

# Portrayal of Female Protagonists through Leigh Bardugo's Chosen Works

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Prpić, Ena

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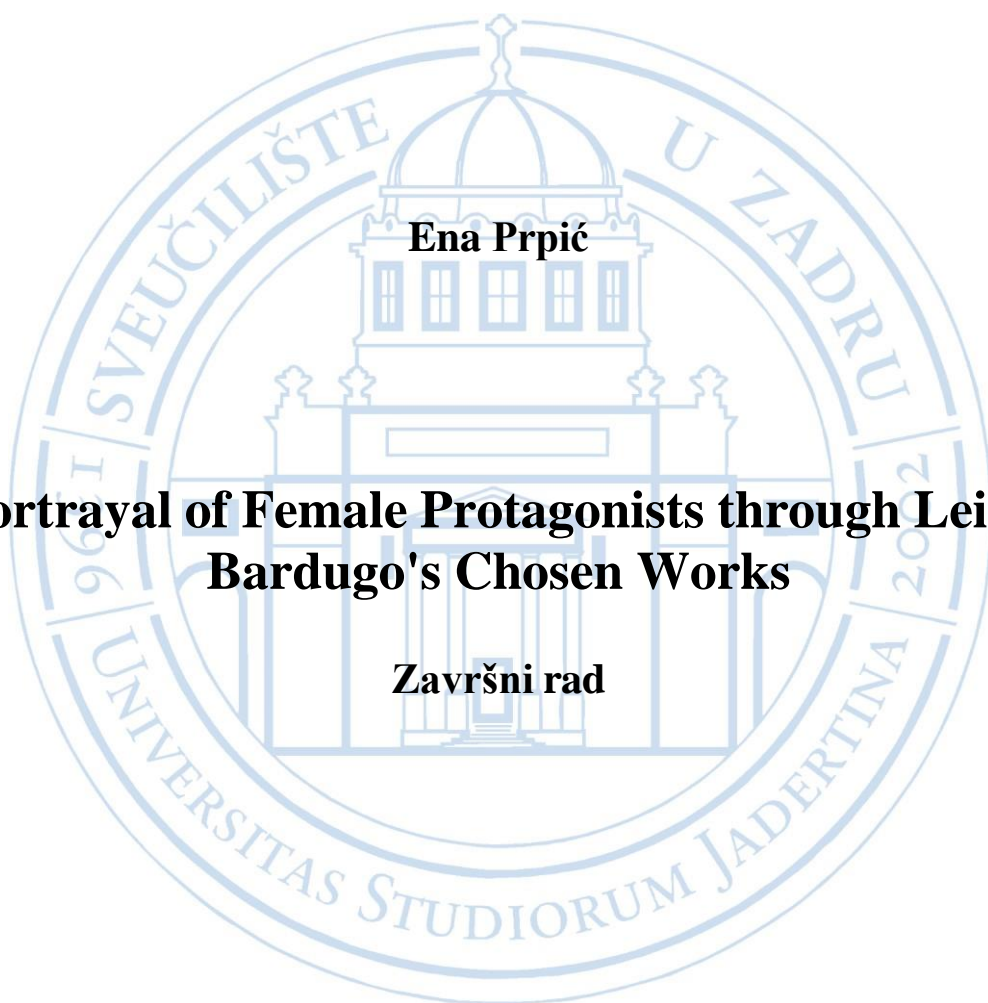
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Anglistika



**Ena Prpić**

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# **Portrayal of Female Protagonists through Leigh Bardugo's Chosen Works**

Završni rad

Student/ica:

Ena Prpić

Mentor/ica:

Doc.dr.sc. Zlatko Bukač

Zadar, 2024.





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Zadar, 31. kolovoza 2024.

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## 1. Introduction

What is it about fantasy novels that makes them so lovable these days? Is it the beauty and magic of the landscapes, the characters that come in various forms and fashions, the attractive male characters or the brave female assassins? Whatever the answer might be, it could be said that this genre is quite rich and complex and a far cry from everyday life. Or is it? If we think about it, what we come across in these novels can often be applied to our normal lives, and the characters that we admire in those novels can surely serve as inspiration to the young readers. And this is where we come to the issue of this paper, which is the importance of representation in fantasy, specifically the one of female main characters. The reasoning behind this is that young readers often try to find something they can relate to, and especially for young girls, giving them strong, capable female leads of different races, sexualities and life aspirations can serve, not only as inspiration, but also as a way of normalising these occurrences. All that being said, this paper will focus on the ways in which the contemporary fantasy author Leigh Bardugo portrays female protagonists in her works. It mainly addresses the aspects of gender, sexuality, feminism and race in recent fantasy works of the above-mentioned author, specifically through analysing the traits and behaviours of her female characters. Firstly, the focus of this paper will be on defining fantasy and the various subgenres of it, then on introducing the themes of feminism and gender and explaining those in more detail. A clear distinction between sex and gender will be made, and the idea of feminism coming in waves over the years will be explained, with focus on the fourth wave that is active currently and the aspects of which are present in the analysed works of Leigh Bardugo. The main focus later on will be analysing the characters of Alex Stern in *Ninth House* and *Hell Bent*, Inej Ghafa and Nina Zenik in *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom*, and the characters of Diana and Alia Keralis in *Wonder Woman: Warbringer*, all in correlation with the themes of gender, sexuality, feminism

and race. Through this analysis, the effects of fourth wave of feminism will become more noticeable and the instances of these characters will serve to explain the complexity of gender and how it is greatly related to performance.



