ENGENDERING THE 'OVERMAN': A STUDY OF
STIEG LARSSON'S THE GIRL WHO PLAYED WITH THE FIRE

Philey Philip, St. Joseph’s Training College, Mannanam P.O., Kottayam

Abstract:
The Girl Who Played with Fire is the second book in the Millennium series, written by Stieg Larsson. The novel has many gaps in the narration. It should be kept in mind that the author of the book had planned more than three books in the series but could only complete up to three before his death. This paper entitled 'Engendering the 'Overman': A study of The Girl Who Played with Fire by Stieg Larsson' tries to analyse the characters in the novel using the idea of 'Übermensch' put forward by the German philosopher Nietzsche. It was first introduced in the book The Gay Science in 1882 and later elaborated through the book Thus Spoke Zarathustra. The concept of sex as a construct put forward by Butler and the concept of performativity is also used for the analysis of the book The Girl Who Played with Fire by Stieg Larsson in this paper. The concept of performativity which Butler says in the case of gender and sex is also employed in the case of narration of the novel. Both the characters, Zala and Lisbeth are pictured through the reiteration in the narration of the novel.

Keywords: Gaps in narrative of story 'overman'-characters gender performativity.

Stieg Larsson is a Swedish writer who planned to write about ten works but could only complete up to three before his death. His works The Girl with the Dragon tattoo, The Girl Who Played with the Fire and The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet’s nest were published posthumously. It was together called the Millennium series. Later a fourth part was written by another author David Lagercrantz, The Girl in the Spider's Web. The protagonist of the novels is Lisbeth Salander. She is a powerful woman, with a wide knowledge on technology, hacking computer programs. In the novel, the journalist and the former lover of Lisbeth Salander, Blomkvist tries to find out the person behind the murder of Dag Svensson and Mia Johansson, two important persons who have been doing a project on human trafficking with the support of Millennium office. The young couple who have been killed had reached the conclusion that it is a person named Zala who is behind all the trafficking. The narration proceeds with the investigation of Blomkvist to find who Zala is and to catch him, the culprit. The story reaches the climax when Blomkvist comes to know that Zala is Lisbeth's father, the only twist in the novel, and ends with a violent fight between Zala and Lisbeth where they both are severely injured.

The novel has many events which does not sound logical. In the novel, Lisbeth is suspected by the police as the murderer. Bjurman’s weapon is found at Dag and Mia’s house. The weapon was used for the murder. Later, Bjurman is also killed. As Bjurman is her guardian, the police suspects Lisbeth. Though they suspect her, they do not do anything to arrest her. They check whether she is there in her apartment. Learning that she is not living there then, they just wait for her to arrive and do not make any move to search for her further. This same attitude of police is described on the day when police waits for Bjurman. He was to be questioned by the police regarding the murder as the weapons were his. Instead of calling him, or arresting him, the police just stand outside to witness the surroundings of Bjurman’s apartment. It is only later, they feel like going there and understand that he is killed in his bedroom. Before that the police never felt to go inside the apartment.
The most absurd element of the story is that Zala is Lisbeth’s father and Lisbeth does not reveal it to Blomkvist, a person who is trying to help her. The author has built up a character who behaves very strangely. Here, she is a person who fights in the beginning with a man and kills him as he tortures his wife. She is a woman who cannot tolerate any violence against women. The day before Dag and Mia are murdered, she goes to see them interested in their work. Her friend Armansky and Blomkvist strongly believe that as a woman who stands against the violence against woman, she would never commit a murder of two people who were doing a project on sex trafficking. So, naturally, she should be against Zala. Even if she wanted to kill him without letting the law to take the responsibility over him, she should have at least revealed it to Blomkvist, who is trying to help her. Knowing everything, she makes the life of everyone troublesome with her strange and arrogant behavior and thus the story extends up to six hundred pages.

Another thing that confuses any reader is the question why Blomkvist does not go to Palmgren at first. When he decides to question all people close to Lisbeth Salander and does it, it is so nonsensical that he just left out to go to Palmgren, who is Lisbeth’s former guardian. In the novel, it is written that he just felt like going to Palmgren all of a sudden without any provocation or reason. Also, Lisbeth only finds out Zala after Blomkvist and the readers become aware that Zala is her father, until then, sitting in the solitude, being a world class hacker, she cannot find Zala before the readers come to know about it.

