
Literary Voice: A Peer Reviewed Journal of English Studies (ISSN 2277-4521)

Number 25, Volume 1, September 2025, <https://literaryvoice.in>

Indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection ESCI, Cosmos, ESJI, I2OR, CiteFactor, InfoBase

Labyrinths of Liberation: Mapping Transgressive Femininity in Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic* and Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo**

¹**Hasini Raj I**, Research Scholar, Dept. of English & Foreign Languages, College of Engineering and Technology, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur Campus, Chennai (Tamil Nadu), India. siniachieve@gmail.com

²**S. Horizan Prasanna Kumar**, Associate Professor and Research Supervisor, Department of English and Foreign Languages, College of Engineering and Technology, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur Campus, Chennai (Tamil Nadu), India. horizans@srmist.edu.in

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2025.25.1.29>

Abstract

Transgressive female characters in literature often serve as catalysts for challenging entrenched gender conventions and social norms. The study aims to decipher the complexities of societal expectations put upon women and the ways that literature acts as a potent vehicle for subverting established norms by analyzing the actions, motivations, and outcomes of boundary-pushing female characters like Noemi Taboada from Mexican Gothic (2020) by Silvia Moreno-Garcia and Lisbeth Salander from The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (2005) by Stieg Larsson. The women in these narratives, despite being rooted in different cultural and temporal contexts, confront patriarchal structures, social expectations, and conventional gender roles. This study examines that both characters embody contemporary versions of the Gothic heroine—women who challenge categorization and subvert societal norms. Noemi's defiance within a deteriorating patriarchal estate resonates with traditional Gothic elements infused with a contemporary posthumanist perspective, whereas Lisbeth's urban battle against systemic abuse merges tech-noir with psychological Gothic. Together, they demonstrate the ongoing evolution of transgressive femininity in literature, providing a thought-provoking analysis of gender, power, and identity. The study also takes into account how these representations may affect more general discussions on women's agency, empowerment, and how gender roles are changing in literature.

Keywords: Transgressive females, Gothic heroine, Postcolonial Gothic, Societal norms, Digital resistance, Women's agency

Introduction

The female body has been highly regarded in the course of literature as a symbol of chastity, honor and dignity. A range of literary works revolved around the concept of female honor wherein the female characters were portrayed as innocent, honorable maidens protecting their virginity as a symbol of their virtue. Women's desire to overcome the social barriers and limitations that bound them to the century caused a thought divergence from the traditional mores of the past, which in turn affected the ways that the authors and artists portrayed, displayed and manipulated women's bodies. Fletcher made the claim that, "a woman's sexual reputation was the whole of her reputation," (104) meaning that chastity was the primary indicator of her honor and hence, an

***Article History:** Full Article Received on 31st May 2025. Peer Review completed on 20th June 2025, Article Accepted on 28th June. 2025. First published: September 2025. **Copyright** vests with Author. **Licensing:** Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

essential component of the paternalistic social structure. Male honor was associated with courage whereas female honor was associated with chastity. Chasteness was the sole criterion for a woman to be considered honorable. The female gender was perceived solely for its sexual reputation, indicating that the female body was regarded as a mere tool for reproduction and nothing more. They were invited forcefully to abide by societal norms and preserve their chastity until the knight in shining armor arrives to rescue her. And this in turn constructed a variety of feminine virtues including being a good housewife and a nurturer of the family.

The phrase “transgressive fiction” refers to a literary genre where characters deliberately challenge or defy societal standards they find oppressive or unsettling. This genre often gains a reputation for being shocking or even revolting due to its willingness to depict taboo subjects, including graphic violence, sexual content, and other illicit or unconventional behaviors. It is sometimes referred to as “smut,” but this is more a result of the prevalent themes of subversion than a prerequisite of the genre itself. In a culture where heterosexuality is the norm, for instance, the characters may disrupt this standard by depicting themselves in an aggressively homosexual manner. However, whether or not it contains anything surprising or pornographic, it would likewise be deemed subversive if a character in the present age chose to abandon civilization and live in a cabin in the woods. The characters that find it to be tiring to live by the expectations of society and live life as how they wanted fall under this category. They try to break away from conventional lifestyles.