## 2. Defining fantasy genre

It can be quite challenging to define fantasy as a genre, which is why many authors seem to have different opinions on it and how it should be defined. Calvino, for example refers in his definition of fantasy to the French origin of the word which closely relates to the notions of something scary, something associated with horror, and emphasizes how the reader has to accept to be pushed into this new world in order to experience it (qtd. in Sandner 133). Or the most widespread definition of fantasy, despite its various limitations and lack of precision, defines fantasy as: “A fictional narrative describing events that the reader believes to be Impossible.” (qtd. in Sandner 271). J.R.R. Tolkien even described it as: “The most nearly pure form” of art, characterized by “arresting strangeness” and “freedom from the domination of observed ‘fact’”; in other words, Sub-Creation combined with “strangeness and wonder.” (qtd. in Sandner 272). In general, fantasy as a term has often been applied to “any literature which does not give priority to realistic representation” (Jackson 8), which includes various tales and stories from folklore, legends and myths from ancient past all the way to the more modern texts and genres such as science fiction, which fantasy genre often ends up being associated with. That being said, we should make a clear distinction between the two and provide a few instances of various subgenres of fantasy, in order to have a better understanding of it. For example, one of the first works that might come up in one’s mind when we mention fantasy would probably be *The Lord of the Rings* series by J.R.R. Tolkien, or for the younger generations, *The Throne of Glass* and *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series by Sarah J. Maas. Or even Holly Black, with her *The Folk of the Air* trilogy, where she combines elements of high fantasy with partial modern-world setting, and characters inspired by Celtic mythology. The emerging authors like Sarah J. Maas, Holly Black and Leigh Bardugo are starting to shed a new light on fantasy, introducing strong female leads, and characters of various races and sexualities. However, among the three, Bardugo seems to portray the most diversity in her characters which is why we will be focusing on her novels in our analysis.

Moving on to development of fantasy as a separate genre, it is thought to have stemmed from the genre of science fiction during the 1970s and 1980s. During this time, they were almost tied together and therefore they had to be separated somehow. This posed a major problem since they were quite similar if analysed based on storytelling, usage of metaphor and metonymy, and writing style in order to improve world-building. But despite these similarities they still differed in a sense that the worlds created could be very different, the biggest difference being in the use of technology and science, which is almost non-existent in the works of true fantasy (Stephan 3-15). To explain true fantasy in a simple way, we could just say that *The Lord of the Rings* series by J.R.R. Tolkien is basically the blueprint for this genre, with fantastic elements, a great quest, magical setting and characters inspired by various mythologies. Based on this distinction, it is important to mention that there is a multitude of subgenres in fantasy as such, and ways in which it can be divided. However, since there are so many subtypes, we will stick to the ones to which our chosen works for analysis belong, meaning the fantasy works of Leigh Bardugo and the female protagonists within them.

First there are Urban Fantasy novels like *Ninth House* and *Hell Bent*. What is characteristic for this subtype is that the action is set in an ordinary world where magical aspects can be present to various extents. It often revolves around some secret works of the protagonists that others are almost unaware are happening. There is also usually a great conflict between the good and the evil, and often some aspects of protagonists' actions relate to history or have a great impact on some future events in the society (Long 13).

Moving on, *Wonder Woman: Warbringer* can be classified as an Epic Fantasy since it features a main heroine who is on a quest to basically save the humanity. Along the way she is facing many challenges, making friends and travelling half the world in order to achieve the ultimate goal that is necessary to save the earth from certain doom (Long 4).

And lastly, novels such as *Six of Crows* and *Crooked kingdom* can be seen as High Fantasy, mainly because of the elements like prominent magical powers and showing how the

main characters manage their, in this case heist, through careful scheming and teamwork (Long 8).

### 3. Development of female representation in literary works – historical overview

It is safe to say that female representation in literary works has been changing over time. It is known that, for example in the ancient times, literacy was a luxury not everyone could afford. Although men who came from wealthy families did not need to worry about this, it was not the same for women. They were the ones who had to take on the domestic work, spend time cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children. Nonetheless, with this lack of female representation there was mostly a one-sided portrayal of female characters from male's perspective. These characters were mostly passive, submissive and sometimes cruel, mad, wicked, or were simply given titles such as being somebody's mother, daughter or sister (Singh 39-40). As time went on, there were many women raising their voices to gain rights on education, have freedom in raising their children and getting a job, buying properties without a man's permission, participating in politics and more. This also had an impact on female representation in literature (Brunell and Burkett). Over the years, women such as Jane Austen and Emily Bronte came into play, introducing to their audience different, powerful female characters who stand their ground, but also male characters who are far less powerful compared to how they were portrayed up until this point in time (Singh 40). Thankfully, we have come a long way since the issues with illiteracy, *madwomen in the attics*, and lack of female authors. Nowadays, there are more female authors such as Leigh Bardugo, Sarah J. Maas, and many others who show independent, capable, emotional female characters who perhaps evoke that feminist spirit in young readers who love to lose themselves in such fantasy worlds.

#### 4. What is feminism?

Generally speaking, it can be said that feminism is a movement which advocates for equality between men and women on various bases (Brunell and Burkett). If we take a look at feminism as a movement, it has been coming in waves for the past few decades. According to the feminist theory, there have been four waves of feminism. The first wave happened all the way back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, starting with Mary Wollstonecraft and her essay *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which can be considered as one of the first written evidences of discussing the liberation of women. Moving on, the second wave took place in the 1960s and 1970s, revolving around women's abilities to focus on their careers, mentioning abuse of women and inequality in payments. When it comes to the third wave, many would agree that it started in 1991 with Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, saying how feminism had to be revived. Now, this can be the beginning of the time where popular culture comes into play, especially in terms of music in 1990s. However, many were worried about women taking their rights for granted merely because those born in the 60s had all the benefits of previous waves of feminism without giving it much thought. Because of this heated disagreement, feminists were given the freedom to define feminism in the way they wished to. And lastly there is a fourth wave that is thought to be active in the present time. It mentions limits of materialism, focusing on the world instead of oneself and the importance to put oneself to the service of the world. Moreover, technology and digital culture are one of the most prominent aspects of this wave, including the portrayal of female characters in video games, memes, films and so on (Trier-Bieniek 13 - 22). Also, it is possible to say that fourth wave entails "technological mobilisation, intersectionality, empowerment, social activism and denunciation of sexual violence" (qtd. In Turello 6). Alongside focusing on issues of gender and how multifaceted and complex this concept is, fourth wave of feminism also further develops the notion of intersectionality (Day and Wray 119). Intersectionality is a term used to emphasize how women are often oppressed, not only based on their sex and normative gender roles, but also in terms of race, social status and other

outside and societal factors that impact their odds for success in a given society (Samie). As Kimberlé Crenshaw stated: “Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things.” (“Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later”). This can be applied to the characters that are mentioned in this paper since most of them face prejudice or discrimination and seem not to fit into certain stereotypes. Whether it is the way Alia feels in the presence of a policeman because of her race, or Nim being isolated in school because she was weird, chubby Indian kid, or even Alex for not being that much of a feminine young woman with the most admirable behaviour, they were all at some point treated differently because of what they are.