The author extends the novel up to six hundred pages not simply, to write a book with a lot of pages. Stieg Larsson might have done it with a purpose. One reason could be to balance both the characters, to balance the so-called ‘good’ and ‘bad’ characteristics of both the characters, Lisbeth and Zala. From the point when murders happen, Blomkvist and others who work in the Millennium office suspects Zala. This is because two among the three people who are murdered are those who were doing a project on human trafficking and who reached the conclusion that Zala is the person behind all this. The story then extends to the point when Blomkvist finds who Zala is. The only suspense in the novel is when the readers come to know that it is Lisbeth’s father, who has no national identity. From the beginning, thus the name Zala is repeated. He is pictured as a criminal and the murderer.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea of ‘Ubermensch’ was put forward through his philosophical novel Thus Spoke Zarathustra. Through Zarathustra, Nietzsche shares his views on the ‘Ubermensch’. It is a German word and it is translated into English as ‘superman’, ‘overman’ and ‘overhuman’, elaborated through the book Thus Spoke Zarathustra. Nietzsche said that ‘overman’ is the goal of humanity. He is someone who has successfully overcome the human state. Nietzsche lived in a time when Darwinism was popular and breaking way from religion. People had started negating God. Nietzsche had proclaimed that God was dead. He believed that the aim of every human is to overcome the present state and become a higher form which is the ‘overman’. People have evolved from apes and they look down upon apes and laughs. Similarly, ‘overman’ will one day, in future, look down upon humans.

In this novel, Alexander Zalachenko is portrayed as a dangerous person. He is the real culprit, who murdered Dag, Mia and Bjurman. He is a womaniser and alcoholic. He was a cruel husband and a cruel father too. Lisbeth’s mother, Agneta Sofia Sjolander met him when she was 17 years old. Palmgren says she was so innocent that any cruel man could easily trap her. Out of love, she changed her name from Sjolander to Salander which was an act that showed her desire to marry him and live with him together. Agneta Sofia had a terrible life with Zalachenko. He came to the house only once in a while. He always came to the house giving her hope. But, he was always drunk. She was mentally and physically exploited by Zalachenko. Zalachenko savagely abused her and was not even bothered about the children who were growing up witnessing all the terrible tortures their father were doing to their mother. He arrives at the house whenever he wants, to get drunk and for sex. The two girls children were shut in a room until their mother allowed them to come out. Palmgren says to Blomkvist that Zala even carries a gun always. Lisbeth and Camilla, her twin sister behaved differently. Lisbeth was always a child standing away from her father and Camilla was a child who went and hugged her father after the events as if everything was fine. He did
not bother about the children and never went near him. They were not beaten by him. His tortures were directed towards her.

Later he once came and stabbed her continuously. She was beaten heavily and he stabbed on her head. She was left unconscious. She was admitted in the hospital. Doctors said she had a brain damage. He never took the responsibility over her thereafter. Children were also left alone who were adopted by separate families. It is only Lisbeth who visits her bedridden mother once in a while who dies before the murder in the novel. Through Palmgren, what a reader gets is a negative image of Zala. He is the murderer, and a man who is sadistic in his heart. He has ruined a family. But he also has a professional side. At the end of the novel, he tries to kill his own daughter Lisbeth and that too, with the help of his own son. Zala's son, Ronald's body and his voice which is not broken clearly shows that he has some sort of genetic defect. He just acts whatever things his father orders. He does not think and works as a machine. The very act that he uses his own son as a slave to kill his daughter shows how cruel he is. Both the way of treating his wife Agneta and his son showsthe way he emotionally exploits them, especially his wife.

Through Björg, who has worked with Zalachenko, Blomkvist comes to know about his social identity and profession. Björg was never ready to give details about Zala, whatever he knows to Blomkvist first. Later he himself comes and says to Zala on a promise that Blomkvist will never reveal about him to others. Björg was the only person who was a link between Zala and Bjurman. Gunnar Björg, sixty-two years old, unmarried, had been in the police force since he was twenty-one. He later studied law and fetched up at Sapo, the security police. Zala too worked for Sapo and thus Björg knows him.

Though the plot tries to reveal the cruelties of Zala and the characters are in pursuit of Zala, the protagonist, Lisbeth is not very far different from Zala. She is portrayed as a strange woman. She acts arrogantly towards others. She is also violent like Zala. Palmgren comments, “Her attitude to the rest of the world is that if someone threatens her with a gun, she'll get a bigger gun” (493). Only because she is the heroine of the novel, the story ends with Zala as the villain. She too tortures and kills other humans.