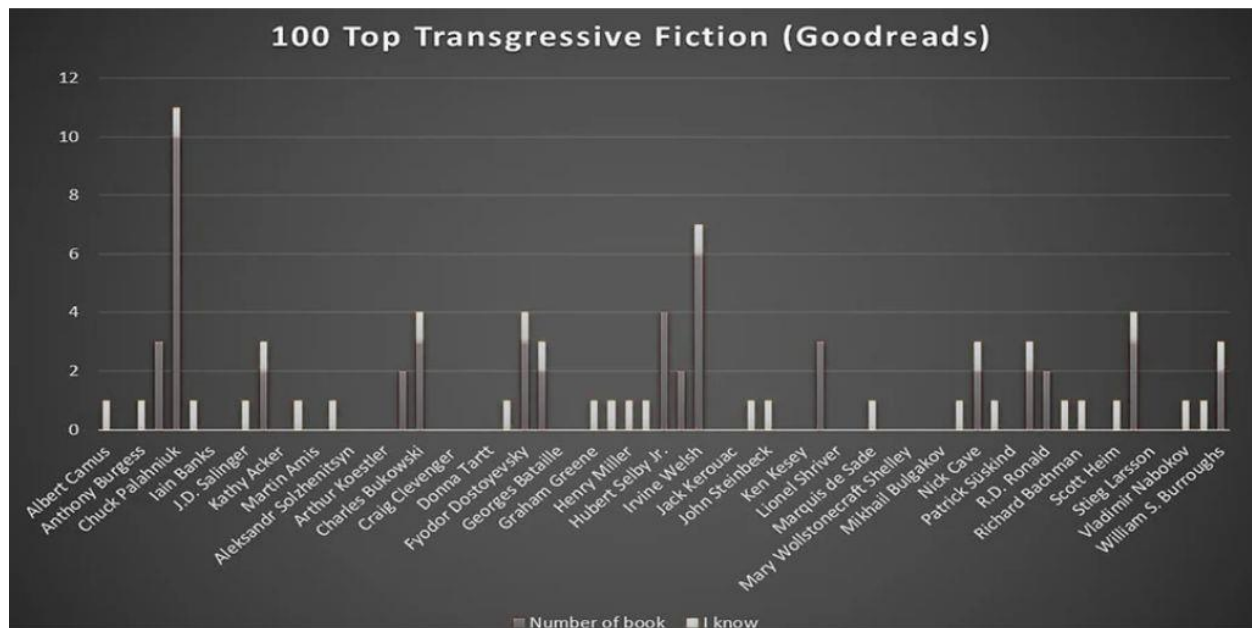


Figure 1. (Aria)

The graph provides a comprehensive overview of key figures in transgressive literature, while also subtly revealing a notable gender imbalance. The overwhelming predominance of male authors such as Chuck Palahniuk, Irvine Welsh, and Bret Easton Ellis who dominate the list with multiple entries points to the male-centric construction of the transgressive literary canon. In contrast, female authors such as Kathy Acker, Donna Tartt, and Mary Shelley appear far less frequently despite their significant contributions to the genre cannot be overlooked. This imbalance reinforces the central argument of the article, which argues that female transgression is frequently neglected

or inadequately represented in dominant literary discourse. The graph highlights the importance of reassessing literary canons to recognize how female authors and characters confront norms in ways that are culturally significant and powerfully transgressive.

Transgressive female characters have historically been crucial to the Gothic tradition. Characterized by their opposition to societal standards and rejection of gendered expectations, these women frequently occupy spaces of confinement both literal and metaphorical and confront the systems that aim to subjugate them. This study analyzes Noemí Taboada from *Mexican Gothic* and Lisbeth Salander from *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* as protagonists who challenge entrenched systems of authority. Despite their differences in genre, locale, and tone, the protagonists employ intellect, agency, and unconventional strategies to reclaim control. Their settings, High Place, a decaying Gothic mansion in rural Mexico, and modern Sweden, a digitally saturated landscape riddled with corruption serve not merely as backdrops but as arenas for the confrontation between individual autonomy and institutional authority. Quesen (2023) in her article titled, “What Decays and What Stays: Understanding Gothic Violence and Colonialism in Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s Mexican Gothic” examines how Moreno-Garcia uses Gothic elements to depict colonial violence and decay exploring how the decaying estate reflects historical trauma rooted in colonialism and how the genre’s focus on hauntings and decay often limits its ability to fully confront the legacies of colonial violence. Fredriksson (2020) in her article titled, “Avenger in Distress: A Semiotic Study of Lisbeth Salander, Rape-Revenge and Ideology” through a semiotic approach, analyses how Lisbeth challenges the traditional damsel in distress and symbolizes feminist resistance, she also encapsulates patriarchal ideologies such as vigilantism and violence.