Based on this, we could say that Leigh Bardugo produces novels with accordance to the characteristics of the fourth wave of feminism and she can also be seen as a feminist herself based on one of the interviews we will mention later on in this paper.

That being said, this work will focus on the products of the fourth wave of feminism in popular culture, specifically some Leigh Bardugo’s literary works. To be more precise, female protagonists in *Ninth House*, *Hell Bent*, *Six of Crows*, *Crooked Kingdom*, and *Wonder Woman: Warbringer*, will be analysed according to gender and feminist theories in more detail.

## 5. Portrayal of gender in today's western society – gender theories

With the notion of feminism and female representation, over the past few decades there have also been some changes when it comes to gender roles in society. While it was normal for women to be stay-at-home moms and take care of the family, today they can be the ones running companies. Or the men who were expected to be more masculine, hiding emotions and providing for the family, can now be more outspoken about their mental health and take care of the children while the woman goes to work. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that gender roles have changed over time. But, in order to have a better understanding of these changes, it is important to define what gender is and make a distinction between gender and sex. The term sex refers to the biological features which result in us being assigned male or female at birth. Gender, on the other hand, is something that is socially constructed. It is related to the values of femininity and masculinity that members of a society might share and the correlation of those values with their sex (Trier-Bieniek and Leavy 2). That being said, children are taught from an early age to behave more masculine or feminine depending on what is expected of them according to their sex. But there is no clear-cut line between the two, meaning that we all take on both of these roles depending on the situation we are in. In today's society, the media are more often portraying heterosexual relationships as a norm and using non-heteronormative relations as a source of comedy. In that aspect, they are lacking in developing more complex characters that could be viewed equally as the heterosexual ones (Richardson 30-32). Moreover, many women could agree that they grew up watching cartoons such as *Little Mermaid*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White*, and so on, where all these princesses are in need of a saviour that always comes in a form of a white, rich, brave prince. And little girls who are used to seeing this image all the time tend to recognise it as a norm. The boys, on the other hand were shown very masculine, brave, strong characters in cartoons such as Conan the Adventurer or He-man and the Masters of the Universe. It can even be said that parents often encourage this kind of distinction between children's cartoons, discouraging and frowning upon their son

watching *Winx Club*, and encouraging their daughters to play “kitchen” or “family” instead of playing with cars or any more violent or messy games boys are used to playing. These are only some of the instances how the portrayal of gender roles is shown to us from a very early age, and some part of everything that we see, especially at that impressionable age, often stays with us through life.

This kind of gender representation analysis can be applied to the works of fantasy as well. In the past, male authors were more present, showing male characters as heroes of their novels, whereas today, with emerging female authors, there is a growing number of female main characters in such works. With that also came some improvements in terms of representation of various sexualities, races and religions as well. Nonetheless, it is important to show how some perceive this issue of inclusivity and gender representation in fantasy novels. For instance, J.R.R. Tolkien has stirred up some controversy with his *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. While many would not consider him racist for the way he wrote these novels, some would say that they have some racist and misogynistic elements to them and critique his way of portraying female characters as less significant or even as being less present in his novels. However, this is mostly a matter of personal opinions of the readers and should not be taken as an objective measurement of the gender or racial issues in his works (Baker 2-4). When it comes to the actual representation of women in literature, Sara approaches this problem directly in her dissertation. Here she mentions how women are often portrayed as “the Other” and that their characters can be written in both positive and negative light but in a way that it correlates to the male perception of them. This often ends up being objectifying, resulting in idealised or simplified images which she points out is problematic considering the influence representation in works of fiction can have on the individuals consuming it (González Bernárdez 13).

In that sense Leigh Bardugo actually makes some improvement in this area by introducing a homosexual couple in the *Six of Crows* duology, or simply mentioning those kinds



of relationships and normalizing them in *Wonder Woman: Warbringer*. And when it comes to race, she introduces characters from various cultural backgrounds, thus adding more variety to her characters.

## 6. About Leigh Bardugo

Leigh Bardugo is an Israeli-American author most known for her *Grishaverse* series, and some of her more recent works such as *Ninth House* and *Hell Bent*. She predominantly writes works of fantasy, with intense, attention-grasping plots and diverse, complex characters both of which the readers can easily fall in love with. Throughout her works she creates characters of various races and sexualities and gives them to the readers. In her interview with *The Guardian* she states that she does not intend to be praised for this, but rather her goal is to portray her fantasy worlds more similar to the one we live in - full of diversity (Cain, “Shadow and Bone author Leigh Bardugo: “People sneer at the things women and girls love.”). Characters such as Alex, Inej, Nina, Diana and Alia are all heroines in their own way, who also battle their own doubts and fears thus inspiring the young readers and gluing them to the pages. Alongside the feministic aspects of her novels and its characters’ traits, we could say that the author herself is a feminist considering how she portrays her female characters, putting them in the centre of attention. She makes almost all of them seem like very capable, strong young women, with some great goals they want to achieve in the future. The only exception could be Alex in *Ninth House* and *Hell Bent* since she does not really exhibit any of these traits in the beginning, but that also changes over the course of the two books. Nonetheless, all of these claims will be discussed later on in the paper.

We can safely assume that, through her works, Bardugo tries to inspire young readers, especially young women, and be the wind at their backs by giving them the escape from reality that still feels applicable to everyday life. There is one sentence in the interview which nicely emphasises the whole point of this paper and that is: “Teenage girls have so much sway over culture, yet people sneer at the things that women and girls love, and are contemptuous of the creators of that content, particularly if they are women.” (Cain, “Shadow and Bone author Leigh Bardugo: “People sneer at the things women and girls love.”).

