

Body and Society: Symbolic Equation in *Vampire Academy* Series by Richelle Mead

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ABSTRACT

The body serves as a symbol that describes the relationship between individual parts of an organism and the system as a whole. A structure of the social system of society can be found within the body. Literature works as the product of a culture and is considered a mirror of society. The body in literature is often a theme or symbol rich in meaning because the body can reflect various aspects of human life, such as identity, emotion, culture, politics, spirituality, and social relationships. The use of the body in literature often involves multidimensional exploration that inspires readers to understand the human experience more deeply. The Vampire Academy series brings about a body issue representing certain social structures of a society. This study aims to explore the symbols underlying the vampire body in the Vampire Academy series. The material and data were gained from library sources using a literary study method. The objects of this study are six novels by Richelle Mead from the Vampire Academy series, which tell the story of the lives of teenagers who fight against the class division structure in a school. The results include the body becoming a symbol of group identity, as seen in the tattoos of the Dhampir guardians' class and the Human Alchemists, symbols of sexuality in body shape, and symbols of power in the blood, skin colour, and tooth shape.

Keywords: body; society; symbol; Vampire Academy

INTRODUCTION

The *Vampire Academy* series of novels is a series by Richelle Mead consisting of six novels first published in 2007 entitled *Vampire Academy*, followed by *Frostbite* and *Shadow Kiss* in 2008, the fourth novel *Blood Promise* released in 2009 then the fifth and sixth novels *Spirit Bound* and *Last Sacrifice* published in the same year 2010. The *Vampire Academy* series received good reviews from readers and they have been translated into various languages and sold eight million copies worldwide. The popularity of the *Vampire Academy* series cannot be separated from the vampire narrative presented by Mead about a high school that educates teenage vampires and dhampirs - half-vampire creatures who struggle in a class hierarchy structure.

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Vampires in both classic and contemporary fiction have been studied from various perspectives, from phenomenology to the sexual relations presented in the story (Burr, 2003), feminism about female monsters (Abdi & Calafell, 2017), white dominance (Stratton, 2005), changes in family structures in contemporary western society (Burr & Jarvis, 2007), posthumanism, to popular culture as a form of escapism in an eternal vampire element that offers eternal youth and promises. Richelle Mead's *Vampire Academy* series was studied by Smith and Moruzi and published in the online journal *Children's Literature in Education* (2018). They focused on studying the gothic theme of vampire stories set in schools. Traditional school stories are adapted and transformed with gothic themes to define contemporary girl models. *Vampire Academy* tells a school story that allows for unique, disturbing, potentially transformative female protagonists, regardless of the limitations imposed by heterosexual romance plots. Those studies focused on gothic themes and the protagonist's characteristics in romance. There is still an open space to give further research to the *Vampire Academy* series, especially on the body issue, as Mead accommodates various bodies in her creation of *Vampire Academy* characters, which she divides into three groups: vampire bodies, half-vampire bodies, and human bodies, all of which form a class structure. The body representation becomes the main issue in the series. The researchers tried to reveal the meaning of the body represented in the *Vampire Academy* series.

Westerners consider the body as a mere object that is (perhaps) separated from the mind or soul since the development of rationalism. When the bourgeoisie became the dominant social class with its capitalism, this view became hegemonic. The human body does not only contain parts such as the head, eyes, lips, chest, thighs, anus, intestines and heart. Ideas, images, meanings, and ideas about the biological system and the physical body are complete representations of the body. According to Synnot (2007: 1-2), the body is filled with public and private, cultural, political and economic, sexual, moral and sometimes controversial symbolism. In various populations, the body and senses are socially constructed over different organs, processes, and body attributes. Age, gender and skin colour are body attributes that determine identity, status and social differentiation in society, so social inequality arises from here.

The term social body appears when the body is discussed and interpreted in society. However, the concept of the social body is not interpreted as that. The social body is interpreted from various perspectives, as conveyed by Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) in their theoretical paper. They mentioned Mary Douglas's work, which shows that society and its social relations can be seen through the body. Douglas (2003:91) also mentions a postulate that the body consists of self and society. The physical body does not stop at the self but has a universal meaning as a system that responds to the social system, which expresses it as a system. Some groups form a social structure that can be seen through the body. The body becomes a natural symbol that brings up the relationship between parts of an organism (individual) and the whole (society) at a general systemic level. The self and society mentioned by Douglas can be so closely related that they can be said to be united, but sometimes they can be far apart. This relationship can give rise to tensions that allow for the elaboration of meaning. When Douglas mentioned that the body becomes a rich source of metaphor by seeing the body as a unity without dualism, Hughes and Lock see the body as a metaphor machine when talking about somatic and psychological states. (1987:23) They added that the body resides in a society's structure or social system. The researcher uses the concept of the social body of Hughes and Lock, and Douglas to reveal the meaning of symbols on the bodies of Moroi vampires, Dhampirs, and Humans in the VA series.

METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative research using a literature study method. All materials and data related to the studied object were obtained from library sources. The object being studied is a material object, namely the *Vampire Academy* series, which consists of six novel series entitled *Vampire Academy*. The first novel will be abbreviated as VA. The second novel, *Frostbite*, abbreviated as FB; the third novel, *Shadow Kiss*, abbreviated as SK; the fourth, *Blood Promise*, abbreviated as BP; the fifth book, *Spirit Bound*, abbreviated as SB; and the last is *Last Sacrifice*, abbreviated as LS. The formal object used to help examine the existing problems arises from the material object, namely the vampire body in the VA series. The data for this study were literary data expressed in words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or discourses. The first step in data collection was to read the six VA series novels on each page carefully and record empirical facts related to the problem of the body as a symbol of society. The data obtained from reading and recording activities were then sorted, identified, and grouped based on theoretical tools for the formulation of problem one; the Scheper-Huges and Lock (1987) body theory was used. This body theory was chosen because it was needed in studying the body, which was not only a physical and mental entity but also a representation of culture and society. The next step was the analysis using the analytical descriptive method. This method was carried out by describing empirical facts and then analysing them to get answers to the research problem.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

According to the title of the series that is the main object of this research, *Vampire Academy* (VA), this novel tells a story of vampires and their relationship with other groups, dhampirs (half vampire, half human) and humans. Vampires are mystical characters in Western folklore depicted as immortal and blood-sucking creatures. However, fictional and folkloric characters can be very different, as in the VA novel.

PALE SKIN

There are two types of vampires in VA: Moroi and Strigoi vampires. Moroi are described by Mead as living vampires because, although they live long, they can die as they are not immortal. Unlike Strigoi, they are immortal. Mead calls Moroi vampires because their lives depend on consuming blood, although they can consume a little human food. Physically, Moroi vampires are described as having pale skin, as Mead describes in the following quote,

“A lot of royals just didn’t work at all, ... And those who did work certainly didn’t do a lot of martial arts or physically demanding jobs. Moroi had a lot of great attributes: exceptional senses—smell, sight, and hearing—and the power to work magic. But physically, they were tall and slender, often small-boned. They also got weak from being in sunlight (FB, 58)

Abe’s was the strange face I’d seen while I’d been going in and out of consciousness after the fight by the barn. He was older than me, close to Olena’s age. He had black hair and a goatee, and about as tan a complexion as Moroi ever had. If you’ve ever seen tan or dark-skinned people who are sick and grow pale, it is a lot like that.” (BP, 115)

Pale skin also applies to Moroi, who have tan/brown skin. Even on tan skin, the pale nuance is very obvious. Mead clarified this description of the character of Abe Mazur, Rose Hathaway's biological father, as a dark-skinned person who looks seriously ill and very pale. Essentially, the pale skin identified with Moroi vampires is caused by their limited exposure to sunlight. Sunlight

makes Moroi bodies weak but not deadly as if Strigoi vampires are exposed to sunlight. Pale is a colour with a light tone and is identified with purity and innocence. Gajanayake (2022) adds that this colour also gives a holy impression. However, pale also signifies negative emotions and, illness and even death. Mead seems to emphasise the meaning of purity and holiness in pale Moroi skin and death in Strigoi, who look paler than the pale Moroi.

FANGS

Another characteristic of the Moroi body is the prominent and strong canine teeth used to bite the neck of prey to suck their blood. Fangs can be interpreted as power and dominance over others. Fangs are indeed associated with vampires in literature, although Dracula does not have fangs (Cengel, 2020). Mead narrates the Moroi's fangs as a tool to give pleasure to those they bite, along with saliva containing endorphin, as seen in the quote below.

"Those fangs contrasted oddly with the rest of her features. With her pretty face and pale blond hair, she looked more like an angel than a vampire... Her fangs bit into me hard, and I cried out at the brief flare of pain. Then it faded, replaced by a wonderful, golden joy that spread through my body. It was better than any of the times I'd been drunk or high."(VA, 8)

Mead clearly describes Moroi fangs and saliva-like syringes and anesthetics. The effect of saliva that anaesthetises and makes the person who is bitten and whose blood is sucked feel great pleasure and pleasure. The effect given by the bite gives Moroi what they want from their prey willingly, which is blood. Fangs become one of the symbols of Moroi power.