Noemí Taboada, the Reimagined Gothic Heroine

In *Mexican Gothic* (2020), Silvia Moreno-Garcia reinterprets the classic Gothic heroine with the character of Noemí Taboada. Historically, the Gothic heroine illustrated in works such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* or *Jane Eyre* represents a young woman, facing economic or social vulnerabilities, who finds herself in an unfamiliar and threatening setting, usually characterized by a decaying estate. She is often described as being passive, emotionally sensitive, and in need of male protection. Noemí, by contrast, is a bold, intellectually curious, and socially privileged woman who not only enters the decaying world of High Place willingly but also maintains her agency throughout her descent into its horrors. Noemí Taboada subverts the expectations of her social class and gender norms. As a cosmopolitan young woman in 1950s Mexico, she enters High Place, a colonial mansion secluded in the countryside, equipped not with acquiescence but with scientific inquiry, skepticism, and autonomy. High Place, governed by the British Doyle family, is a decaying remnant of imperial authority, parasitically feeding off indigenous labor and land.

In the Gothic framework, trauma is frequently shown through haunting which is evident in decaying houses, ghostly appearances, and recurring patterns of violence. In *Mexican Gothic*, the Gothic tropes are reinterpreted as metaphors for colonial violence, reproductive exploitation, and intergenerational suffering, primarily endured by women. According to Cerdeña et al., “one of the reasons that Latinx communities are underrepresented in the literature on intergenerational trauma may be due to their significant heterogeneity and the multiple overlapping sources of trauma, including diverse forms of colonisation, political oppression within Latin America, dangerous passages of international migration, and systemic racism” (1). Noemí’s journey into High Place is not just a Gothic descent into horror, it’s a symbolic confrontation with the complex legacies of Latinx trauma, where the intersections of race, gender, class, and colonialism converge.

As stated by Gelder, “the postcolonial Gothic explores the colonial past at the same time that it imagines a postcolonial future which has not yet come into existence. It therefore turns domestic experiences of loss into symbolic accounts of lives that are simultaneously independent and hopelessly enslaved or exploited” (196). The Doyle family are British colonizers who amassed their fortune through the exploitation of Mexican land and labor, represent a lingering manifestation of colonial authority. The Doyles’ obsession with racial purity and their grotesque use of eugenics, particularly through the possession of women’s bodies to perpetuate their bloodline as “A woman’s function is to preserve the family line” (Moreno-Garcia 75) underscores the ongoing exploitation of the colonized and feminized body. The bodies of women, particularly those of Indigenous or mixed descent, are utilized as instruments, both in a literal sense through fungal possession and symbolically through marriage and reproduction, to uphold the colonial lineage. Noemí’s journey is a confrontation with the deep-seated structures of colonial domination that continue to define the present, as well as with familial and bodily horror. “The creation of an afterlife, furnished with the marrow and the bones and the neurons of a woman, made of stems and spores” (Moreno-Garcia 284). Noemí disrupts the reproductive logic of colonial patriarchy, exposes the violent undercurrents of the seemingly civilized elite, and ultimately destroys the living memory of the colonial regime embedded in the house’s mycelial network in her resistance to the Doyle family, which is both personal and symbolic.

