

Decoding the Justice and Psychological Imbalances: A Scrutiny of SA Lelchuk's *Save Me from Dangerous Men*

Sravya S. R.

Department of English, Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Kumaracoil, Kanyakumari, India

R. David Raja Bose

Department of English, Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Kumaracoil, Kanyakumari, India

Abstract—This paper is an in-depth qualitative analysis of S. A. Lelchuk's (2019) debut novel, *Save Me from Dangerous Men*, focusing on the representation of justice and law within this narrative. By implementing a variety of theoretical methodologies and primarily focusing on justice and the legal system, the study attempts to decode the inherent, yet often fabricated, misrepresentation of concepts embedded and hidden in Lelchuk's revenge fantasy. Through a rigorous examination of themes, characters, and narrative style, this study aims to uncover hidden agendas and their impact on contemporary society, particularly in the depiction of justice in real-life scenarios. The study also attempts a thorough examination of Lelchuk's work through this meticulous investigation into the role of justice. Moreover, the study examines the relevance and significance of revenge in contemporary human life, as people fight for rights and justice. With an interdisciplinary perspective, the study draws insights from cultural studies verging on resistance literature to examine the failure of law and the delivery of justice, which culminates in revenge, and illuminates the cultural relevance of the field in contemporary lives.

Index Terms—revenge fantasy, justice, legal system, resistance literature, contemporary society

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores *Save Me from Dangerous Men* through the retributive justice theory and examines how S. A. Lelchuk's (2019) narrative exemplifies the tenets of retribution. Through textual scrutiny and immersion into philosophical and legal scholarship, the paper delves into the subsequent questions, which are the objectives of the study. This study aims to analyze Lelchuk's work within the tradition of crime fiction and the philosophical discussions surrounding punishment, seeking to explain the enduring significance and inherent dangers of retributive justice in contemporary culture. Lelchuk's novel serves as a living illustration of law and order, the function of justice, and thoughts that seek to provide justice, even in the shape of retribution, in today's world. With an interdisciplinary view, the study deals with cultural studies verging on resistance literature to examine the failure of law and the delivery of justice, which culminates in revenge, and highlights the cultural relevance of the field in contemporary lives. The main objectives of the study are:

1. To examine how main character Nikki Griffin's vigilante actions echo the key doctrines of retributive justice.
2. To analyze in what ways the novel evaluates the inadequacies of legal justice, primarily addressing gender-based violence concerning contemporary society.
3. To explore the moral consequences of personal vengeance in a society where formal justice mechanisms fail to deliver the mandatory justice needed for the citizens.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

S. A. Lelchuk's (2019) *Save Me from Dangerous Men* has been received as both a conventional thriller and an unconventional feminist narrative. Its protagonist, Nikki Griffin, is a bookstore owner who operates as a clandestine vigilante, punishing men who abuse women. Critics and readers alike have noted how the novel merges fast-paced crime fiction with themes of gendered justice. Furthermore, professional reviews in outlets such as Publishers Weekly and Kirkus Reviews draw attention to Nikki's complexity, while online reviewers on platforms like Goodreads and NetGalley praise her moral clarity and feminist drive.

Professional commentary frequently emphasizes how Nikki's actions are tied to her mission of protecting women. The reviews highlight that Nikki's voice is not indiscriminate but instead is targeted at men who embody patriarchal harm. Kirkus Reviews underscores a similar theme, noting that the physical confrontations Nikki engages in are both clever and exciting. Such descriptions suggest that the text reworks the conventionally masculine trope of bodily strength and reassigns it to a female character, reframing gendered expectations within the thriller genre. Some perspectives illustrate

how audiences perceive Nikki not simply as a vigilante but also as someone whose ethics are rooted in gender-specific injustice. The satisfaction expressed by readers suggests her actions resonate within contemporary cultural debates about violence against women and the desire for justice outside of the legal system. Bloggers in *Pop Culture Nerd* (2019) have highlighted how Nikki consciously uses femininity to manipulate male expectations, noting that she acts according to men's roles of an ideal woman to lure them. While reviews and reader responses provide useful insight into how *Save Me from Dangerous Men* (Pop Culture Nerd, 2019) has been received, there is still limited scholarly discussion placing the text within larger traditions of feminist or vigilante fiction. Comparative analysis with Stieg Larsson's *Lisbeth Salander* or *Jack Reacher* could clarify Nikki's place in a wider literary lineage. Additionally, feminist theories, such as Simone de Beauvoir's ideas of woman as "other" or Judith Butler's theory of performativity, offer frameworks through which Nikki's actions could be critically examined, but they have yet to be applied extensively to her as a protector rather than a woman: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 283).

