), and focus on piecing together the past in order to overcome it so she no longer will be abused. Non-recognition of why survivors often put themselves in danger leads instead to cycles of violence, guilt, and misunderstanding; that is, blaming the victim, rather than contextualizing and reassembling the injustice of her past experiences, translating them into narrative in the place of raw, death-like fear. The goal here is not to psychoanalyze a fictional character, but rather to suggest how Larsson (as a feminist devoted to exposing social ills) links childhood trauma and "strange" adult behaviors (actually the normal response to abnormal, aberrant abuse), in a way that can be used to gain awareness and healing.

### **Sex-Based Paths**

Traumatic amnesia concerns both sexes, though its consequences are influenced by societal roles sanctioning male violence and female victimization (Salmona,

2013, p. 257). Abusers frequently exhibit narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), more common in males (Grijalva et al., 2014). This is characterized by lack of empathy and use of reversals to avoid detection. According to Salmona, although all abusers may not be narcissists or psychopaths, all have been subject to some form of trauma. Some may experience a release offered by using others, yet regret it and want to change. If action is not taken immediately, however, the dependence on abusing others becomes too great (again due to the “hard drugs” the brain produces); it becomes impossible to regret or want to change. I am aware that this is a controversial perspective. Salmona’s arguments are well-substantiated, however (there are a plethora of neurological studies, mainly ignored by those who should be using them to improve response to victims). Leaving the persuasive and abundant evidence safely locked away in neurological journals, programs focus on assisting the (usually male) perpetrator to reform, rather than assisting (women and children) survivors. Studies of traumatic memory suggest that in the absence of narrative reconstruction early on, endogenous chemical dependence manifests as one of two paths: abuse or be abused; the further down these paths one goes, the harder it is to stop. Those who abuse have chosen the privileged standpoint of pushing others in front of them through the minefield, blowing them up while themselves staying safe. The possibility of them changing is very slim, as they have forgone all capacity for empathy; in addition, they have cultivated a high degree of deception, since everything they base their lives on is scripted. It is doubtful whether perpetrators could benefit from assistance, or only pretend to, and in any case, it is cruel not to put survivors who have chosen not to harm others first.

The need for disassociation, and dependence on substances produced in the brain impel survivors to become victims again or perpetrators (gaining a similar relief whether they are harmed or harm others). Though only a minority choose to be perpetrators, it is enough to feed the cycle of abuse and inequality. Moreover, perpetrators legitimize their acts through reversals, including making themselves out to be the victims (Salmona, 2013, p. 253).

### **Beyond Suspicion**

Larsson insists on trauma as a driving force in Salander’s life, as much of the novels’ focus is on recollecting childhood abuse and tracing its consequences. The trilogy’s opening plotline sets the scene for recognition of sexual abuse within families as Salander, along with Blomkvist (investigative journalist with the leftist magazine *Millennium*), set out to solve the mystery surrounding Harriet Vagner (a young woman belonging to a wealthy corporate family), who disappeared many years prior. They discover that Harriet fled after a childhood of abuse at the hands of her rapist and murderer father and brother. The brother, Martin, was also sexually abused by their father. Larsson’s depiction coincides with Salmona’s theory (2013, 151-152): men and women are encouraged to follow different paths following abuse, inflicting harm or being harmed respectively. Knowing that justice would not be served, Harriet finally killed her father in self-defense and escaped. Larsson highlights a largely unacknowledged social tragedy: contrary to the “loving family” stereotype, most crimes against children are committed by their own parents. As long as the stereotype persists, it will be even easier for the abusers to pose as concerned care-givers and hide their criminal identities behind closed doors. (They will be seen as heroic for enduring their misfortune in having children who are diagnosed bipolar, OCD, learning disabled...) This is particularly true if the parents are wealthy, educated, and white.

In the second novel, *The Girl Who Played with Fire* (2009), Larsson calls attention to the reversal through which the victim is made to appear insane, and the perpetrator poses as a victim. A girl, captured and restrained in a dark room, mentally replays a past episode when she threw a milk carton filled with gasoline onto a man inside a car and tossed an ignited match onto him. Larsson subsequently informs readers of Salander's long-term childhood sequestration due to a conspiracy between "the Section" (Swedish secret services) and Dr. Teleborian, a pedophile psychiatrist. By removing Salander, the Section protects Zalachenko (Zala), a former Soviet defector who is also Salander's biological father. Power structures conspire to protect abusers, particularly men in prominent positions. The Salander/ Zala dichotomy illustrates interstices of male-dominated power structures and traumatic memory, as well as the dual paths of inflicting harm or polyvictimization.