## 7. Portrayal of female protagonists through Leigh Bardugo's chosen works

### 7.1. Alex Stern in *Ninth House* and *Hell Bent*

*Ninth House* and *Hell Bent* are novels that tell a story of Alex Stern, her powers and the way they influenced her life. The former shows the beginning of Alex's life in Yale while continuously revealing the moments from her past, reasoning the way she is now. The latter, on the other hand, focuses on her journey to get her mentor out of hell, in what she succeeds by the end of the book, while continuing to work without him in the real world. They are both considered to be adult novels, with college students as the main characters. The action is situated in Yale and revolves around the secret, magical works of various societies in it, where Alex ends up having an important role as being one of the people who make sure all the rituals and protocols go as planned, but she ends up dealing with greater problems on the side.

Galaxy (Alex) Stern is not just a regular twenty-year-old student starting her freshman year at Yale University. She was never really a good student and even started drinking and taking drugs at a very young age, so academic success was surely not one of the reasons why she was here. However, since she was very young, Alex was able to see ghosts, more precisely see them in the exact state they were in when they died. Meaning with bullet wounds, limbless, completely naked or covered in blood. One night when everything went wrong, she found herself in the hospital, both her boyfriend and best friend dead, crime scene a complete mystery to the police, which is when one of the members of Yale comes to her, gives her an opportunity to go study there and now she is here, trying to deal with all the challenges that come her way. Now, at Yale there is an organization called Lethe which makes sure that any kind of prognostication or other magical ritual goes right. Among other things they keep those ghosts they refer to here as "Grays" under control. This is where Alex's ability to see them without the help of any potion ends up being useful, and from the very beginning of the novel we follow her through all the struggles of trying to find her place here.

When we first encounter Alex she does not really seem like a very inspiring female character we are used to seeing in many fantasy novels. She is nothing like, for example Feyre, in Sarah J. Maas' *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series or Aelin in *Throne of Glass*. She is not really that ambitious and does not have any goals for the future. However, there was a point in her past when she would talk with her friend Hellie about starting community college and finding a job to start saving for a car, but Hellie did not take her too seriously and it was all more of a daydreaming rather than an active plan to achieve something and change their lives for the better.

She is constantly hiding herself behind her clothes and tattoos, struggling to keep up with the ever-piling assignments, being late to the ritual she is supposed to supervise and making mistakes along the way. Even in the beginning of the book it says: "Yale Alex struggled but didn't complain. She was a good girl trying to keep up." (Bardugo, *Ninth House* 13). Here it is visible that her life at Yale served as an escape from her past. Nonetheless, her character becomes more interesting as the book progresses and more aspects of her past are revealed.

Firstly, it is possible to focus on her physical appearance. In the book she is described as a very thin girl, with sharp collar bones, black eyes, sleek, long black hair, and covered in multiple tattoos. While there is no great focus on her exterior, the few scenes in the beginning of the book can be analysed in terms of the "male gaze", when Darlington, her mentor, is having a first conversation with her. In order to understand the relevance of this it is important to understand what "male gaze" actually is. The overall concept of "the gaze" revolves around the notion that the individuals who are being observed or judged by someone tend to change their demeanour according to the situation (Trier-Bieniek 1). Based on that, "When applied to settings where women feel observed, assessed and judged primarily on their physical appearance by others, predominantly heterosexual men (or the presumed lens through which a heterosexual man would look at a woman), the analyses becomes one of the "male gaze." (Trier-Bieniek 1). There are many instances in popular culture, including film and music industry,

where “the gaze” becomes more objectifying, making the observer pay attention to certain parts of a female body or generally alluding the sexual aspect of a certain shot. But even though it can be objectifying and overall unsettling for people to know that they are being observed, the concept of “the gaze” does not have to be understood as something wholly negative. It simply serves to explain that individuals can behave differently when they are alone as opposed to when they are in a certain social environment. Nonetheless, this can be beneficial for the individuals and even help them fit into a given society and various social settings (Trier-Bieniek 1-2).

The example of the “male gaze” and the effect it has on Alex’s behaviour are noticeable in the beginning of *Ninth House* when she and Darlington are talking. Throughout their conversation Darlington is constantly analysing her, trying to guess her nationality based on the colour of her skin, hair and eyes: “He took in her black hair, her black eyes, the olive cast to her skin. She might have been Greek. Mexican. White.” (Bardugo, *Ninth House* 36). He even noticed her posture had changed as they walked and talked, making her seem more relaxed: “He realized her shoulders had gone loose and easy. Her stride had changed. She looked less like someone gearing up to take a swing.” (Bardugo, *Ninth House* 37). Since the book is written in third person the exact reasons why she might have changed her behaviour are not directly mentioned from her perspective, but nonetheless these observations show that this scene could be analysed in the way that his gaze revealed his perception of her and that it probably influenced her behaviour. So, this is not a classic example of the “male gaze” where women are seen as objects of desire, but rather shows how he was watching her in a more assessing manner which still ended up resulting in the change of her behaviour.

Moreover, some traits of the fourth wave of feminism are obviously present. For example, the novel touches on the issue of sexual assault when Alex was just a little girl on a school trip. This scene shows her being raped by one of the “Grays”. Not only does it raise some serious issues about rape in general, but also mentions the questions many women who

were in her situation tend to ask: “*Maybe he did rape me?* She wasn’t sure when it counted, how far inside he had to be.” (Bardugo, *Ninth House* 125). By making the main character imperfect and showing the unfortunate situation that can happen to anyone it, in a way, raises awareness about these issues and can serve to show women they are not alone. Specifically, that question of when something counts as rape, and staying silent instead of saying what happened is the reality of many women who went through such a thing. Fourth wave of feminism is known for openly discussing and showing issues of this kind, especially with the rise in popularity of feminism on social media. For example, campaign such as #metoo movement raises awareness of rape and sexual assault, and the #timesup initiative brings about the issue of inequality in workplace among male and female employees, the discrepancy in chances of getting a job, and various gender-determined factors that impact the employer’s decision to hire somebody (Kakroda and Ambedkar Sole 92).

The above-mentioned instance of sexual assault, sexual violence and overall issue of Alex being objectified and used in that sense are all themes of fourth wave of feminism which demands for these problems to be noted and resolved. Although these are all works of fantasy, bringing up these topics can serve as a way for feminism, as a movement, to raise awareness for these issues in everyday life.