BLOOD

Moroi blood is one of the main issues in the VA series. Unlike the blood sucked and consumed by Moroi vampires, Moroi blood itself is targeted by Strigoi vampires and humans. Moroi blood has power. For Strigoi vampires, Moroi blood makes them stronger, while for humans, Moroi blood gives the power to prevent disease and makes them healthier and stronger. Blood has a universal meaning of life; in the VA series, blood has the meaning of strength and life. The following quote shows a description of Moroi blood for other groups,

*They are deadly, and they are powerful. Moreover, do you know what makes them more powerful?"
"Moroi blood," I whispered.
"What was that?" asked Stan loudly. "I didn't catch it."
I spun back around to face him. "Moroi blood! Moroi blood makes them stronger."* (VA, 33)

Blood symbolises conflict, sacrifice, or violence, while power reflects dominance, control, or influence. Blood can lead to a power struggle marked by violence or bloodshed, such as in a revolution, war, or struggle for power. Moroi's blood, as described by Mead, holds strength. Each Moroi blood figure has the ability to master one of the four basic elemental magics of fire, wind, earth, and water. "All Moroi wielded elemental magic. It was one of the things that differentiated living vampires" (VA, 43). This magic was initially used to help them daily, but over time, a ban was imposed on using it openly. Moroi's magical abilities engraved in their blood are mainly used to protect them from Strigoi attacks. Moroi's magical abilities symbolise technology. Technology that works to survive, protect, and strengthen Moroi's power in the social structure of society in the VA series. Blood represents the power that provides a dominant position, as conveyed by Kalberg (Wandansari, 2022; Avatara, 2024)—dominance to lead other groups.

SCARS

The magic in Moroi's blood allows him to live longer (not immortal) and resist disease. However, this does not mean they are immune to disease. Like humans, their bodies can also be physically injured and leave scars. Mead gave an example of Tasha Ozero, a Moroi noble, Christian Ozero's aunt. Tasha got a scar on her face when she fought a Strigoi to save Christian, who was still a child at the time. The wound healed but left a deep scar, "I mean, it's obvious she used to be really pretty. But even with the scars now ... I don't know. She's pretty in a different way. It's like ... like they're part of her. They complete her." (FB, 63). For Rose, the scar on Tasha's face is a form of beauty and beauty, but the scars on the Moroi's body depicted in the VA series have the meaning of resistance and betrayal. Moroi is likened to an intellectual group who never lifts their bodies physically to fight evil. Physical resistance is taboo if the Moroi do it, so what Tasha Ozero did was considered despicable. In the final series, Mead finally chose Tasha as the character who killed the Moroi Queen, Tatiana. This confirms that scars for Moroi are a disfigurement and symbolise shame.

SLIM BODY

Body shape is an issue that Mead often brought up to explain the differences in class groups in the VA series. Mead described the Moroi as slender and tall, as seen in the following quote:

"It was ironic that dhampirs had such an allure here because slender Moroi girls looked very much like the super-skinny runway models so popular in the human world. Most humans could never reach that "ideal" skinniness, just as Moroi girls could never look like me". (VA, 47)

The moroi body is like a very slim model's body, a body that humans desire because it is considered beautiful, therefore, Mead called it very popular. Mead seemed to be applying the American beauty standards of the 2000s when slim bodies became idolised. A journalist named Konstantinovskiy (2022) wrote that there was a time when society had a phobia of fat, and that time was the 2000s. 2007 was the peak of eating disorders in America, the same year the first VA novel was published. Victoria's Secret models became the dream body models, and Hollywood films played a role in distributing this slim, super-skinny body image.

SHAPED AND CURVY BODY

Unlike Moroi, Dhampir is said to be a figure born from a combination of Moroi with dhampir or with humans, so half of Dhampir's blood is Moroi, and half is human. The Dhampir body is described as having its characteristics; they are strong and fast, which is one of the reasons they become guardians of the Moroi. However, Mead gave another impression of the strength of the Dhampir body; the Dhampir body implies extraordinary sexuality. Dhampirs become sex objects for the Moroi. Rose Hathaway becomes a figure desired by Moroi men, even by the son of the main Moroi noble, as seen in the quote below,

"Here, among the slim and small-chested Moroi girls, certain features—meaning my larger breasts and more defined hips—stood out. I knew I was pretty, but to Moroi boys, my body was more than just pretty: it was sexy in a risqué way. Dhampirs were an exotic conquest, a novelty all Moroi guys wanted to try." (VA, 8)

As described by Mead, the duties of dhampir women are raising dhampir children that they get from Moroi couples (unofficially), who then be sent as guardians, or they become guardians of the

Moroi. For Dhampir men, they are obliged to be guards. However, dhampir men also become sex objects for Moroi women, as happened to Dimitri Belikov, Ambrose, and Michael Turner.

