



# Silenced Voice, Reclaimed Agency: A Psychoanalytic and Feminist Reading of Harriet Vanger's Trauma in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*

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## Abstract

*This study delves deeply into the intricate psychological trauma experienced by the character Harriet Vanger in the literary work *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005), employing a comprehensive Freudian psychoanalytic framework that is further contextualized by pertinent feminist theoretical perspectives. Enduring a prolonged period of sexual abuse inflicted upon her by her father and brother, Harriet epitomizes the archetype of the repressed victim, whose psychological landscape is profoundly shaped by elements of fear, enforced silence, and a visceral sense of resistance to her circumstances. The application of Freud's theoretical constructs concerning repression and the dynamics of the unconscious mind elucidates the profound ways in which trauma indelibly influences her sense of identity and the strategies she adopts for survival in an oppressive environment. A feminist interpretation of her narrative reveals the entrenched patriarchal structures that not only facilitate her victimization but also perpetuate her marginalization within the broader social context. The trauma experienced by Harriet is not solely confined to the psychological realm; rather, it extends into the socio-political domain, thereby mirroring the systemic silencing of female voices within a predominantly patriarchal framework. Ultimately, her journey towards eventual escape serves as a powerful testament to her resilience and the assertion of her agency in the face of overwhelming adversity.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Stieg Larsson's seminal work, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, (2005), intricately constructs a

multifaceted narrative wherein the complex interplay of psychological trauma, the pervasive nature of sexual abuse, and the arduous struggle

for personal agency coverage within the confines of a society that is deeply entrenched in patriarchal values and structures. At the heart of this intricate narrative tapestry lies the character of Harriet Vanger, whose extensive and prolonged experience of incestuous abuse, coupled with the subsequent psychological repression that she endures, presents a particularly compelling case that invites a nuanced psychoanalytic and feminist interpretation of her plight. This research article endeavors to meticulously explore the multifaceted dimensions of Harriet's profound trauma through the critical lens of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, with a particular emphasis on the foundational constructs of the id, ego and superego, as well as the intricate mechanisms of repression and the enigmatic nature of the unconscious mind. In tandem with this psychoanalytic exploration, the study further integrates a robust framework of feminist theory in order to highlight how deeply entrenched patriarchal structures not only facilitate but also perpetuate her victimization, thus underscoring the systemic nature of her suffering. This dual theoretical framework serves to illuminate the profound and lasting effect of sexual abuse on both the psyche and the formation of identity, while simultaneously recognizing and articulating the broader socio-political implications that arise from Harriet's silence and her eventual journey towards resistance.

The traumatic experience that Harriet Vanger endures originate in the formative years of her childhood, during which she is subjected to a series of repeated and horrific instances of sexual abuse perpetrated by none other than her father, Gottfried Vanger, and subsequently, by both Martin Vanger. The lingering effects of this egregious abuse resonate profoundly with Freud's conceptualization of trauma, which he articulates as a fundamental conflict between the conscious reality that one experiences and the unconscious desires that are often repressed or hidden away. In his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1917), he posits that "the essence of repression lies simply in the function of rejecting and keeping something out of consciousness" (221). Harriet

epitomizes the archetype of the repressed victim, as her traumatic memories are relegated to the depths of her unconscious mind, where they remain suppressed by the operations of the ego, all in an effort to safeguard the self from further psychological harm and distress. Consequently, her silence emerges not merely as a byproduct of fear but rather as a sophisticated psychological defense mechanism that Freud meticulously describes as essential for the maintenance of the ego's stability in the face of overwhelming anxiety and turmoil. Her pronounced detachment and emotional distance from her family, particularly exemplified by her deliberate decision to live in obscurity, can be interpreted as a strategic maneuver employed by the psyche to avert any confrontation with the traumatic realities that she has endured, her repressed pain articulated as "I was sixteen. I was scared. I was ashamed. I was desperate. I was all alone.... I had told Anita about the sexual assaults, but I didn't have the courage to tell her that my father was also an insane killer of women.....I know that. My father molested me for a year." (Larsson 443)

Freud elaborates extensively on the complex array of defense mechanisms in his influential text, *The Ego and the Id*, (1923), wherein he elucidates that repression constitutes "a process that begins with the ego and serves to keep distressing thoughts buried in the unconscious" (30). He further delineates that "repression is not a once - and -for-all act but a continuous process... the ego is constantly on guard to keep forbidden impulses in check" (34). This continuous act of suppression inevitably leads to the development of neurosis and can manifest in a variety of forms, including avoidance, dissociation, or the fragmentation and splitting of one's identity. Harriet's dramatic decision to vanish from her previous life and to adopt a new identity serves as a quintessential example of such a defense mechanism, as it allows her to elude the immediate and direct consequences of the trauma she has suffered, all while ensuring her own physical survival in a world that has proven to be profoundly hostile and dangerous.