III. DISCUSSION

Revenge fantasies have served as a reflection of collective societal anxieties about justice, punishment, and the confines of the law. In S.A. Lechuk's (2019) *Save Me from Dangerous Men*, readers are brought into the world of private investigator Nikki Griffin, whose quest for justice for abused women blurs the lines between the litigation process and personal vengeance. Nikki's actions outside the perimeter of formal law raise vital questions about the ethics and efficiency of retributive justice. The retributive justice theory hypothesizes that punishment is reasonable when deserved and should match the gravity of the wrongdoing, offering a persuasive perspective through which to inspect both Nikki's motivations and the wider ethical framework of the novel.

Retributive justice is also an age-old and most impactful theory of punishment in Western thought. Rooted in the principle of *lex talionis*, the law of tit-for-tat justice, often condensed in the phrase "an eye for an eye," retributive justice upholds the idea that wrongdoers deserve to be punished in proportion to their crimes that "retributive punishment is concerned with giving offenders the punishment they deserve, based on the moral seriousness of their wrongdoing." (Carlsmith & Darley, 2002, p. 285). This theory stands in contrast to utilitarian approaches, which justify punishment primarily based on its consequences, such as deterrence or rehabilitation.

Contemporaneous retributivists have explored these themes in greater depth, stressing the relevance of proportionality and moral responsibility. As Shklar (1986) explains, "Retribution insists that punishment is justified by the moral culpability of the offender, not by its consequences" (p. 39). This attention to merit and proportionality is evident in legal systems around the world, which often calibrate sentences in proportion to the gravity of the offenses and the magnitude of culpability. According to Kant (1996), "Judicial punishment can never be used merely as a means to promote some other good for the criminal himself or for civil society, but must always be imposed only because the individual has committed a crime" (p. 331).

Moreover, retributive justice is not without its critics. Many argue that it can cause violence when performed outside the bounds of law, and many dispute whether or not this concept of punishment helps to attain justice or maintain legal morality. Murphy (2003) states, "The desire for retribution may be understandable, but it is not always clear that it is just" (p. 15). These disputes become prominent when it comes to saving the disadvantaged social class, and the role of law is brought to the forefront with unnecessary arguments. According to Kant (1996), "The law of punishment is a categorical imperative" (p. 331).

In the case of law, revenge fantasies wrestle with the tension over time, where people take the law into their own hands to attain justice when the law has failed to provide its actual authority. The vigilante, a person who stands for justice by preventing crime or catching and punishing someone who has committed a crime, is the prominent one of the genre, mirroring public dissatisfaction with the constraints of the law and its uncertainty in the case of personal vengeance.

Nikki Griffin's personal experience and in-depth understanding of the vulnerabilities experienced by women in a culture dominated by men have shaped her negative attitude toward judicial justice. As a secret investigator, she has seen many cases of abuse against women; thus, she brings her version of justice, which is well-plotted and personal. She expresses her philosophy concisely: "I have a rule: I never do more than they deserve. But I always make sure they get exactly what they deserve" (Lechuk, 2019, p. 102). This allegiance to proportionality expresses the central doctrine of retributive justice.

By obtaining proof and verifying guilt before acting, Nikki's actions are supported by a strong sense of ethical accountability: "I don't go after anyone unless I know for sure. I have to know. Otherwise, I'm no better than they are" (Lechuk, 2019, p. 47). This demand for assurance and liability is consistent with the retributive requirement that punishment should be reserved solely for the truly guilty ones. Nikki's vigilante acts and activities against the accused are evident throughout the book. The readers see Nikki tracking a man who was harassing and terrorizing his ex-girlfriend. After addressing the abuser, Nikki gives him a warning and physically punishes him to avoid future abuse: "I made sure he understood exactly why he was hurting and what would happen if he ever came near her again" (Lechuk, 2019, p. 119). Nikki's actions are not only punitive but also communicative, conveying a clear-cut communication through actions about the impacts of misconduct.

However, she is well aware of the consequences and limitations of her role as the vigilante: "There's a line, and I know I cross it. But sometimes the law just isn't enough" (Lechuk, 2019, p. 211). This awareness of the drawbacks of both the

rule of law and her vigilante justice adds an extra layer of favoritism to her character, inviting and enabling the readers to question the reliability of extrajudicial retribution or the concept of an eye for an eye. The central doctrine of retributive justice is proportionality, and Nikki Griffin's actions reflect this ideal. She develops her punishment based on the seriousness of the crime, confirming that her actions are just and fair. For instance, while dealing with a serial abuser, Nikki meticulously fine-tunes her reaction: "I could have done a lot more, but I stopped myself. He needed to be punished, not destroyed" (Lelchuk, 2019, p. 153). This temperance and self-control indicate her devotion to the concept that punishment should suit the crime.