Lisbeth Salander is shown as a vigilant observer at first. She observes a lady nearby her apartment in Granada. Noticing that she is a victim of domestic violence, she follows the lady and her every move. She then gathers information about her husband and understands that he has a plan to kill her in order to get all the money that his wife possesses. Lisbeth Salander is not a police or detective. Still she behaves as if she has an authority over everything. She gathers the information about the couple not in a direct manner. She does it all through hacking the computer networks. When she sees the husband beating the lady and trying to kill her at a distance, she goes and stabs him. She takes the woman inside the building and assures her safety. Though it is to save the woman, she kills a human. She is also a murderer. Though she kills a man, no police force is behind her. There is no mention of the case or event after the incident occurred in the novel.

Nietzsche explains in his work Thus Spoke Zarathustra about things that one must give importance in his life and how a man should live in order to reach the aim of becoming an 'overman'. He believed that the concept of afterlife was foolish. One should not give more importance to the soul which is not a separate element. For him, body is everything. It is the body which helps to live and do things in the daily lives. “The body is a great intelligence, a multiplicity with one sense, a war and a peace, a herd and a shepherd. The instrument of your body is also your little intelligence, my brother, which you call ‘spirit’;— a little instrument and toy of your great intelligence” (31). Here, one can clearly understand that both Lisbeth and Zala are not concerned about others emotions. They are materialistic. Nietzsche calls the people who give importance to the soul than the body, as despisers of body. Man has the ability to create his own virtue. He should not submit to other’s opinion on virtues. He also criticizes those who say that death is the beginning of a new life and people will be judged according to the things done by them. Zarathustra supports war and revenge.

Zala was a civilian with a fake passport. He was not born in Sweden. He was born in Stalingrad. He lost his parents in the world wars when he was one year old. He learned in a military school. He has worked
as a journalist, photographer, in advertising as a sailor. He was one of the GRU's top agents. GRU is the military intelligence service that is directly subordinate to the army high command. According to Bjork, over the years he had been corrupted, and he squelled away a little money here and there. He was also a womanizer and he drank too much. All this was noted by his superiors, but he was still a favourite and they could overlook as he was good at his work. All the missions that he undertook were successful. No one bothered to mind his attitude. Later once, when one of the missions he undertook failed, he was summoned by the superiors. He refused to go. When they sent one of the officers, Zalak killed the officer. He then fled to Sweden. Thus he came to Sweden. When the government noticed that he is one of the top spies in Soviet Union, they first tried to get rid of him and later they kept it as a top secret. He later on helped Sweden, sold information about other nation's secrets and spying agencies. He is a brilliant man useful for Sweden, apart from the violent nature he possesses. The reader is made aware of these characteristics before the cruelties done to his family are revealed in the book. The narration is fabricated in such a way that the reader gets to know both his positive sides and negative sides.

Lisbeth is a strange woman who does not inform anyone where she goes. She does not have friends. The only people she likes in her life are Palmgren and Armansky. Her female partner Miriam Wu whom she calls Mimmi too is not that relevant for her.

She realised at that moment that she had not said goodbye to George Bland on Grenada either, and she wondered whether he was walking on the beach looking for her. She remembered what Blomkvist had told her about friendship bring based on respect and trust.

I keepsquandering my friends(91).

She does not even say to Mimmi or Armansky when she moves to Grenada. She does not give replies to Blomkvist's messages, e-mails or even letters. Even after the investigation started, and Blomkvist tries to help her, she never replies to him. She sees many messages to her in his computer's desktop which he has written down for her. She only replies when she feels that it is beneficial for her. Also, she changes her ID, uses the identity of another person and moves out once when the investigation progresses. She as a child has even tried to kill his father twice and at the end, the third time. Armansky even comments that she has an attitude problem. When Palmgren suffered a stroke and was admitted in the hospital, she was present at first. Later she leaves from there without telling to anyone. She says that she left because the doctors said there is no hope. Palmgren is her guardian and she herself says that the only two people she likes in her life are Palmgren and Armansky. Still, she does not look after him when he was in the hospital. Her act of leaving him at the hospital bed also suggests her lack of interest in taking responsibility of a person who has always stood for her.

In the book Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Zarathustra persuades the people to go into solitude. Zarathustra advises the people to stay away from the city life, move into solitude. Solitude will help them gain knowledge and become wiser. In the work Zarathustraspeaks about a marketplace which is in fact the world itself. It is a place where some people act as great people with wide knowledge.

Where solitude ends, there begins the marketplace; and where the marketplace begins, there begins also the noise of the great actors, and the buzzing of poison flies. In the world even the best things are worthless without those who represent them: those showmen, the peoplecall great-men(45).