Noemí’s body and consciousness are gradually infiltrated by a fungal network that feeds the deteriorating Doyle family and their estate. “The fungus, it runs under the house, all the way to the cemetery and back. It’s in the walls. Like a giant spider’s web. In that web we can preserve memories, thoughts, caught like the flies that wander into a real web. We call that repository of our thoughts, of our memories, the gloom” (Moreno-Garcia 211). This physical and psychic infiltration is best understood through Stacy Alaimo’s theory of transcorporeality, which asserts that the human body is neither isolated nor autonomous, but rather materially and ecologically intertwined with its surrounding environment. In *Mexican Gothic* the fungus alters perception and exerts control, allowing patriarch Virgil Doyle and his ancestors to manipulate memory, reality, and identity. This environmental system operates not just as Gothic ambiance, but as a manifestation of colonial legacy, where the land and its resources are consumed and assimilated into the imperial framework. Noemí’s awareness of her body’s physiological responses like nausea, confusion, hallucination becomes part of her intuitive resistance. Alaimo suggests that “the material interchanges between human bodies and the environment render the human permeable, vulnerable, and entangled,” (2) but they also create space for embodied knowledge and resistance. By remaining physically embedded within the toxic environment of High Place, Noemí is able to observe, experience and internalize the workings of the fungal system, gaining insight into its mechanisms of control. This proximity becomes a site of transformation. Unlike traditional Gothic heroines who are often rescued or driven to madness, Noemí utilizes her embodied experiences including hallucinations and sensory confusion, not as signs of weakness but as tools of resistance. She does not passively endure contamination; she learns from it, ultimately confronting and destroying the source of the Doyle family’s parasitic domination—the ancient, root-like being of Howard Doyle. Her liberation is not merely psychological or symbolic, it is corporeal and ecological. In destroying the fungus, Noemí asserts an alternative vision of agency, one that acknowledges the body’s vulnerability without conceding its autonomy. She becomes a transcorporeal subject, fully aware of her embeddedness within a contaminated environment, yet refusing to be defined by it. In doing so, *Mexican Gothic* transforms the traditional Gothic heroine into a postcolonial eco-feminist figure whose resistance is as much about

reclaiming bodily sovereignty as it is about confronting the ghosts of colonial and ecological destruction.

Lisbeth Salander, the Cyber Avenger Behind the Screen

Lisbeth Salander, the enigmatic protagonist of Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, emerges as a quintessential Techno-Gothic heroine, navigating a digitally saturated world where horror is encoded not in castles or dungeons, but in hard drives, encrypted files and surveillance networks. "As technological advances reshape our fears and our desires, new techno-Gothic modes arise" (Hogle 138). Lisbeth is well-known for her skilled hacking abilities, her unapologetic attitude, and her startling disdain for conventional norms around gender roles. Within the literary canon, Salander stands out as a singular and rebellious female heroine who questions mainstream opinion and transforms ideas about women in fiction. Lisbeth Salander defies conventional ideas of femininity with her unusual wardrobe choices, body piercings, and tattoos. She deliberately rejected the norms of society associated with gendered appearances with her androgynous and defiant manner of presentation. A key component of Lisbeth's personality is her prowess in computer hacking and technology. Her ability to challenge gender norms regarding technical expertise and intelligence in the "archetypal masculine cultures such as engineering, where mastery over technology is a source of both pleasure and power for the predominantly male profession" (Wajcman 111). Because of her proficiency with technology, Lisbeth is able to navigate a society ruled by men on her own terms and gain empowerment.

She was a pale, anorexic woman who had hair as short as a fuse, and a pierced nose and eyebrows. She had a wasp tattoo about two centimeters long on her neck, a tattooed loop around the biceps of her left arm and another around her left ankle... She had a wide mouth, a small nose, high cheekbones that gave her an almost Asian look. Her extreme slenderness would have made a career in modeling impossible, but with the right make-up her face could have put her on any billboard in the world. (Larsson 33, 34)

As for Lisbeth's personal preference, she goes with punk culture which encompasses a self-liberating ideology rooted in opposition to established norms and authoritative figures, advocating for a society devoid of governmental or political control, where individuals assume full responsibility for their own actions. She also still has a hint of the gothic, the title that pertains to the somber and obscure period of the 19th century, during which vampires, ghosts, and the supernatural emerged. Since punk and goth labels serve as identity identifiers, they imply that she possesses a dark temperament and is prepared to engage in rebellion. She is a rebel not only in her appearance but also in the way she conducts herself and the assignments she undertakes. She does not conform to the conventional expectations of women's roles. Lisbeth Salander's agency encompasses both sexual and political dimensions. It is quite challenging to divide into two distinct groups. Many of her deeds of resistance have characteristics of both. Lisbeth frequently exhibits the phenomenon of gender queerness. She has traits that are indicative of both males and females. Often, she reverses the traditional gender roles between males and females.