Throughout *Save Me from Dangerous Men*, Lelchuk (2019) knits a captivating tale that centers on retributive justice through the protagonist, Nikki Griffin. The novel is notable in the crime fiction genre for its subtle investigation of justice and the consequences of taking the law into one's own hands. Unlike conventional vigilantes who act recklessly, Nikki moves with a strong impulse of moral responsibility, insisting on in-depth investigation and evidence before acting. This approach sets her apart from more reckless vigilantes and positions her as a special character who is deeply concerned with the principle of credibility. According to Hegel (1967), "Punishment is the negation of the negation and thereby restores the right" (p. 99).

The novel is set against a framework of systemic failure, where legal justice often fails, especially in the case of women and other vulnerable groups. Moreover, as an author, Lelchuk does not run away from the ethical dilemmas inherent in extrajudicial justice. In Nikki's journey, the novel sheds light on the ethics of retribution, the psychic cost of vigilantism, and the cultural impact of acting outside the legal justice system. Ultimately, *Save Me from Dangerous Men* (Lelchuk, 2019) becomes both a jubilation and a critique of retributive justice, inviting readers to navigate the intricacies of punishment and the search for ethical equilibrium amid moral disorder.

Nikki Griffin's attitude towards justice is defined by her consistent upholding of morality despite its challenges and responsibilities. Unlike many others in literature who seek justice and act on personal vendettas, she does not act solely based on her suspicions. She is scrupulous in her investigations, authenticating testimonies, and confirming that she has complete comprehension of everything before making it or finalizing it. This methodical process is a key feature of her character and distinguishes her from any other vigilante who implements violence. Nikki says, "Justice isn't about revenge. It's about making things right. And you can't do that if you don't know the whole story" (Lelchuk, 2019, p. 178). This opinion sheds light on her view that genuine justice demands deep insight into the realities and a devotion to impartiality. By checking out the facts and evidence and acting genuinely for legal justice, she puts forward a positive notion towards her deeds, even though she is a secret vigilante who is fighting for justice. She punishes the criminals not through biases or speculations but through evident facts and supporting evidence of their crimes and their absurdly violent actions towards women.

Nevertheless, Nikki's investigations are not entirely free from the consequences she faces as a private investigator or a secret vigilante conducting her investigation. Nikki often faces struggles such as hesitant eyewitnesses, contradictory reports, and the ever-present hazard of aggression. Rather than face these threats, Nikki is tenacious in her secret work to uncover the truth and hold the criminals accountable. This key factor of dedication and wholeheartedness towards her work and seeking justice through the roots of facts or truth through strong evidence and reliable testimony from witnesses makes her extraordinarily different from other notable vigilante figures in the literary world.

The way private investigator Nikki Griffin is portrayed in the novel shapes how justice is denied to the poor and also serves as a critique of the legal justice system. By accentuating the need for and importance of evidence and corroboration, Lelchuk (2019) highlights the failures of institutional justice, where cases are often decided based on incomplete information or biases and prejudices. Nikki's extrajudicial approach is more just and stringent than the mechanisms of the legal system she aims to enhance. Nikki's priority for thorough investigation of the cases is core to the novel's exploration of the key element of retributive justice. Her hazardous actions are encouraged not by a desire for revenge, but by a wholehearted and sincere commitment to justice and the revival of ethical principles and the return to moral equilibrium. Even though Nikki's commitment to true justice for the disadvantaged is laudable, the novel does not run away from the consequences and ethical dilemmas that are present in retributive justice. The primary hurdle that Nikki faces is identifying the proportionate punishment, especially in cases of situations involving ambiguous facts or when the accounts are conflicting, unclear, and ambiguous. These hurdles and consequences point out the difficulties of applying retributive justice outside the shell-enveloped environment of the legal system.

The protagonist Nikki's concept of the proportionality of punishment to the offense is evident in cases where the line between justice and crime is distinctly out of focus. In certain circumstances, she should assess the complication produced by the incident and weigh it appropriately. When she fails to provide due process in her investigations, her judgment will ultimately turn personal, becoming biased and prone to errors. When vigilantes, rather than institutions or judicial systems, are in the spotlight pursuing justice, this fear arises, and numerous challenges or problems emerge as people are inclined to take the law into their own hands, even if their intentions are genuine (Vimal & Pillai, 2024).

Nikki is well aware of the difficulties caused by her involvement and her actions taken as a private investigator. She says, "Every time I do this, I wonder if I'm stopping the violence or just keeping it going" (Lelchuk, 2019, p. 233). This observation points out the core element of retributive justice: its likelihood of continuing destructive cycles rather than stopping them. Nikki is surely becoming part of the crime she addresses by taking the law into her own hands, which is

a concern that is echoed throughout the novel. This is a perfect illustration of vigilante justice, which is prevalent in today's world when we examine various crimes committed for vengeance.