Zarathustra is aware of the difficulty to force a group of people who live among the group of people to move into solitude at once. But still he tells them men becomes wiser, and master the hours and becomes an 'overman' when he is in solitude. He advises them not to love their neighbors, dismisses the concept of fake friendships in the world and tells to believe in oneself. One is born in the world free and should not fall addicted to a particular belief and constrain themselves. Each one has their own concept of virtue and truth. One should not compromise his idea for others. God is not the creator. It is people in the world who are creators. If god is the creator then men do not have anything to create. Chastity is another concept that
Zarathustradiscusses Chastity is good but it should not be something which is forced upon people. To whom chastity is difficult, it is to be dissuaded; lest it become the road to hell— to filth and the lust of the soul. Do I speak of filthy things? That is not the worst thing for me to do. Not when the truth is filthy, but when it is shallow, does the discerning one go unwillingly into its waters. Truly, there are chaste ones from their very nature; they are gentler of heart, and laugh better and more often than you.(48).

One can see the character Lisbeth as the one that Zarathustra explains. She always stays away from others. She is not a one who believes in chastity, Zala too, is not present in social records. Both are absent in the society as a social being.

The way she treats Bjurman is also to be noticed. She does not believe in the law and does not complain about rape. She keeps threatening him with the video of the rape. She has imprinted a tattoo on his body, she keeps his life under her control. She had sparekeys to his office and apartment. She would drop in whenever she wanted.

On a surface level it is a story of the woman, Lisbeth Salander, who is bold, strong and strange, who has the ability to creep into any of the networks. It is the story of investigation of the murders happened, the murder of a young couple who were doing a socially relevant project. It is a story of struggle from the part of Blomkvist to find Zala. Analysing more closely, one can find that both the characters Zala and Lisbeth are in fact cruel and nihilistic in their attitude. Lisbeth kills a person, hacks the accounts and networks. Sitting anywhere, she gains access to any networks. She always wants everybody under her control. She gets into the Millennium office, gathers all the data into her secret applications and programs. None is better than the other. Lisbeth too is a threat for the society with her behaviour as Zala is. The story is extended with a lot of unnecessary details because the author wanted to show the strange behaviour of Lisbeth and the professionally successful Zala before closing the plot with Zala as the culprit or the villain and Lisbeth as the protagonist.

There are also many similarities in their life. Both wants to destroy everything and become a superpower and keep the world under their control. One can see that Stieg Larsson tries to bring the concept of 'overman' through the two characters, Zala and Lisbeth in his work. Both characters aim at becoming a person who can control everything in the world. Lisbeth does not want to enter into a marriage. Though she loves Blomkvist, she breaks her relationship with him one day all of a sudden and disappears. Zala maintains a relationship with Agneta Sofia but is never interested to marry.

Nietzsche in his work says that marriage is a distraction for a human whose aim is to become an 'overman'. Often, marriage is considered as a union between two people, to begin a new life and to avoid the loneliness in life. This should not be so. If people think so, it will be a distraction. Only those people should marry who has the self confidence that he will definitely become the 'overman' in future. Feeling of pity is useless in life. Love towards others is also unnecessary. One should respect their own virtues. One should not submit to the desires and wishes of others. One should only obey oneself and not others. Once, submitted to a higher power, he will be able to control only those who are weaker than himself. Thus he becomes inferior to others and moves into a position behind, in his struggle towards becoming an 'overman'. One should obey oneself and thus gain power. One should learn to command others. The superior man of the future will be the finest incarnation of the will to power.

Zala had worked for Sapo very sincerely and thus one cannot say that he is a threat for the entire nation. Though he is a womaniser, alcoholic and cruel to his family he has struggled his best to make every mission he had undertaken to be successful. Similarly though Lisbeth does murders when she feels a person is harmful, she has helped Blomkvist for the project he was doing the previous year.

When she was twelve years old, when all the evil happened as she says, she tried to kill Zala by pouring petrol on his face and throwing a matchstick into the car where he was. For so many years he was not present anywhere. She thought he would never come again. But later he comes back. At the end, Zala
tootries to kill Lisbeth. She is shot and then buried underground. After sometime, she manages to crawl on the ground scratching the earth above her. In fact both have experienced a resurrection. Both are in a state of "undead". They are not alive totally or dead. At the end a fight between the two 'undead' people breaks out. While Zala is the present aspect of the crime, she is the absence. She is present in the virtual world whereas Zala is not present in the virtual world. The very fact that Zala is not present in the virtual world and she is, shows that one is the alter ego of the other. Here both the characters possess the same characteristics. Both have the same attitude towards life.