Understanding Salander's trauma hinges on the psychological and sociological implications of narcissism. *Millennium* depicts an array of psychopathic and narcissistic villains and their henchmen. Initially a source of vital information on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic's (USSR) intelligence operations, Zala begins to traffic in sex slaves on the side. He meets a 17-year-old woman who becomes pregnant with twins, one of whom is Lisbeth (Salander). Though often absent, Zala frequently resurges during her childhood, along with the terror he brings through abusing Lisbeth's mother so severely that she eventually dies as a result of his attacks. Lisbeth tries to save her mother, and only after the authorities repeatedly refuse to intervene does she resort to the attempt to set her father on fire. This may seem insane but is, under the circumstances, a rational attempt to save her mother's life. The authorities lock pre-adolescent Salander into a psychiatric ward. Salander's mother is left with cerebral hemorrhages which consign her to nursing homes and ultimately cause her death. Zala is allowed to walk away, but suffers serious injuries from the fire and loses one foot.

Much later, Zala eventually shoots Salander and has her buried, but she literally rises from the grave and wounds him with an ax. In novel 3, *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* (2010)) both end up in the same hospital (again, survivors are not being protected – in real life, children are often returned by courts to their abusers). Although Salander acted in self-defense, she is the one accused of murder (a reversal). Teleborian provides a false psychiatric examination and recommends that Salander be institutionalized without a trial (the powerful use the law to support their own perversions). He accuses her of psychopathy (*Hornet's Nest*, p. 250), a reversal: later Teleborian is arrested for possession of child pornography found on his computer by Salander and her hacker friends. He is one of many abusers portrayed by Larsson who get away with countless crimes under the guise of his respectable professional identity.

Larsson's fictional depictions correspond to sociological findings suggesting that many psychopaths lead highly successful professional careers wherein their disorders become assets to them (Babiak & Hare, 2006). This again is an instance of reversal, as their victims are seen as inferior professionally and otherwise, even while leading ethical lives. The satisfaction of psychopaths and narcissists stems from treating traumatic memory by switching roles and no longer being the victim, thus adhering fully to the law of might makes right (Salmona, 2013, p. 251, 267). The roles are distributed differently, the script does not change.

Salander is repeatedly framed for crimes she did not commit. She is accused of murdering, not only Zala and her rapist guardian Bjurman, but also a young couple investigating sex trafficking. Salander's official record establishes her as a violent, unstable, psychotic young woman with a history of prostitution – all of which construct around her a narrative that is not her own and has no correlation with who she is. Whether in private during the abuse or publicly, victims are cast in roles, their individuality and humanity ignored, shattered, discarded. Larsson highlights how survivors are misrepresented and misunderstood, cast in roles that have nothing to do with who they really are, and often forced to play into the expectations of their abusers (Stockholm syndrome), as slaves for treating their own traumatic memories.

The good versus evil dichotomy Larsson draws between Salander and Zala subscribes to suspense genre conventions: both have almost superhuman powers, they pursue each other until good eventually triumphs; even the lineage between the two is predictable (*Star Wars*, etc.). Zala is a stereotypical villain, a Russian spy and mobster un-nuanced in his psychopathy. According to Salmona, both survivor and perpetrator inhabit a world determined by traumatic memory and the dichotomous (sex-based) solutions offered. Larsson makes his points clear and accessible: women and children are not being protected from sexual abuse, which is a highly consequential crime for individuals and society. As long as abuse is swept under the rug, society can never become equal. Yet he goes further than this by injecting trauma and its consequences as a central element in the equality issue. Larsson portrays two intertwined factors that go against equality: traumatic memory and reversal.

### **Myths, Reversals, and Stereotypes**

A significant obstacle to protecting victims in real life, also emphasized by Larsson, is the myth of places wherein children are supposed to be cared for and loved being the safest. Ninety percent of sexually abused children know the perpetrator, and only 10% report abuse to a potentially helpful adult (Finkelhor, 2012). There is an ongoing legacy of classifying victims as liars or sexual deviants, this reversal contributing to a very low rate of prosecution for sex crimes committed against children (the most traumatic form), following the overall trend for perpetrators of sexual violence.