Moving on to her relationship with her boyfriend Len, it can be described as a toxic one, to say the least. For instance, there was a scene where they were arguing and Alex knew she did nothing wrong and was very angry with Len, that this is quite noticeable. Because even though she was angry at him for a reason, she still missed him when she calmed down and could not wait for him to come back: “She didn’t feel angry or righteous, just ashamed and so scared that somehow she’d ruined everything, ruined herself, that Len would never want her again. And then where would she go? All she’d wanted was for him to come back.” (Bardugo, *Ninth House* 290). Moreover, it is said that he often called her names like bitch and slut, and that having sex with him made her feel almost more used rather than loved: “But when Len had said

she was a good little slut, she hadn't felt sexy or wild; she'd felt so small. She was afraid she might cry and she was afraid he might like that too." (Bardugo, *Ninth House* 290).

It is visible that the protagonist here is not what we would usually expect in this genre, however, in the second part of the book she slowly starts turning into a girl who wants this new life that was given to her. She starts to care for her future and is willing to stand up for herself in order to succeed and never go back to her old life. With that, she is a bit different in the beginning of the second book. This leads us to the sequel, *Hell Bent*, where Alex needs to save her mentor who is trapped in hell after he went missing. With the start of the second book, it is visible that she is trying harder to keep up with her assignments, doing the readings for classes, still not perfect at her job, but at least she was pretending and trying to do better. That being said, over the course of the two books, Alex Stern evolves into young woman full of courage, willing to take chances in order to save Darlington. She was still in fight or flight mode, however, she seemed more determined and equipped to deal with the challenges that came her way. Even though she was still not fully confident or best at what she did, she seemed to be more determined to succeed: "She didn't want to be reminded of the lost days when she'd hidden in these secret rooms, wounded and hopeless. Pathetic. She wasn't going to let that happen to her this year. She was going to find a way to keep control." (Bardugo, *Hell Bent* 23). And despite multiple moments where she was doubting herself, believing she was the same girl who came to Yale, she starts to change that in the second half of the book: "She wasn't the girl she'd been. She wasn't helpless. ... She had power." (Bardugo, *Hell Bent* 295).

Another way in which she is interesting is that she manages her way through all these situations mostly by pretending or lying and being vulgar and violent. In that sense, if we look at gender as being a performative act, it can be said that she behaves in a more masculine way: "Violence was easy. It was her first language, natural to slip back into, ready on her tongue." (Bardugo, *Hell Bent* 184). It is possible to explain this by saying that, throughout her life she was constantly facing difficult, dangerous and often life-threatening situations since she was

dealing drugs, being sexually assaulted, living with an aggressive boyfriend, and all of these scenarios demanded from her to be on alert and provoked more of that masculine behaviour. And that kind of performance, and of course the help from her friends is exactly what helps her get Darlington back from hell.



## 7.2. Inej Ghafa and Nina Zenik in *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom*

*Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom* are the two novels following the *Shadow and Bone* trilogy. *Six of Crows* is a young-adult fantasy novel showing the adventures of teenage criminals, Kaz, Inej, Nina and Jasper as a starting team, who are supposed to go on a deadly, almost impossible heist. The leader of the group, Kaz Brekker, agrees to go because of the enormous amount of money waiting for them as a reward. This is essentially where all the adventures in the first book begin. The son of the man who hired them, Wylan Van Eck, eventually joins them along the way. One of their primary goals is to get Matthias, Nina's former lover, out of the prison and get down to completing the rest of their mission. The second book in this duology picks up right where the first book ends, with Inej held hostage, and shows the readers all of the challenges the characters face after the successfully resolved heist in the first book.

The novels are written in third person and each chapter shows the perspective of a different character, giving the readers insights into their thoughts, but also showing their pasts, the demons each of them is facing, and the aspirations they might have for their futures.

Along mentioning physical and sexual abuse in Inej's case, the novels also show an example of homosexual relationship between Jesper and Wylan, mention physical disabilities in Kaz's case, and introduce Wylan as a character with learning difficulties. However, for the purposes of this work, Inej and Nina will be analysed in more detail in the text that follows.

### 7.2.1. Inej Ghafa

Inej Ghafa is a young girl who grew up in a family of acrobats but was taken away from them and sold as a slave to work as a prostitute at Tante Heleen's brothel. Based on this she also portrays some elements of fourth wave of feminism, considering that she had been sexually and physically assaulted. This has not been too deeply analysed or mentioned often throughout the books. There are some instances of physical abuse mentioned but not as many sexually, presumably because these books are intended for young-adult readers. But nonetheless, based

on her behaviour and strong desire to escape Tante Heleen, it is possible to conclude that she had suffered various forms of violence during her time working in the pleasure house. Thankfully, Kaz partially gets her out of there by paying her owner so that Inej can work for him, but despite this “escape” she is still her indenture. Inej is, in general, portrayed as a very skilful and capable girl with mostly strong morals that are challenged more often than she would like. Throughout the novel there are several times where Inej mentions her saints, showing her strong faith and traits of being a religious person. However, despite her religion she does many things for Kaz that go against her morals, such as killing someone when necessary. She primarily agrees to go on this deadly heist because of her loyalty to Kaz, and because of the chemistry and unexpressed feelings that exist between them that constantly stay unresolved.

By the end of their journey she decides it is no use trying to go after someone who is not capable of loving her in a way that she expects, and wishes to dedicate her future to the greater goal of capturing slavers on the open seas. She also finally stands up to Tante Heleen, the woman she is indentured to, and instead of bringing herself down with the sad moments from her past, Inej starts seeing her new purpose.

Based on her physical appearance, she is not given as feminine, eye-catching features as Nina. She is described as being shorter than others, having a lean physique, dark eyes, brown skin and long dark hair she often kept tied up.