"...the reversals of sexual power that occur through her identity as a hacker. Salander turns the tables on her victimization, using technology to penetrate, surveil, and expose the perversion of the very authorities who pathologized her. Her membership in the hacker community situates her firmly within a masculine social group with Bob the Dog. And her ability to enter the private sphere of another's e-mail account or hard drive is experienced as a violation, a metaphorical indicator of her aggressive sexuality..." (Surkan 41)

Her career as a cyber-hacker and her interest in computer technology was widely classified to be a manly profession. "The virtuality of cyberspace is seen to spell the end of naturalized, biological

embodiment as the basis for gender difference. The Internet is expressive of female ways of being, and thereby creates manifold opportunities for changing the woman-machine relationship. Technology itself is seen as liberating women” (Wajcman 7). Lisbeth was very much interested in math which is seen as gender bending as girls are expected to excel in the discipline of humanities and not the sciences.

“Lisbeth is likewise unenthusiastic about institutionalized education, yet it is her mathematical genius which truly situates her in a commonly male-dominated arena. In elementary school, she discovers that her math textbook has an incorrect answer, and refuses to back down when her teacher, Birgitta Miåås, does not think she is right. Instead, Lisbeth ends up throwing the textbook at Birgitta’s head, strongly emphasizing her distaste for school and authority in general. Despite this incident, Lisbeth’s passion for math continues in her adulthood, and she spends a good portion of the second novel working out Fermat’s Last Theorem, even though it remained unsolved for over 400 years.” (Reidlinger 22)

Salander is an open-minded individual who isn't very concerned about her sexuality. Although she doesn't seem interested in labels, she is naturally bisexual. People are classified on the basis of their gender preferences as homosexuals, heterosexuals, bisexuals. Salander disregards these classifications as she is not interested in the sex of the other person but her decision is solely based on how aroused she feels looking at another individual. The sex of the person is not in question. Mimmi describes Lisbeth as, “You’re probably bisexual. But most of all you’re sexual – you like sex and you don’t care about what gender. You’re an entropic chaos factor.” (Larsson 107) She is not the stereotypical damsel in distress rather she saves herself in the end. Her absent father and by the age of 13 her mother was also no more which made Lisbeth an independent girl from a very young age who grew up to be strong willed and determined. “Her attitude towards the rest of the world is that if someone threatens her with a gun, she’ll get a bigger gun.” (Larsson 493). Traditionally, heroines are not associated with physical violence. Lisbeth makes use of it without hesitation.

“It was not until they reached the bed that Bjurman realized that something was amiss. She was the one leading him to the bed, not the other way around. She shoved the Taser into his left armpit and fired off 75,000 volts.” (Larsson 228)

“So you’re a sadist,” she said matter-of-factly. “You enjoy shoving things inside people, is that it?” She looked him in the eyes. Her face was expressionless. “Without lubricant, right?” Bjurman howled into the adhesive tape when Salander roughly spread his cheeks and rammed the plug into its proper place.” (Larsson 231)

This exhibits the male agency of violent appropriation of rape. Since rape is widely acknowledged to be a penetrative violation, it is regarded as a male dominance biologically. Lisbeth is certain that she possesses agency. That is the defining characteristic that classifies her as an anti-heroine. She possesses the ability to seek retribution against those who have harmed her or other women. She remains resilient in the face of her difficulties and refuses to succumb to passive suffering, subverting the traditional Gothic trope. Working under her alias “Wasp” within the “Hacker Republic”, she demonstrates a radical form of digital resistance wherein she infiltrates secure databases and offshore accounts, not merely for personal gain, but to destabilize systems that enable and perpetuate the abuse of women. Her transformation from victim to avenger through hacking is not just about revenge; it's about a fundamental re-calibration of power dynamics, allowing the once-silenced and marginalized female body to speak and act with unprecedented technological authority. “Although small in stature, Lisbeth’s power comes from inner strength – an attitude of refusing to stand down from any confrontation.” (Reidlinger 20)