In Sweden, the rate of reported rapes is the highest in Europe, possibly due to the specificities of how crimes are classified, and a greater willingness among victims to speak out. Still, Sweden has only a 12% conviction rate in rape trials (Brottsförebyggande rådet, 2016) suggesting that victims are not being believed. Larsson's novels insist on this point, as Salander from childhood onward has been accused of lying and manipulating when attempting to protect and defend herself and others. In collaboration with Swedish secret services, Dr. Teleborian is successful in quelling the threat of young Salander to state security by exposing the existence of Zala. Those in charge are aware of her genius-level intelligence and intransigence and knowingly incorporate Teleborian. His program of torture under the pretext of care is designed, if not to kill her, to incapacitate her; in many ways it does, as seen in her asocial, deviant behaviors. Teleborian does his job and derives pleasure from his total control over the young girl strapped down to the bed. To some, despite her mathematic genius and pragmatism as a world-renowned hacker, Salander appears mentally retarded (an engineered reversal and common phenomenon among survivors).

After Zala's attempt to murder Salander, he "patiently explained that on the contrary, *he* was the victim of a crime, that in point of fact it was Salander who had attempted to murder *him*" (3-90). He insists on this position until he is eventually murdered by a dying secret agent who finally decides to act in what he considers an ethical manner (the agent being a horrible person, but not a narcissist like Zala). Zala coaches his associates: "You are a victim, and it is important that we see to it at once that this is the image presented to the press" (*Hornet's Nest*, p. 91). Teleborian accuses Salander of being manipulative (*Hornet's Nest*, p. 250) while pretending to be a caring health professional. Brain surgeon Jonasson, however, is no dupe and, though he usually doesn't go by the books (the good guys never do here), he claims to be "bound to observe the bureaucratic procedures" (*Hornet's Nest*, p. 251) and thereby refuses Teleborian access to Salander's psychiatric care. He recognizes that "Teleborian was contradicting his own reading of Salander" (*Hornet's Nest*, p. 250). Teleborian, for example, reports: "She lacks empathy and, in many respects, can be described as a sociopath" (*Hornet's Nest*, p. 368), while she spends her life rescuing victims and caring for her disabled mother and aging former guardian Palmgren; and later diagnoses her as "more of an egomaniacal psychopath" (*Girl Who Played with Fire*, p. 369), clearly what he is himself. However, social stereotypes help to uphold his lies, as his suave, personable demeanor contrasts with Salander's seemingly aggressive, antisocial stance. Understanding the narcissist/survivor dynamic (a main by-product of traumatic memory) is essential to combating such stereotypes.

Larsson depicts narcissists and heroic, risk-taking survivors as opposite sides of the same psychological coin, corresponding with Salmona's theory that both behaviors are rooted in traumatic memory. Zala displays characteristic narcissistic personality disorder behaviors such as duping delight (getting high on deception and manipulation): while under investigation for attempting to murder Salander, yet casting her as the criminal, he "suddenly felt elated and would have burst out laughing" (*Hornet's Nest*, p. 93). He implies that Salander's gunshot wounds could be explained as a father-daughter conflict (*Hornet's Nest*, p. 93), which (bizarrely) contributes to his defense. He insists that, since the secret police are "too sensitive to kill her," Salander must "disappear ... be declared invalid ... committed to a mental institution for life" (*Hornet's Nest*, p. 94). Diagnosing survivors with innate disorders while disregarding their trauma (the usual procedure, according to the ACE study), in effect silences them by negating their experience and dismissing their symptoms as somehow an inherent part of them. Psychological disorders are the only ones where a cause is rarely sought; when someone is bleeding, doctors look for the knife that cut them. While ignoring clear symptoms of traumatic memory or of the larger category PTSD, they are labeled and medicated; very often, they themselves are unaware of their past (traumatic amnesia). It is through the symptoms that this past can be pieced together, translated into narrative, and definitively overcome; medications such as neuroleptics hinder access to this. Another obstacle is how narcissists construct the narrative, negating and turning tables on survivors, armed with skills of deception and higher social position. Quite often, abusive parents live into healthy old age, while their children die of heart attacks very early in life – abusers use others to treat traumatic memory in their place, pushed ahead in the mine field, making it safe.

Most narcissists (unlike psychopaths) expend much energy in avoiding detection, developing elaborate strategies to seem like exemplary citizens while their victims appear insane, sick, unfit (Salmona, 2013, pp. 235-256). Larsson insists on

the fact that it is often the least suspected, most charming man who is really the narcissist, and that the men who are more outwardly aggressive or seemingly more likely candidates may indeed be awful people (misogynistic, etc.), but do not fit the specific pathology of narcissistic personality disorder. When Erika Berger is cyber-harassed then stalked, the likely candidate, arrogant and misogynistic Holms, turns out to be innocent of this extreme, while the pandering Fredriksson is the unsuspected culprit (*Hornet's Nest*, p. 571).