The same is seen in the selected work, too, where the protagonist seeks justice through revenge. Nikki often forgets the rule and law and simply acts to deliver justice. One of the main consequences is that many innocent ones will suffer, as the punishment is not done by proper questioning, search, and proof. It is done solely for the sake of revenge. These effects are limitations that highlight the ill effects of vigilantism. The novel's depiction of the challenges of vigilantism is thought-provoking mainly through the protagonist's actions and her own life.

The psychological burden and wear and tear of vigilantism are a core element in the novel *Save Me from Dangerous Men* (2019). The protagonist's exposure to and subsequent life of violence and the eagerness to save vulnerable women highlight her psychological condition, resulting in emotional instability. The best example of this can be seen when Nikki confesses, "It's hard to know where justice ends and vengeance begins. Sometimes I'm not sure there's a difference" (Lelchuk, 2019, p. 245), which underscores the inner conflict between justice and revenge and the ill effects of violating the law. Lelchuk makes clear that Nikki's mission is deeply personal. Her vigilante work is rooted in her own painful past, as she endured abuse and family tragedy. In an interview, Lelchuk notes that Nikki's commitment to protecting women is "born of revenge and trauma," reflecting her need to transform private pain into a broader protective cause. Critics have pointed out the contradictions within Nikki's character. She is described as methodical and observant, yet capable of sudden violence when necessary. This tension illustrates her psychological imbalance caught between intellectual calm and violent impulses. One review of the novel sees Nikki's portrayal as traumatized.

Nikki's psychological struggles are portrayed with empathy and actions in realism. She struggles with inner conflicts, questioning whether her actions against violence and injustice are positively impacting her or making her worse. This mode of self-introspection is a hallmark of her character, and it profoundly influences the novel's depiction of justice. The book is also a poignant portrayal of a woman's struggle for justice, not for herself, but for others. Her vigilante actions blur the line between justice and compulsion, showing how trauma can fracture identity and drive moral choices. Lelchuk (2019) makes clear that Nikki's mission is deeply personal. Her vigilante work is rooted in her own painful past, as she has endured abuse and family tragedy. In an interview, Lelchuk notes that Nikki's commitment to protest is linked to her own life and the incidents she faced, where she was unable to raise her voice against those injustices, which were born out of revenge and trauma. Books often serve as her grounding force, offering a fragile sense of stability amid her divided life.

Indeed, critics have pointed out the contradictions within Nikki's character. She is described as methodical and observant, yet capable of sudden violence when necessary. This tension illustrates her psychological imbalance caught between intellectual calm and violent impulses. One review of the novel observes that Nikki's portrayal as a traumatized, yet unstoppable, vigilante sometimes mirrors the exaggerated style of a superhero. While dramatized, this perspective underscores how her unresolved trauma fuels a cycle of violence disguised as justice. Moreover, the novel also emphasizes the long-term consequences of trauma. Nikki's childhood experiences and family losses continue to haunt her, leaving her with urges that she cannot entirely control. In this way, the ripple effect extends beyond Nikki herself, shaping her family relationships and reinforcing her isolation.

Furthermore, her constant exposure to danger keeps her in a state of survival, suggesting that trauma never truly leaves her. As the plot intensifies, she becomes entangled in a case where she must fight not only to protect others but also to stay alive. This reflects the way many trauma survivors remain hyper-vigilant, reliving patterns of threat and survival long after the initial event. What is more, Nikki Griffin also represents both resilience and fragility. Lelchuk (2019) portrays her as someone who turns trauma into a mission of protection, but who is also trapped in cycles of violence and solitude. Her psychological imbalance, while destructive, becomes a form of survival, and her vigilante actions are as much about coping with her own wounds as they are about saving others.

At first glance, Nikki's vigilantism appears to embody retributive justice, or the idea that wrongdoing demands proportionate punishment. Morris (1974) states that "Punishment should be proportionate to the blameworthiness of the offender" (p. 152). Yet, her actions often exceed proportionality, reflecting the entanglement of justice with revenge. This ambiguity highlights the influence of trauma on her sense of morality. Her retribution is not merely about balancing scales for others; it is also an expression of her own unresolved pain. Each intervention is haunted by her past, blurring the line between altruism and compulsion. According to Feinberg (1970), "Punishment is a conventional device for the expression of attitudes of resentment and indignation" (p. 98).