In the novel, the entire plot revolves around the murder of Dag and Mia. One more murder happens after they are murdered. Bjurman, the former guardian of Lisbeth is murdered. Bjurman had earlier raped her and she always threatened him with a video of her rape. Lisbeth always wanted to keep his life under control and he said she would kill him if she tried to move in any manner against her in his life or do anything harmful against her. One can see that Bjurman, in spite of the warning given by Lisbeth, goes to the police departments and finds the secret files of Lisbeth. The plot gives importance to the murder of the young couple in such a way that by the end, it is obvious that any reader may forget about Bjurman. At the end, Zala says that he killed Dag and Mia because he found out that their project was pointing towards him and killed Bjurman because he was useless. The reason sounds very absurd. There is no proper importance given to the murder of Bjurman and no proper reason given.

When Blomkvist realises that police has suspected Lisbeth as the culprit he asks her whether she has committed the murder. He strongly believes that she will not commit a murder, that too of a young couple who is doing a project against human trafficking. He believes she would only help them. In the message to Blomkvist which she sends him as a reply to his questions, she only says that she did not kill Dag and Mia. She does not say about Bjurman. Also she says that she is not innocent. This shows that Lisbeth might have murdered Bjurman. He has gone to find her records in spite of her warning as a first step towards taking revenge against her. Later when she enters into his apartment, she finds out that Bjurman had found out some of her records. So, one cannot surely conclude that Zala has committed all the three murders. The fact that Bjurman’s murder is marginalised in the novel also could be an attempt by the author to make the readers concentrate more on Zala.

It is important to look into the concept of gender in this case. The concept of gender has undergone many changes throughout the years. It was, and still is a widely accepted notion that gender is something innate. With the idea that gender is a performance, presented by Judith Butler and other eminent feminist theoreticians, the essentialist belief that a woman's behaviour as a passive, dependent person is natural, was shaken. In Gender Trouble, she says “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.” (33) Judith Butler further discusses about body and sex and says that sex is also something which is materialised. She further elaborates on the concept put forward by Beauvoir that sex is biological and gender is a construct. In fact she criticises the statement. In her work Bodies that Matter she discusses how he views on the notion of body, sex and gender. For Butler, sex is also something which is materialised by external forces.

Thus, sex is a regulatory ideal whose materialisation is compelled and this materialisation takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words 'sex' is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialised through time. (236)

Apart from this she explains the concept of performativity, Judith Butler was influenced by Lacan. “Performativity is thus not a singular ‘act’ for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and so the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (241). In the narration too the reiteration is analysed. Both the characters, Zala and Lisbeth are pictured through the reiteration in the narration of the novel.

All the events prove that Zala and Lisbeth are not really the people at opposite poles in the novel. If
she had not done the crime, there was no reason to hide. They both are in fact the alter ego of one another. All these characteristics show that they have traits of human who try to become 'overman' in their life similar to Zarathustra. The character of Zala is made known to the readers through many others in the novel. For the wider knowledge on both the characters, the author uses the voice of many other characters like Bjork, Palmgren, Armansky and Miriam Wu. A reiteration is found in the narration of the novel.

In fact Zala and Lisbeth are two different manifestations of the same concept of the 'superman' or the 'overman' concept of Nietzsche. Nietzsche says one should move into solitude to reach the aim of every human which is to become the 'overman'. Here Lisbeth always wants to stay alone, away from others. She is not a social being. In the beginning she is at Grenada spending days alone in an apartment. Later she goes away from the social world and hides from the external world. Zala too is not present everywhere. He is not found in the national records. He is only known as a person to the secret security wing of Sweden. Other than that he has no identity in the nation or he is not present as a social person. As Nietzsche says marriage is a distraction for those who desire to become an overcome, here one can see that both the characters do not want to marry. She does not want to stay with Blomkvist or continue the relationship with him. Zala too does not show any interest in marrying Agneta Sofia Salander. Nietzsche also says that chastity is good, but it should not be forced upon anyone. Here, Lisbeth does not believe in chastity. It is difficult for her to believe in the concept so she never forces herself into believing it. She has relationship with man and woman. Miriam Wu, whom she calls Mimmi is her female partner and she makes love with other men also. They never obey others. They are only obedient towards themselves to gain power. They never submit to others opinions. Here both the characters Zala and Lisbeth only tries to control others but does not obey any other person, institution or government. Thus one can see that they are two gendered manifestations of 'overman'.

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