The Vangers in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, appear to be a respectable family, yet violence within and outside their ranks is commonplace. How did Martin Vanger get away with so many murders? Even Salander could not, at first, fathom this: “She could hardly imagine the horrors that must have played out in Martin Vanger’s basement, in the midst of this well-ordered, idyllic spot” (*Dragon Tattoo*, p. 506). Families themselves connote something well-ordered and idyllic, particularly when they are wealthy. The murders are also a class issue: “His victims 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*, p. 506). As it is well known that the majority of prostituted women have suffered sexual abuse during childhood (Bindel, 2017; Farley, 2010), Larsson again calls attention to poly-victimization.

After Salander sees Martin Vagner to his death, she finds his file with potential victims; her reaction highlights Larsson’s de-individualization of misogynistic crimes: “He had killed only a fraction of these women, but every woman anywhere near him was a potential victim” (*Dragon Tattoo*, p. 507). Just as psychopaths and narcissists are not inhuman monsters, but rather agglomerates of past violence along with neurological and social (sex-based) consequences, victims are not just unlucky individuals; both are products of traumatic memory. Salander destroys this catalog as well as the photographs of tortured victims kept as souvenirs, implying that the viewing of these is itself a perpetuation of misogynist violence and thus inequality (even if used as evidence). Salander has lost faith in the system long ago, and will not participate in a police investigation. Her mistrust of authority is best summarized in Palmgren’s words: “Our client on principle does not speak to the police or to other persons of authority, and least of all to psychiatrists. The reason is simple. The result in every instance was that she was punished because government civil servants had decided that Zala was more important than she was” (*Hornet's Nest*, p. 736). Not seeking to understand her behaviors’ underpinnings in both trauma and inequality, the police interpret her non-cooperation as a sign of mental impairment, insanity, or retardation (*Hornet's Nest*, p. 627). Likewise, Blomkvist does not comprehend Salander’s cutting him off following experiences that should have drawn them closer, in the midst of mutually-satisfying intimacy.

### **A Hidden Handicap**

Healthy relationships may be unfamiliar and threatening to survivors, who instead choose (like Salander) the anesthetizing thrills of promiscuity. Having been subjected to reversals, and anesthetized by the cycles of violence they offer, stepping beyond the funhouse mirrors is paradoxically a frightening experience for many survivors. Since they constantly live in a minefield (the amygdala alarm always ringing), real dangers are no more threatening than perceived ones. Likewise, a healthy relationship can seem scarier than an abusive one. Through survival mechanisms that linger via traumatic memory, survivors’ own reactions have been reversed. Larsson illustrates this point clearly regarding Salander’s relationship

with Blomkvist: “Her problem was she could not interpret her own feelings for him ... she talked about herself in a way that she would never, even under threat of death, have imagined doing with any other person. It frightened her and made her feel naked and vulnerable to his will” (*Dragon Tattoo*, p. 636).

Similarly, about their loving friendship: “She had no idea how it had happened or how she was supposed to cope with it” (*Dragon Tattoo*, p. 637). She becomes more reserved and distances herself from Blomkvist for most of the following two novels. “When he asked her if anything was wrong, she gave him a neutral, uncomprehending look” (*Dragon Tattoo*, p. 637). Healthy human sentiments do not offer the emotional anesthesia of dissociation.

This is another way in which the playing field is not level between those suffering from the hidden disability of traumatic memory and those who may want to befriend or help them. The uncomfortable truths behind dissociative and risk behaviors make it easier for judicial, medical, and social systems to individualize the behavior (blame the victim). In keeping with the Nordic noir genre, aspects of the Swedish social democratic model are prime targets of Larsson: two of Sallander’s main abusers are her state-appointed care-givers, while the third (her biological father) is allowed to abuse her and her mother because he is in cahoots with state secret services.

### **Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing**

The majority of childhood sexual abuse occurring within the child’s home, the idea that the home is a safe place as opposed to the dangerous world “out there” is a myth. The myth maintains that there are big, bad wolves out there in the forest, but at home, there are gentle herders guarding the flock. The idea of the enemy being “out there” in that dangerous world is a cornerstone of the Stockholm syndrome, wherein the captive identifies with the captor in order to assure survival (the usual effective mechanism that the vast majority of people, male or female, have evolved to adopt). This myth is particularly harmful in limiting freedom and possibilities of escape, and increasing dependence on abusers; yet it persists, despite conclusive evidence that most perpetrators are known by their victims. Protection of children and other most vulnerable groups hinges on recognition of this; society (even in socially-progressive Sweden) is failing in its job to protect them.