The novel also underscores the cultural appeal of vigilante figures. From comic book superheroes to noir antiheroes, vigilantes embody fantasies of justice where institutions fail. What distinguishes Nikki from her predecessors is her gender and her grounding in trauma. Unlike Batman or other male vigilantes, Nikki's motivations are inseparable from her own history of violation. This makes her violence not only a critique of systemic injustice but also a symptom of personal suffering. Her vigilantism, therefore, cannot be neatly categorized as either noble or pathological; it is both, existing at the uneasy intersection of survival, revenge, and protection. Carlsmith and Darley (2002) states that "People's punishment judgements are driven primarily by retributive concerns" (p. 289). Essentially, her vigilante role isolates her. While she creates safety for the women she helps, she cannot create it for herself. The secrecy of her double life prevents intimacy and stability, leaving her perpetually on the margins of society. The bookstore again symbolizes the paradox. It is both a refuge and a mask, allowing her to exist in two worlds without ever fully belonging to either. In this sense, vigilantism

reflects not only resistance to injustice and vengeance but also alienation born of trauma. According to Feinberg (1970), “Punishment conveys moral condemnation rather than mere vengeance” (p. 100).

Save Me from Dangerous Men (Lelchuk, 2019) foregrounds the gendered dimensions of violence and justice, positioning Nikki Griffin as a female avenger who challenges patriarchal norms and offers empowerment to victims of gender-based violence. Nikki’s assertion, “If the world won’t protect women, then I will” (Lelchuk, 2019, p. 12), encapsulates her mission and resonates with readers who are frustrated by the inadequacies of institutional justice. Nikki’s role as a protector and avenger is both empowering and complex. On one hand, her interventions provide hope and agency to victims who might otherwise remain voiceless. She becomes a symbol of resistance against gender-based violence, challenging the notion that women must passively accept their fate. Her actions inspire those around her and provide a sense of justice that the formal legal system often fails to deliver. According to Steinem’s (1992) *Revolution from Within*, “Power can be taken, but not given. The process of the taking is empowerment in itself” (p. 577).

On the other hand, the novel does not romanticize vigilantism. It critically examines the limitations and dangers of individual retribution. Nikki’s self-doubt is a recurring theme, as she reflects, “Maybe I’m just another part of the problem. Maybe all I’m doing is making things worse” (Lelchuk, 2019, p. 267). This introspection underscores the moral ambiguity of her mission and raises important questions about the nature of justice. The narrative also interrogates the broader implications of Nikki’s actions. While she seeks to right wrongs and protect the vulnerable, her interventions sometimes have unintended consequences. Innocent bystanders may be put at risk, and conflicts can escalate in ways that might have been avoided through more measured responses. These collateral effects serve as a cautionary reminder of the risks inherent in extrajudicial justice, even when motivated by the best of intentions. According to Beccaria (1986), “Punishment should be proportional to the crimes” (p. 19).

Save Me from Dangerous Men (Lelchuk, 2019) situates Nikki’s story within the context of a society that often fails to protect its most vulnerable members. The failures of institutional justice are a recurring motif, with Nikki’s actions serving as both a response to individual wrongdoing and a critique of systemic injustice. By comparing Nikki to other avenger figures in literature, such as Medea or Lisbeth Salander, the novel highlights the unique contributions of female protagonists who challenge traditional gender roles and expose the inadequacies of the justice system. *Save Me from Dangerous Men* offers a complex and thought-provoking portrayal of gender, power, and justice. Through Nikki Griffin, Lelchuk invites readers to consider the limitations of retributive justice, the dangers of vigilantism, and the enduring need for a justice system that truly protects all members of society.

Nikki Griffin’s story can be situated within a long tradition of avenger figures in literature, from classical tragedy to modern crime fiction. They operate outside the boundaries of the law, driven by a sense of personal injustice and a desire to right perceived wrongs. However, Nikki’s gender and motivations set her apart from many of her predecessors, offering a fresh perspective on the avenger archetype. Literary scholar Heather Worthington observes that “the female avenger in contemporary crime fiction not only punishes male perpetrators but also exposes the failures of the justice system to protect women” (Worthington, 2011, p. 92). This observation is particularly relevant to Nikki’s character, whose actions are both a response to individual wrongdoing and a critique of systemic injustice. By positioning Nikki within this literary tradition, Lelchuk (2019) invites readers to consider the broader implications of her story and its contribution to the genre. Kirkus (2019) states that “Nikki’s fight scenes are satisfying, clever, and exciting...the book also tackles the aftermath of grief....”.

The novel’s emphasis on proportionality, moral responsibility, and the psychological costs of vengeance distinguishes it from more simplistic tales of retribution. Nikki’s struggles with doubt and self-questioning add depth to her character and challenge the reader to reflect on the ethics of vigilantism. The narrative also engages with theoretical debates about retributive justice, exploring the tension between the desire for punishment and the need for fairness and due process. By comparing Nikki to other avenger figures, we can better understand the unique contributions of *Save Me from Dangerous Men* (Lelchuk, 2019) to the genre. The novel’s nuanced portrayal of retributive justice, its critique of institutional failure, and its exploration of gender and power dynamics set it apart from more conventional crime fiction. At the same time, Nikki’s story raises important questions about the legitimacy and limits of extrajudicial punishment in a society that often fails to deliver justice through formal channels.