If we look at the notion of gender and how feminine and masculine traits and behaviours do not depend solely on one's sex, it can be said that Inej actually shows more masculine traits and takes on that role throughout the novel. She is able to fight and deal with her opponents who are mostly men far bigger and stronger than she is. Therefore, Inej radiates that masculine energy and gives off a different impression compared to that of Nina. Especially in a sense that she stands up for herself in every situation and does not let anyone disrespect her: “So she'd let no insult or innuendo slide. She'd always struck first and struck hard. Sometimes she even cut them up a bit.” (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 66). She is also not willing to wait for something to

change in order to be good enough for her. If it is not what she wants and needs, she will not waste her time sticking to it for too long. This can be seen in her relationship with Kaz since they both have feelings for each other, but they cannot admit it and he is not even capable of loving her in the first place. And no matter how strong feelings she might have for Kaz, she is ready to let go of him if he cannot reciprocate that love, no matter how much it might hurt her: “I will have you without armour, Kaz Brekker. Or I will not have you at all.” *Speak*, she begged silently. *Give me a reason to stay.*” (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 460). In that sense, by taking control of her life as much as she can, not putting up with anyone’s threats and fighting anyone who tries to stand in her way, she seems to be more masculine, as opposed to Nina with her often-flirtatious behaviour.

Moving on, in *Crooked Kingdom*, when Inej is fighting Dunyasha, she starts thinking about the way girls often tend to perceive their lives which correlates with the previously mentioned stereotypical images that young girls of today are growing up with: “But wasn’t that what every girl dreamed? That she’d wake and find herself a princess? Or blessed with magical powers and a grand destiny? Maybe there were people who lived those lives. Maybe this girl was one of them. But what about the rest of us? What about the nobodies and the nothings, the invisible girls? We learn to hold our heads as if we wear crowns. We learn to wring magic from the ordinary.” (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 460). In a way this also serves to introduce a new image to the young readers, one different from the “princess waiting for her prince” but equally as important.

### 7.2.2. Nina Zenik

Nina Zenik is a Grisha who is mostly torn between her two loves: love for Matthias and love for her people. Matthias is one of the soldiers whose main aspiration in life is to destroy all Grisha since they believe they are evil witches. The relationship between Nina and him is quite complicated, but nonetheless the conflicts between the man and the nation she cares about certainly make Nina’s life difficult. Her story shows complicated aspects of, in a way,

“forbidden love”, but also the struggles of staying true to one’s own identity. Over the course of the novel, she takes on various roles in order to succeed in their plan. As was previously mentioned, gender is very complex and refers closely to performance in different situations in everyday life. This shift can be visible in Nina’s character, not only physically: “She was tall and built like the figurehead of a ship carved by a generous hand.” (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 81) but also with the way she behaves: “Nina just liked to flirt with anything. He’d once seen her make eyes at a pair of shoes she fancied in a shop window.” (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 81). Here we can see some of the more feminine features in her external looks but also her actions. However, right after this comes almost a complete shift in her behaviour: “Nina threw herself into a chair at the table and wriggled her feet out of her jewelled slippers, digging her toes into the plush white carpet. ... She shoved one of the cakes from the coffee service into her mouth and mumbled,...” (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 82). This can serve as an example of how gender roles can shift depending on the situation. One moment she was working with a client, being more feminine and elegant and in the other, completely different, relaxed and not caring what Kaz, who just came to her, might think: “Kaz shook his head, amused and impressed at how quickly Nina dropped the wise Grisha priestess act. She’d missed her true calling on the stage.” (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 82). Although it can be said that she was literally acting for the purpose of her job, we could also say that these different situations demanded a certain change in her behaviour, showing once again how gender is closely tied to performance.

### 7.3. Diana and Alia in *Wonder Woman: Warbringer*

*Wonder Woman: Warbringer* is a novel made in collaboration with DC as a part of their DC Icons Series. It focuses on the story of Princess Diana, also known as Wonder Woman. It is known that her character originates from the popular DC comics, all the way back in 1940s where she was quickly recognised as an iconic feminist character (Mangels). As time progressed, she has made an appearance in many comics, various movies, and now a novel situated in a modern-day setting.

The story starts with Diana's race on the secluded island Themyscira, when she sees a young girl drowning and decides to break the island's rules and save her. But the girl she saves is not just a regular girl. She is Alia, a Warbringer who, if not dead by her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, will bring about a war on a global scale. In the urge to get off the island as quickly as possible, they go to New York and, with plenty of trials and tribulations, try to make it to the magical spring where Alia can be purified of her curse and continue on living a normal life.

#### 7.3.1. Diana

Despite being a princess and a heroine we all know about, Diana is in some ways different from the woman we see in the movies made about Wonder Woman. Here, she is shown as a sixteen-year-old girl who must live up to the expectations of her mother and her people. She is already unique because she was made from the Island, unlike the other Amazons who live there, who deserved their place on the Island by dying on the battlefield. Because of this, many tend to view her as undeserving of being among them which she is aware of and constantly wants to earn their respect and acceptance. The book starts with the race which she sees as a perfect opportunity to prove herself to her sisters. Solely based on this we can tell that she is quite a strong-willed young woman with strong determination to win. This is not only visible in the beginning when she is preparing for the race, but also in the rest of the novel where the whole journey to the spring can be seen as an ultimate race that will determine

Diana's future when she comes back home. While she proves to be incredibly capable and fierce in the end, Bardugo manages to portray that teenage enthusiasm in Diana, and the issues of self-doubt at that age. When it comes to her behaviour, it can be said that she shows more masculine traits, not only by being physically strong and fit and carrying Alia on her back like a child, but also in the way she often takes lead in different situations: planning the route ahead, keeping watch at night, suggesting hunting for food, fighting men like no other and so on. And if we look at Diana's relationship with her mother and the behaviours they express, we could say that they take on a more masculine role in their society. They do not express any strong emotions and her mother's, Hippolyta's face, is more neutral and contained rather than expressive. Even her hugs towards Diana are extremely formal and not too warm in the public eye. Accordingly, Diana does not let others see how she is feeling and pretends not to care about what others around her say about her in the beginning, before the race starts. This kind of suppressing of emotions correlates with the usual stereotype where the lack of showing emotions could be seen as a more masculine trait. In a way, this entails that the leaders and figures of higher status in a society full of women resort to more masculine behaviour patterns in order to maintain and manifest power in their society.