Conclusion

Noemí Taboada and Lisbeth Salander emerge as potent reimaginings of the Gothic heroine in contemporary literature, figures who defy subjugation and transform spaces historically dominated by patriarchal control. Though rooted in distinct cultural, temporal, and narrative settings, both women resist systemic oppression through subversive means: Noemí by confronting a decaying colonial estate entangled in biopolitical control and ecological decay, and Lisbeth by reclaiming power through technological mastery and radical autonomy in a hyper-surveilled digital world. Drawing on frameworks such as Posthumanist Feminism, Techno-Gothic, and Postcolonial Gothic, this study has illustrated how each character disrupts the binaries of victim/perpetrator, body/mind, and tradition/technology. Noemí's corporeal resistance within an eco-toxic landscape aligns with Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality, emphasizing the entanglement of body and environment. Meanwhile, Lisbeth's techno-agency resists the commodification of female bodies in the age of surveillance capitalism, using data and digital power as tools of emancipation rather than exploitation.

Crucially, both characters reject the traditional Gothic trope of the helpless, endangered woman, instead asserting themselves as agents of disruption, survival, and transformation. They reclaim their narratives not by escaping Gothic structures, but by inhabiting and dismantling them from within, Noemí in the haunted estate of postcolonial decay and Lisbeth in the digitized ruins of capitalist patriarchy. In doing so, they offer a new archetype for the Gothic heroine: one that is not confined by cultural scripts of femininity, trauma, or submission, but instead embraces contradiction, rebellion, and complexity. Their stories suggest that the Gothic mode continues to evolve, serving as a literary space for critiquing contemporary anxieties, be it about environmental collapse, surveillance, gendered violence, or the limits of the human body. The narratives of Noemí and Lisbeth point to a vital literary and political possibility that women, especially those cast as the "other," will not only survive oppressive systems but reshape them through hybrid, radical, and transgressive forms of resistance. Their legacy is not one of passive haunting but of active rebellion—a message that literature, and the world it reflects, must continue to hear.

Works Cited

- Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press, 2010, p. 2.
- Aria, Neda. "Women and Transgressive Literature." *Neda Aria*, 4 Mar. 2021, www.nedaaria.info/post/women-and-transgressive-literature.
- Cerdeña, Jessica P., et al. "Intergenerational Trauma in Latinxs: A Scoping Review." *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 270, no. 113662, Feb. 2021, p. 1, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.113662>.
- Fletcher, Anthony. *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England, 1500-1800*. Yale University Press, 1999, p. 104.
- Fredriksson, Tea. "Avenger in Distress: A Semiotic Study of Lisbeth Salander, Rape-Revenge and Ideology." *Nordic Journal of Criminology*, vol. 22, no. 1, Nov. 2020, pp. 58–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2578983x.2020.1851111>.
- Gelder, Ken. "'The Postcolonial Gothic', from 'the Cambridge Companion to the Modern Gothic.'" *Www.academia.edu*, 2014, p. 196, www.academia.edu/28654371/The_Postcolonial_Gothic_from_The_Cambridge_Companion_to_the_Modern_Gothic_Cambridge_UP_2014.
- Hogle, Jerrold E. *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern Gothic*. Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 138.

- Larsson, Stieg. *The Girl Who Played with Fire*. MacLehose Press, 2012.
- . *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Maclehorse Press/Quercus, 2008.
- Moreno-Garcia, Silvia. *Mexican Gothic*. Jo Fletcher Books, 2021.
- Quesen, Mina. *What Decays and What Stays: Understanding Gothic Violence and Colonialism in Silvia Moreno-Garcia's Mexican Gothic*. 2023,
mackseyjournal.scholasticahq.com/api/v1/articles/94883-what-decays-and-what-stays-understanding-gothic-violence-and-colonialism-in-silvia-moreno-garcia-s-_mexican-gothic_.pdf.
- Reidlinger, Elise. *Somebody'd Get a Fat Lip If They Ever Called Me "Pippi Longstocking": Gender, Sex and Red Hair in Stieg Larsson's the Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Lund University, 2011,
lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordOId=2025491&fileOId=2025492
- Surkan, Kim. "The Girl Who Turned Tables: A Queer Reading of Lisbeth Salander." *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo and Philosophy*, Eric Bronson, John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2012, pp. 33–46.
- Wajcman, Judy. *TechnoFeminism*. Polity Press, 2004.