Save Me from Dangerous Men (Lelchuk, 2019) is a significant addition to the tradition of avenger literature. Through its complex protagonist and thoughtful exploration of justice, the novel challenges readers to grapple with the complexities of punishment, the failures of the legal system, and the enduring appeal of the avenger figure in contemporary culture. Nikki steps into situations where, men harm women, acting as a self-made protector. Through her actions, traditional roles between men and women are reversed. Instead of being portrayed as a victim, she becomes the figure who enforces consequences on male perpetrators. By giving his heroine the authority, Lelchuk (2019) explores how women might seize power in spaces where they are usually denied it, though at the cost of their own peace and stability. According to McCrillis in the Popular Culture Nerd Review, “By trade, Nikki is a PI...Nikki discovers the case is much bigger...Before readers start thinking she’s an unrealistic fantasy figure, Nikki points out she intentionally plays into men’s images of an ideal woman to lure them to her” (McCrillis, 2019).

Many critics pointed out the contradictions in this portrayal. One reviewer describes Nikki as a woman with a painful past who takes on the role of a lone vigilante, but her ability to overpower multiple violent men stretches the bounds of realism. This commentary suggests that while Nikki’s power offers a striking reversal of gender roles, it also illustrates

how complete equality remains largely an imaginative construct within the thriller genre. The novel also sheds light on destructive forms of masculinity. Many of Nikki's targets are men who exert control through violence or coercion, embodying patriarchal authority. By turning their violence back on them, Nikki enacts a symbolic reversal; the aggressor becomes vulnerable, and the silenced woman regains a form of voice through Nikki's intervention. Yet her motivation is not purely altruistic. As descriptions of the book indicate, Nikki's violent impulses are tied to a horrific childhood tragedy that continues to haunt her. Her authority, then, is shaped by her own trauma as much as by her desire for justice. According to Murphy (1979), "Retribution is not revenge, but a morally justified response to wrongdoing" (p. 16).

In the end, the novel presents gender and power as a constant negotiation. Nikki challenges male dominance and defends vulnerable women, but her role reveals how deeply violence and trauma structure her life. According to de Beauvoir (2011) in *The Second Sex*, "When she is productive, active, she regains transcendence; she affirms herself concretely as subject in her projects" (p. 745). Lechuk's (2019) narrative highlights both the persistence of patriarchal power and the possibility of women resisting it, though resistance often comes at a personal cost. According to Duff (2001), "To punish is to call an offender to answer for wrongdoing" (p. 82). We can even see the avoidance of gendered objectification in the novel, as mentioned in the *Fing Twist* review: "... for being a novel written by a man, I was pleased to find she didn't talk about how her nipples felt or looked at any moment, since that seems to be a thing male writers are typically preoccupied with when writing female leads" (Krystin, 2022).

IV. CONCLUSION

S.A. Lechuk's (2019) *Save Me from Dangerous Men* offers a compelling and nuanced exploration of retributive justice in action. Through protagonist Nikki Griffin, the novel embodies the desire for proportional punishment and moral restoration while also exposing the risks and ambiguities of extrajudicial retribution. By applying retributive justice theory to Lechuk's narrative, this essay has highlighted the ethical dilemmas of punishment, the failures of institutional justice, and the enduring appeal of vengeance in the face of violence.

The novel's portrayal of Nikki's struggles and triumphs invites readers to reflect on the complexities of justice and the limitations of individual retribution. Her commitment to moral responsibility, her meticulous investigative process, and her willingness to confront the psychological and social consequences of her actions set her apart from more simplistic avenger figures. At the same time, the novel does not shy away from the ethical concerns raised by vigilantism, emphasizing the importance of due process and the dangers of operating outside the law. The work serves as both a celebration and a critique of retributive justice, particularly in contexts where the law fails to protect the vulnerable. Nikki Griffin's story is a powerful reminder of the need for justice systems that are fair, effective, and responsive to the needs of all members of society. By situating Nikki's journey within the broader context of gender, power, and justice, Lechuk (2019) invites readers to grapple with the complexities of punishment and the search for moral balance in an imperfect world.

The novel stands at the intersection of trauma literature, feminist crime fiction, and cultural debates about justice. While outwardly a suspenseful thriller, the novel offers much more than entertainment. At its heart, it is a meditation on the enduring weight of trauma, the entanglement of psychological imbalance with cycles of violence, the contested terrain of gender and power, and the precarious role of vigilante justice when legal systems fail survivors of abuse. To conclude, an exploration of this novel requires not only a return to its narrative core but also a weaving together of the theoretical, psychological, and feminist frameworks that illuminate Nikki Griffin's character. In doing so, it becomes evident that the novel is not merely a tale of one woman's retribution against abusive men but a broader cultural reflection on survival, resistance, and the limits of justice itself.