Larsson’s social critiques imply not that sexual abuse happens “even in Sweden,” but target his own Scandinavian country in its particularities (in the tradition of Nordic noir). Discussing Larsson’s disapproval of the Swedish system, Stenport & Alm (2009) raise several poignant issues suggesting that the novels are not as feminist as they may appear. For example, though there are certainly successful women and successful male immigrants, female immigrants are absent (Stenport & Alm, 2009, p.166). They recognize a feminist intention to view “the individual woman as a figure to set society right” (p .170), but consider it as an ineffective solution. Although Stenport & Alm’s argument is valid – why discredit, rather than seek to improve, a Swedish social system that doesn’t always work, but is nonetheless designed to protect the most vulnerable – Larsson brings up the important realities of those who fall through the cracks.

They fail partly because of traumatic memory and how society ignores or overlooks it. It may explain not only survivors’ strange behaviors, but also answer the question those who have never suffered abuse may ask: Why would anyone do such a horrible thing? How could they? Narcissism resulting from abuse may be one of

the answers to their bewilderment when faced with evidence of such “monsters.” The dichotomy Larsson draws, in which Salander and Zala are opposites yet share some similarities, resonates with Salmons’s theories, according to which the brain is wired similarly for survivors and perpetrators with regards to traumatic memory. Human beings are not born to be violent but rather to be compassionate, as research on infants has shown.

*Millennium* suggests that the government’s progressive intentions do not translate into realities. This is stated through the character of Dag (writing a book on sex trafficking but murdered before he can finish it): despite the tough laws against it, “Sweden is one of the countries that imports the most prostitutes per capita from Russia and the Baltics” (*Played with Fire*, p. 101). He explains that “the girls involved are so far down society’s ladder that they are of no interest to the legal system ... Of all crimes involving the sex trade, 99.9 percent are not reported to the police ... A whore is a whore. It’s part of the system” (*Played with Fire*, p. 105). The men who hate women are who Larsson is attacking; the government will not function the way it is supposed to as long as they are still prominent, and because the government is full of them, it cannot be trusted (Larsson was after the law was passed which criminalizes the buying, but not the selling, of sex, and dramatically assists women in escaping prostitution, but he suggests that the law is not being sufficiently enforced). While people who have not experienced trauma may be oblivious to the prevalence of narcissists and (poly)victims among us secretly renewing trauma to assuage the lingering consequences of initial abuse, they are a determinant social factor contributing not only to violence but also to inequality.

## Conclusion

The consequences of childhood trauma are deeply felt, as Salander develops her own unique moral code in recognition of the inadequacies of ordinary law and order, namely the failure to protect women and children from violence at the hands of narcissists who have entered the intimacy of their lives. Male narcissism and female subjugation are norms aggravated or even perpetuated by traumatic memory. The success of Larsson’s novels suggests an eagerness to confront repressed and silenced injustices, at least from the safe standpoint of fiction. Readers recognize the underpinnings of Salander’s behavior in her traumatic past and may be willing to trace back the same symptoms in those around them.

The novels’ hyperbolic clarity, Larsson’s background as a feminist and activist, and the conventions of Nordic noir, all point to a *roman engagé* in favor of ending misogynistic violence. In the tradition of women warriors fighting for women evoked by Larsson (*Hornet’s Nest*, p. 1), and the rise of feminist self-defense courses, female characters have learned techniques to physically overpower male assailants (De Welde, 2012). Yet defense of victims involves recognition not only of what happened to them, but also of the devastating, “colonizing” social and individual consequences of trauma as a contributing factor in sex inequality. The crux is not physical power (here, women frequently win brawls with men), but rather the socially-sanctioned ability to traumatize, manipulate and control. This is a world in which brute strength does not count for much anymore. However, male domination arguably never was based on physical strength; its persistence may be anchored in traumatic memory as a driving force in cycles of abuse.

As Larsson implies, non-recognition of male narcissism/ female subjugation as “treatments” for traumatic memory bears a high cost in individual and societal



terms. The victim often ends up alone or dependent on social structures with physical and mental health problems. Societal attitudes and misconceptions contribute to hardships, which linger on even if she has broken the pattern of oppression and abuse. Thus, Salander does not wish to speak about her life and her past with her lawyer, a typical reaction in a society that is not ready to understand: “It was not her fault that her father had been a pathological sadist and murderer. It was not her fault that her brother was a murderer.

Moreover, thank God nobody yet knew that he was her brother, which would otherwise no doubt also be held against her ... And yet it was *her* life that was going to be turned inside out” (*Hornet’s Nest*, p. 243). As long as understanding and empathy with regards to traumatic memory are withheld, social institutions cannot fulfill their function of ensuring safety, equality, and justice. As crime genre conventions mandate that the character least suspected be found guilty, perhaps it is natural to look towards the “kind and loving” family, and eventually expose the dark underside that haunts so many lives.

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