While reading, it is noticeable that Diana's only feminine features are linked to her looks and beauty, and the feminine behaviour she evokes is completely subconscious. When it comes to her physical appearance, Bardugo describes Diana as a tall, fit girl with long hair, bronze skin and a beautiful body and all the characters, regardless of being male or female, tend to marvel at her beauty and her looks from time to time. For instance, Alia describes her as: "...six feet tall and gorgeous, built like someone who could sell weird fitness equipment on late-night television." (Bardugo, *Wonder Woman: Warbringer* 54).

Because she lived on an island populated only by women, the men and the "male gaze" is something she encounters for the first time in "the World of Man". The first example of her unpleasant encounter with a man was on the subway when she and Alia first came to New York

and some guy there tried to flirt with her. She easily just turned him down and humiliated him in front of his friends. And when it comes to the “male gaze” she seems to observe that phenomenon from the side: “The men were laughing and whispering to one another, casting looks at the glittery girls. *Assessing them*, she realised. There was hunger behind their smiles.” (Bardugo, *Wonder Woman: Warbringer* 106).

When it comes to her beauty, it seems like she is not even aware of it and how it makes others feel to be in her presence, which is visible from her conversation with Alia. When Diana asks her why all men here look so puzzled, Alia just told her: “That’s what happens when a six-foot supermodel walks down the street in a few scraps of leather.” (Bardugo, *Wonder Woman: Warbringer* 109). From this it is visible that Diana is completely unaware of how her beauty affects others, but also how out-of-place she is in this modern world. This can also be analysed in a sense that, on the Island that she comes from there is not much value tied to one’s looks, thus making it a less important aspect of one’s identity. Obviously in the real world this is different considering that there is even a term “pretty privilege” being used to describe how some women can be treated better and get certain benefits in the society simply because of their looks. Based on the way Diana reacts to these novelties in the new world we could say that such values are different or non-existent where she comes from.

Some other instances of the “male gaze” include the time when they are at a party and Jason looks at her in a dress for the first time: “You- his voice broke off abruptly as his eyes locked on Diana. There was that strange look she’d seen on male’s faces all morning: gaze stunned, mouth slightly ajar.” (Bardugo, *Wonder Woman: Warbringer* 189). Or when Theo is giving all the girls compliments, he also acknowledges Diana by saying: “And you- “he said, looking at Diana. “You look like a star-spangled slice of hell yeah.” (Bardugo, *Wonder Woman: Warbringer* 190). This whole scene can serve for the analysis of gender and its performance. When they are getting ready for the party, Diana complains how her dress is not practical for running or fighting and how she cannot fit her lasso in her clutch, so she cared less about

elegance and being profound, but rather about how she would manage if something bad happens and they have to fight or run to save their lives. Moreover, when she is dancing with Jason, she is thinking how it would be better if they could just fight rather than do this, which is again an example of those masculine features in her behaviour, even in the setting where she would be expected to exhibit more feminine ones. This can also serve to break the stereotype that women should dress nicely, be more nurturing and caring than men, and show that they can actually be more of a leading figure.

Generally speaking, the author did acknowledge her looks and how gorgeous and feminine she looks in contrast to her masculine behaviour, and she did so in such a way that our protagonist does not put her worth into her looks but rather into what she does, her actions, which she hopes will give her glory. To the young readers this could convey a very important message.

Moving on, solely based on the title of the book and the fact that it revolves around a heroine well known to almost everyone, it was expected from this book to be full of feministic traits, both in characters' behaviours and speech. For example, when the Oracle says: "Of course men believe a woman's power must lie in the fineness of her features, the shapeliness of her limbs. You know better, Daughter of Earth." (Bardugo, *Wonder Woman: Warbringer* 49). There is also a part where Diana is walking the streets of New York, noticing how people on the billboards looked so perfect compared to the people she saw on the streets, that she thought they were some kind of religious symbols. These are only some of the instances where the author subtly shifts our attention to point out the superficial factors and stereotypes that have an impact on women and the society in general, in everyday scenarios.

### 7.3.2. Alia Keralis

Alia is a seventeen-year-old teenager whose parents died in a car accident. They were rich scientists and after their death her brother Jason basically took all the responsibilities upon



himself and took care of him and Alia. Because of Alia's Greek heritage, she possesses this strange quality of being a Warbringer. This means that if she does not die by her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday a global war would take place. Because of this there is an increasing number of various incidents across the world including riots, fights and general state of tension and it is only getting worse with time. Only after the accident happens on the boat Alia was on and Diana saves her from drowning, does the action start to unravel and they find out what Alia really is and how her curse can be cured.

At the start of the novel, Alia is only aware that she was saved by a giant girl, nothing really makes sense to her, and she cannot really comprehend the magical aspects of the place where Diana lives. It can be said that her character is quite strong-willed considering that she was the one who got them to New York simply by wishing strong enough to go home. But when she gets to New York she almost immediately gains more confidence and is determined to get home and live her normal life. However, she still completely neglects what happened on the island and tries to ignore it. She is pretending that she will work with Diana to get to the spring where she can be purified of her curse when, in reality, she has no intentions of doing such a thing. But this changes over the course of the novel when Alia starts to realise how serious the whole situation is. The author also wrote Alia as being of mixed race, her mother was black and her dad was Greek which is mentioned in the book as being problematic. Moreover, her best friend Nim is a chubby Indian girl and it is said that they were, in a way, excluded from the other children, presumably because of their nationalities. In a scene where Diana and Alia are in a store, Alia warns her of a police officer that might follow them just because she is a woman of colour so she must not act suspicious in any way. These are some of the instances where Bardugo mentions the issues of race in American society in particular, and makes the readers acknowledge the fears, injustice and unequal treatment of people of various minor nationalities in a predominantly white society.

One of the things that is common in both Diana and Alia is that they are teenagers. And because of this they exhibit some of that teenage naiveness and a way of looking at the world which can make them seem a bit childish at times. But as the novel progresses there are more instances of them being more determined in reaching their goal. Especially with Alia, who wishes to avoid the whole issue of being a Warbringer and live a normal life. But eventually she starts to understand how important all of this is for the future of the world and is even willing to sacrifice her life for this cause, which is where we can see her character developing and becoming more sure of herself. At first, Alia blames herself for everything that happened, she regrets going on that boat in the first place, but in those moments of doubt Diana is with her and makes her understand that she has the right to live the life that she wants, not the one controlled by her brother. As Diana says to her: “How could it be wrong to want to prove yourself?” she asked, a fierce light in her eyes. “You were not wrong to dare.” (Bardugo, *Wonder Woman: Warbringer* 60).