In the context of Freudian theory, the id is understood to represent the primal, instinctual desires that drive human behaviour, while the ego functions as the realistic and mediating component that navigates between the impulsive demands of the id and the constraints imposed by the external world. The superego, in contrast, embodies the moral standards and societal expectations that individuals internalize throughout their lives. In the specific case of Harriet, the id—representing her instinctual desire to escape and survive—finds itself overridden by the superego, which reflects an internalized set of stringent rules and expectations derived from the oppressive patriarchal structures that demand her obedience and silence. Caught in this intricate web, her ego finds itself navigating the tumultuous waters between the trauma inflicted by her own family and the societal obligation to remain silent, thereby managing her lived reality by repressing her profound pain while simultaneously maintaining a facade of normalcy. However, it is crucial to understand that this repression does not serve to erase the trauma that she has endured but rather intensifies the internal conflict that resides within her, creating a complex psychological landscape fraught with tension and distress.

Freud in his book *The Ego and the Id* (1923) asserts with significant authority that the condition known as “neurosis is the result of a conflict between the ego and the id, often compounded by the superego,” (47). In a strikingly illustrated manner, Harriet’s existence, which is profoundly influenced by her tendencies towards avoidance and psychological withdrawal, serves as a poignant reflection of such neurosis and its complexities. Her deliberate relocation and subsequent metamorphosis into the identity of Anita Vanger can be interpreted as a compelling manifestation of a fragmented self that is striving to create a substantial distance from the haunting psychological remnants of her tumultuous past.

Feminist theory, particularly through the incisive writings of Catherine MacKinnon and her friend Susan Brownmiller, underscores the critical notion that sexual violence should not merely be

perceived as a personal violation but rather as a systemic instrument wielded for the purposes of patriarchal control and domination. In her scholarly observations, MacKinnon articulates, “sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one’s own, yet most taken away” (3). The abuse that Harriet endures transpires within a familial context that is emblematic of the patriarchal archetype, wherein male dominance is not only normalized but also deeply entrenched, resulting in the systematic suppression of female voices and experiences. Therefore, her victimization transcends the boundaries of familial issues, morphing into a political statement that reflects how power dynamics function within patriarchal systems, effectively serving to silence women and render their experiences invisible as portrayed in the novel “I did everything to avoid it ... but he was my father and I couldn’t refuse to have anything to do with him without giving him some explanation. So, I lied and played a role and tried to pretend that everything was O.K. ... My mother knew what he was doing, but she didn’t care.... My father could have raped me in the middle of the living room right before her eyes.” (Larsson 444)

The Vanger family, despite their affluent status and the social respect they command within their community, serves as a stark representation of the dark underbelly associated with patriarchal entitlement and the pervasive secrecy that often accompanies it. Their deliberate silence and active complicity in Harriet’s abuse lay bare the deeply entrenched misogyny that enables male perpetrators to act with a sense of impunity, free from the constraints of accountability. Moreover, this complicity is not limited to the actions of individual family members but extends to the broader societal structures that patently fail to provide adequate protection for vulnerable women. Harriet’s plight is emblematic of what Andrea Dworkin incisively refers to as ‘male power,’ defining a system in which “women are denied autonomy, silenced, and reduced to property” (10). It becomes evident that Harriet’s experience is not an isolated incident; rather, it serves as a representation of the multitude of

women who suffer in silence, constrained by institutional failures and the pervasive cultural stigma that surrounds issues of abuse and victimization.

The feminist lens through which we analyze Harriet's plight also brings to light the glaring marginalization she experiences. Her abrupt disappearance and the family's conspicuous silence regarding her fate effectively underscore the social mechanisms at play that work to erase female suffering and render it invisible within the public consciousness. As Judith Herman poignantly articulates in her profound work, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992) that "the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud" (1). Harriet's erasure from public awareness stands as a powerful symbol of the societal refusal to acknowledge the systemic nature of sexual abuse and the institutional complicity that facilitates such silencing. Hence, her reclusion transforms into a metaphor that encapsulates the invisibility that is so often imposed upon women who have been subjected to abuse. Feminist theorist Bell Hooks in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) further emphasizes the critical need for voice and visibility, asserting that "being oppressed means the absence of choices" (5). Harriet's absence from the public spheres is not a choice made freely or willingly; rather, it is an outcome dictated by the overwhelming forces of fear and trauma that have shaped her existence.

Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that Harriet's narrative is not solely characterized by the theme of victimhood and despair. Her eventual escape and the strategic concealment of her true identity serve as a significant indicator of her reclamation of agency within a context that has long sought to deny her autonomy. By making the conscious decisions to disappear rather than remain ensnared in a relentless cycle of abuse, Harriet engages in an act of profound resistance that defies the expectations imposed upon her. Her actions can be thoughtfully interpreted through

the lens of Freud's concept of sublimation, whereby repressed energy is redirected into expressions

This study meticulously elucidates several pivotal findings are; Harriet's deeply entrenched trauma vividly illustrates the intricate intersection of psychological repression and the socio-political silencing that often characterizes marginalized voices; her pervasive silence emerges as a dual force that is both protective and paralyzing, shaped by the tumultuous interplay of her internal conflicts alongside the relentless external pressures exerted by a patriarchal society. When viewed through the dual analytical lenses of Freudian and feminist theory, the understanding gained regarding her psychological state and the constraints placed upon her agency becomes profoundly nuanced and complex. Importantly, her arduous journey serves to underscore the multifaceted nature of trauma—emphasizing how the act of survival is frequently misinterpreted as an indication of complicity or inherent weakness, when in reality,

It embodies a potent form of silent rebellion against her circumstances. Harriet's remarkable capacity to endure her suffering and ultimately shatter her silence stands in stark contrast to the prevailing discourse that erroneously equates strength solely with direct confrontation; rather, it illustrates that, at times, retreat can serve as a strategically calculated assertion of control over an individual's own life trajectory.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that this analysis is not devoid of limitations. While the theoretical frameworks proposed by Freud undeniably offer valuable insights into the unconscious processes of repression and trauma, they frequently neglect the socio-political context that are so adeptly addressed by feminist theory and the critiques put forth by Žižek. Freud's body of work, which is predominantly centered around male experiences and is reflective of a Eurocentric viewpoint, can be justifiably critiqued for its failure to adequately consider and represent the lived realities of female trauma within the confines of patriarchal societies. Furthermore, it is essential to note that Harriet's voice is largely absent from

the narrative, which renders her psychological portrait a reconstruction that is based primarily on textual silences rather than on her direct and authentic testimony. This reality necessitates a careful and ethical consideration in the analytical process, ensuring that the interpretations made do not overshadow or oversimplify the inherent complexity of her lived experience. Additionally, the study grapples with the significant issue of representation. Harriet's character, as it is presented through the lens of Larsson's writing, may unintentionally reflect a male-authored conception of female trauma, which carries the inherent risk of replicating the very silencing that it aims to expose and critique. Feminist scholars, such as Laura Mulvey in her book *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) provides a cautionary insights against such narrative constructions, arguing that "woman stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions" (6). Consequently, Harriet's marginal presence within the text serves as an important challenge to researchers, compelling them to carefully balance narrative analysis with a critical reflection on the intricate issues of representations and authorship that permeate the discourse surrounding her character.

Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that this particular analysis is not devoid of inherent limitations that must be critically examined. Although Freud's theoretical constructs provide valuable insights into the intricate and often convoluted unconscious processes of repression and trauma, it is crucial to highlight that these theories frequently neglect to account for the socio-political contexts that are rigorously addressed by feminist theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, Freud's body of work, which is predominantly centered around male perspectives and is characterized by an Eurocentric viewpoint, can be subjected to substantial critique for its apparent failure to adequately consider the lived experiences and realities of female trauma that manifest within the confines of patriarchal societies. Moreover, it is notable that Harriet's voice, which could provide

essential context and depth, is conspicuously absent from the narrative, thereby rendering her psychological portrait a reconstruction that relies heavily on textual silences and omissions rather than on direct and unmediated testimony from her own perspective. This situation necessitates a careful and ethical consideration in the process of analysis, ensuring that the interpretation does not overshadow or simplify the intricate complexity of her lived experiences.

In conclusion, it can be asserted that the character of Harriet Vanger serves as a poignant embodiment of the tragic yet resilient trajectory that characterizes the journey of a survivor of sexual trauma, illustrating the multifaceted nature of such experiences. Through the lens of the psychoanalytic framework established by Freud, her experiences of repression, the manifestation of neurotic symptoms, and her eventual process of sublimation collectively reveal the profound depth of psychological damage that is inflicted by acts of abuse and violation. The insights offered by feminist theory significantly augment this understanding by situating her trauma within the broader and more complex structures of patriarchal control and the mechanisms of silencing that are often prevalent in such contexts. Harriet's eventual assertion of agency stands as a powerful testament to the inherent strength of resistance, even in instances where that resistance may manifest itself in the form of disappearance rather than a direct confrontation with her circumstances. The narrative of Harriet urges contemporary audiences to attune themselves to the silence that permeates narratives of abuse and to recognize the act of survival as not merely a demonstration of endurance, but rather as a profoundly significant act of rebellion against oppressive structures. Her journey contributes meaningfully to ongoing scholarly discussions within literature, psychoanalysis, and feminist critique regarding the ways in which we perceive, represent, and respond to the complex interplay of trauma and resilience.



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