At the foundation of Nikki's story is the psychological toll of unresolved trauma. The protagonist's life is marked by a deep-seated imbalance born from a horrific childhood tragedy, an event that permanently fractured her sense of stability. Trauma theory, particularly as articulated by Cathy Caruth, helps to clarify Nikki's condition. Caruth argues that trauma does not simply occur as a past event but returns belatedly, haunting survivors in the present and compelling them to relive their suffering. Nikki's character embodies this cycle of recurrence: she cannot detach her present from her past, and each act of vigilante justice becomes a reenactment of her own early victimization. Her violence is less a strategy of closure than an endless repetition of unresolved grief.

The bookstore that Nikki manages functions as a fragile counterpoint to this imbalance. On the surface, it represents sanctuary, a place of order, literature, and community. Yet the store also symbolizes concealment, a façade that masks her internal disarray. By day, she is a bookseller, but by night, she is consumed by her violent compulsion to punish abusive men. This duality underscores the split at the heart of trauma: the attempt to live normally while being continuously pulled back into the orbit of past suffering. The imbalance, therefore, is not only psychological but existential; Nikki inhabits two worlds that can never fully reconcile. The most compelling thing is how this trauma propels Nikki into her role as a protector of women. Her violent instincts are not random; they are targeted, precise, and always gendered. She intervenes in cases where women are abused, silenced, or endangered, echoing her own childhood vulnerability. In this sense, her psychological imbalance generates both destruction and protection. She is deeply fractured, yet it is this fracture that enables her to become a savior for others. The paradox reflects a larger truth about trauma survivors: their wounds can both destabilize them and furnish the very drive to shield others from similar harm.

If trauma explains Nikki's psychological motivations, gender explains her choice of targets and the symbolic meaning of her actions. Lechuk (2019) deliberately frames her vigilante justice around dangerous men, men whose violence against women epitomizes the entrenched patterns of patriarchy. By punishing abusers, Nikki confronts the structures of male dominance that permeate both private and public life. In a genre where women are often portrayed as victims, Nikki's role is subversive. She is not the one who suffers in silence; she is the one who acts, reversing the script of gendered violence.

Feminist theory sharpens our understanding of this reversal. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* describes how women have historically been defined as "the other," denied agency and autonomy in relation to men. Nikki disrupts this positioning by claiming subjecthood; she dictates the terms of her encounters and refuses to be defined by male violence. Yet her empowerment is precious. Her strength derives not from systemic transformation but from reactive violence. She is powerful, but her power exists only in response to male aggression. This demonstrates the ambivalence of feminist resistance: it can challenge patriarchy symbolically but often without dismantling its structural roots.

Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity also resonates here. Butler (1990), insists that gender is not innate but enacted through repeated performances that reinforce or destabilize cultural norms. Nikki destabilizes conventional femininity by performing aggression, dominance, and control, traits culturally coded as masculine. In doing so, she redefines what it means to be a woman within the narrative space of crime fiction. However, her performance remains tethered to trauma. It is not a free choice but an enactment born of necessity, a strategy of survival rather than liberation. Thus, her defiance is significant but incomplete, highlighting both the potential and the limitations of gender subversion.

The men Nikki targets embody the most destructive forms of toxic masculinity: control, coercion, physical assault, and entitlement. By defeating them, Nikki performs a symbolic reversal in which the oppressors become the vulnerable. This role reversal provides a cathartic sense of justice for readers, especially women who may identify with the silenced voices behind Nikki's interventions. Yet the costs are visible. Nikki herself is trapped in the very cycle she resists. Her violent triumphs come at the expense of her emotional stability, building her up to the same trauma she attempts to overcome. Thus, the gender and power dynamics in the novel reveal both empowerment and entrapment. Nikki is a feminist avenger, but her victories are fragile, achieved in a world that remains fundamentally structured by patriarchy.

The conclusion that emerges is not one of resolution but of recognition. Lechuk's (2019) novel acknowledges that trauma cannot be neatly healed, that patriarchal power cannot be easily dismantled, and that justice cannot always be served through legitimate institutions. Instead, it presents a protagonist who embodies the contradictions of survival: she resists even as she suffers, she protects even as she destroys herself, and she enacts justice even as she perpetuates the cycle of violence. In literary and cultural terms, Nikki represents a significant development in feminist crime fiction. She challenges the genre's historical relegation of women to victimhood and instead asserts them as agents of action and resistance. Yet she also reflects the lingering costs of trauma and the ambivalence of violence as a tool of empowerment. This duality makes her both a symbol of feminist defiance and a cautionary figure about the limits of vengeance.