Moreover, the issues of gender and sexualities can also be mentioned here. At one point Alia wonders about Diana’s Island and how it is possible for it to be populated solely by women, which she sees as a “radical feminist cult” (Bardugo, *Wonder Woman: Warbringer* 73) of some sort and wonders if all of them are lesbians. Here she also mentions that it is fine if they are and that her friend is still trying to understand what her sexuality is. In this way, the author normalises the talk about various sexualities that exist, which is also a trait of fourth wave of feminism. And when it comes to analysis of gender, referring back to the scene when they are at a party and everyone is dressed nicely, Alia even decides to go out of her comfort zone and wears a gold dress instead of a simple black one. And in this scenario, she is expected to literally change her entire behaviour to being more feminine. Meaning that she has to be pleasant, smile at the guests and talk to them nicely. With that, it is visible how putting on this performance is draining her energy and how much she wants to get away from there. However, when she is dancing with Theo that feminine demeanour comes more naturally and she is actually enjoying

herself, laughing and having a good time. This example serves to show how feminine and masculine behaviours can be subconscious, but also forced upon an individual, resulting in different feelings of the person exhibiting such behaviours.

Overall, the way the author mentions all of these topics and issues of race and sexualities and implements feministic behaviours and speech into this novel does not seem forced, but rather like it is implemented into her characters. For example, Diana and Alia both show how determined they are to succeed, especially Alia who goes from being ignorant to the whole Warbringer talk, to deciding to sacrifice her life in order to prevent the world from a great catastrophe. Or the situations where the Oracle, or Alia describe men and how they perceive women, also have a feminist tone to it. When it comes to racial issues, through Alia's character the author shows the struggles and risks of being mixed-raced in modern American society, and by showing Nim as a chubby Indian girl she introduces even more diversity and can be seen as showing another trait of fourth wave of feminism, which is body positivity. Even by showing the nonchalant discussion between Alia and Diana about her people being all lesbians and mentioning an example of her friend Nim, she makes the whole talk about sexuality seem less like a taboo.

In this way, the ones reading do not perceive these hot topics these days as being pushed into their faces, but they can acknowledge them and come back into the real world with more understanding for the ones around them.

## 8. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has shown how the issues of gender, sexuality, feminism and race can be analysed through the female protagonists of Leigh Bardugo's novels. It has provided clear examples of gender as a performative act and mentioned sexualities that move away from the usually heteronormative portrayal of characters in fantasy novels. When it comes to feminism as a prism to look at some of these issues, the main concerns of fourth wave of feminism such as sexual abuse, sexual violence, equality of genders, of different sexualities, and mentioning body positivity, can all be seen in these characters to various extents. Since these are all grounds for equality women of today are fighting for, it is interesting, and likely beneficial, to show the problems in the real world portrayed in the modern fantasy novels.

But this is not what fantasy novels looked like decades ago. Thankfully, things have changed over time. From the authors being mostly men, showcasing their version of a male character as a hero and women as damsels in distress, we have come to the modern versions of female heroines written by various female authors. With that, this paper covered the issues of what fantasy is, made a clear distinction between sex and gender, shed a light on the issues of feminism over time and showed all of these issues through analysing the female protagonists in some of Leigh Bardugo's novels. All of this was done in order to show how much representation of, what are often times considered to be controversial or touchy subjects, has improved over time and how this can serve to make some major improvements in the societies we live in. Moreover, the inclusivity and representation of this kind can serve as a way for readers to feel less alone, by giving them so many diverse characters in which they can often find something they can relate to. And especially when it comes to young girls, it is important to give them inspirational, strong female leads instead of submissive quiet women who compel to the patriarchal world we unfortunately still live in.

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## SUMMARY AND KEYWORDS

**Portrayal of Female Protagonists through Leigh Bardugo's Chosen Works**

This final paper deals with the issue of representation of gender and feminism in modern-day fantasy novels. With that, female protagonists in the selected Leigh Bardugo's novels are analysed in accordance with gender theories which include sexual violence, gender stereotypes and theory of the "male gaze". In terms of feminism, certain feminist traits and aspects of fourth wave of feminism are noticeable in the novels and characters, and therefore emphasised through our analysis. For the purposes of this paper, the characters of Alex Stern, Inej Ghafa, Nina Zenik, Diana and Alia Keralis in the novels *Ninth House*, *Hell Bent*, *Six of Crows*, *Crooked Kingdom* and *Wonder Woman: Warbringer* are analysed in terms of gender and feminism in order to have a better understanding of how these themes are represented in modern works of fantasy.

**Key Words:** fantasy, Leigh Bardugo, gender, feminism

## SAŽETAK I KLJUČNE RIJEČI

**Prikaz protagonistkinja kroz odabrana djela Leigh Bardugo**

Ovaj završni rad bavi se pitanjem reprezentacije roda i feminizma u modernim fantasy romanima. Prema tome, odabrani romani autorice Leigh Bardugo analizirani su u skladu s rodnim teorijama, uključujući seksualno nasilje, rodne stereotipe i teoriju „muškog pogleda“. Što se tiče samog feminizma, određene feminističke karakteristike te karakteristike četvrtog vala feminizma vidljive su kroz djela i likove, te su iz tog razloga naglašene kroz analizu protagonistkinja. Za potrebe ovoga rada, protagonistkinje Alex Stern, Inej Ghafa, Nina Zenik, Diana i Alia Keralis u romanima *Ninth House*, *Hell Bent*, *Six of Crows*, *Crooked Kingdom* i *Wonder Woman: Warbringer*, analizirane su po pitanju roda, i feminizma kako bi se steklo bolje razumijevanje kako su ove teme prisutne u modernim fantasy djelima.

**Ključne riječi:** fantasy, Leigh Bardugo, rod, feminizam