In Nikki Griffin, Lechuk (2019) has crafted a protagonist who defies easy categorization. She is not wholly admirable nor wholly condemnable; she is complex, contradictory, and deeply human. Her story testifies to the resilience of survivors and the creativity of feminist literature in reimagining justice. At the same time, it underscores the enduring fragility of that injustice, revealing the personal costs of survival in a world that remains hostile to women's safety and autonomy. Nikki's vigilante role actually isolates her. While she creates safety for the women she helps, she cannot create it for herself. The secrecy of her double life prevents intimacy and stability, leaving her perpetually on the margins of society. The bookstore again symbolizes this paradox. It is both a refuge and a mask, allowing her to exist in two worlds without ever fully belonging to either. In this sense, vigilantism reflects not only resistance to injustice but also alienation born of trauma. Nikki is not a simple heroine. She is fractured, tormented, and often excessive in her violence. Yet she is also brave, protective, and determined to ensure that women who might otherwise be silenced find some form of justice. She is both saviour and victim, empowered and entrapped. Her story demonstrates how trauma can produce both agency and destruction, how gender can both subjugate and empower, and how justice, when denied by the law, can emerge in forms that are at once meaningful and destabilizing.

Thus, the novel demonstrates that the intersections of trauma, gender, and justice cannot be reduced to simple binaries of strength and weakness, victim and victor, and legality and illegality. Rather, they must be viewed as complex realities where pain and justice, resistance and fragility, and empowerment and suffering coexist. Nikki Griffin embodies these entanglements, making Lechuk's (2019) novel a powerful, if unsettling, contribution to contemporary literature's engagement with survival, resistance, and the margins of justice.

REFERENCES

- [1] Beccaria, C. (1986). *On crimes and punishments*. Hackett Publishing.
- [2] Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- [3] Carlsmith, K. M., & Darley, J. M. (2002). Why do we punish? Deterrence and just deserts as motives for punishment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(2), 284-299. Retrieved October 26, 2025, from <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.83.2.284>
- [4] de Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The Second Sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Vintage Books.
- [5] Duff, R. A. (2001). *Punishment, communication, and community*. Oxford University Press.
- [6] Feinberg, J. (1970). *Doing and deserving: Essays in the theory of responsibility*. Princeton University Press.

- [7] Hegel, G. W. F. (1967). *Philosophy of right*. Oxford University Press.
- [8] Kant, I. (1996). *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge University Press.
- [9] Kirkus. (2019). *Save Me from Dangerous Men*, Kirkus Review. Retrieved November 6, 2025, from www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/s-lelchuk/save-me-from-dangerous-men
- [10] Krystin. (2022). *Save Me from Dangerous Men: Here's the Fing Twist*. Goodreads. Retrieved November 6, 2025, from <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/>
- [11] Lelchuk, S. A. (2019). *Save Me from Dangerous Men*. Flatiron Books.
- [12] McCrillis, M. (2019). *Book Review: Save Me from Dangerous Men by Lelchuk*. Pop Culture Nerd. Retrieved November 8, 2025, from www.popculturenerd.com/2019/04/08/book-review-save-me-from-dangerous-men-by-s-a-lelchuk
- [13] Morris, N. (1974). *The future of imprisonment*. University of Chicago Press.
- [14] Murphy, J. G. (2003). *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits*. Oxford University Press.
- [15] Murphy, J. G. (1979). *Retribution, justice, and therapy*. Springer.
- [16] Pop Culture Nerd. (2019). *Book review: Save Me from Dangerous Men by S.A. Lelchuk*. Pop Culture Nerd. Retrieved November 12, 2025, from <https://popculturenerd.com/2019/04/08/book-review-save-me-from-dangerous-men-by-s-a-lelchuk>
- [17] Steinem, G. (1992). *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem*. Little, Brown and Company.
- [18] Shklar, J. N. (1986). *Legalism: Law, Morals, and Political Trials*. Harvard University Press.
- [19] Vimal, A., & Pillai, S. R. (2024). Exploring Narrative Techniques in Chetan Bhagat's *The Three Mistakes of My Life: A Critical Analysis*. *World Journal of English Language*, 14(5), 218-228.
- [20] Worthington, H. (2011). *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Sravya SR is a full-time Ph.D. research scholar at Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education in Kanyakumari, India. Her areas of interest are resistance literature, cultural studies, and feminism, among others, mainly focusing on revenge fantasies. She has presented papers at International and National conferences and has published research articles in international peer-reviewed journals.

R. David Raja Bose, a retired principal from Lekshmiipuram Arts and Science College, is currently working as a professor as well as research coordinator in the Department of English at Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education in Kanyakumari, India. His experience lies in literary theory, Shakespearean studies, and cultural studies. His contributions to the field are well-documented through publications in reputable international journals as well as Scopus Publications and invited talks at various educational institutions.