TATTOO

Dhampir guards, both male and female, have tattoos on the back of their necks; the first is an oath tattoo in the form of a winding line resembling a snake that marks him as a guardian. This oath tattoo means they are submissive and loyal to protect Moroi. They get this tattoo when they complete their education at a special guardian academy, as seen in the following quote.

“This guy was good, though, and managed to delicately place the promised mark in the centre of the nape of my neck after all. The promise mark looked like a long, stretched-out S with curly ends. He fit it between the molnija marks, letting it wrap around them like an embrace. The process hurt, but I kept my face blank, refusing to flinch. I was shown the final results in a mirror before he covered it up with a bandage so it would heal cleanly.” (BP, 23)

In addition to the oath tattoo, the dhampir guards also have the Molnija tattoo (read: molniya), a sign of two jagged lightning lines that intersect to form the letter X. Molnija is a Russian word meaning lightning. This sign marks the number of Strigoi that a guardian has successfully destroyed, one Molnija for one Strigoi killed. The Molnija tattoo is a tattoo of pride for the Dhampir guardians; the more tattoos they have, the higher the honour a guardian gets, so the tattoo must be visible to others. In addition to dhampirs, humans who work as alchemists also have tattoos.

Among the characters in the VA series, human characters are not mentioned much. A significant character is Sidney Sage, a human alchemist who appears in the fourth and sixth (last) novels. Other humans are only names with brief descriptions, namely humans whose blood is voluntarily taken by Moroi in return for the pleasure and enjoyment given by Moroi bites and saliva. This human class is not described in detail, only as a figure with dreamy eyes and an eager face when Moroi is about to suck their blood, "An eager look crossed her face—the look of a junkie about to get her next fix". (Vampire Academy, 42). The human class in VA itself represents the lower class because humans who come into contact with Moroi and Dhampir are Moroi bite addicts. However, there is an exception in an Alchemist - a human who works to solve Moroi affairs in the human environment; they get a tattoo-like mark on the lower cheek of the face. Its shape is a flower and leaf tattoo with a gold colour, as seen in the quote.

“Sydney looked up. Now that we were in brighter light, I could see that her eyes were brown. I also noticed that she had an interesting tattoo on her lower left cheek. The ink looked like gold, something I’d never seen before. It was an elaborate design of flowers and leaves and was only really visible when she tilted her head certain ways so that the gold caught the light.” (BP:27)

The Moroi give the golden flower tattoo that the alchemist human has for the services provided by the alchemist when the Moroi have to deal with the human world. Almost the same as the Dhampir oath tattoo, the alchemist's golden flower tattoo signifies loyalty to the Moroi. However, unlike the Dhampir tattoo, the alchemist's tattoo contains Moroi blood, which provides immunity to disease for the tattoo owner.

SHORT HAIR

Almost all Dhampir guardians, both men and women, have short hair, except for Dimitri and Rose, so the Molnija mark can be seen. Dimitri and Rose, even though they have quite long hair, they

always tie their hair up so that their tattooed necks are visible. Rose does not like short hair; according to her, the short hair of the female guards, including her mother, is not beautiful.

"Me. Turning into Alberta. Her...and all the other female guardians. They're all leathery and stuff. Fighting and training and always being outdoors—they aren't pretty anymore." I paused. "This...this life. It destroys them. Their looks, I mean."

"It happened to my mom. She used to be beautiful. I guess she still is, sort of. But not the way she used to be." (VA:155-156)

Short hair on both men and women signifies masculinity and a body exposed to continuous physical exercise, forming an athletic body and eliminating femininity for female Dhampir guardians. The view of hair length in some societal traditions influences the concept of beauty. Long hair is often interpreted as a representation of innocence and feminine charm. It becomes a symbol of femininity that brings sexual attraction and a sense of protection from the opposite sex. Short hair is traditionally considered a masculine and independent identity.

The skin colour, body shape, teeth, hair, tattoos, scars, and even blood embedded on the body in the VA series represent identities, sexuality, and power. The VA series accommodated various body symbols, which give layers of meaning relevant to socio-cultural conditions. The body reflects how humans understand themselves and their worlds.

CONCLUSION

The body symbolizes various cultural, social, and artistic contexts. The meaning of the body as a symbol can vary depending on the context. Body and society are a symbolic equation as the body represents a society. VA series accommodates an issue of a society engraved on the characters' bodies. The body represents a group or cultural identity through tattoos owned by the alchemist human group and the dhampir guard group. Short hair becomes a symbol of masculine gender identity, while the athletic body of men and the curvy body of women become a symbol of sexuality, attractiveness and interpersonal relationships. The slender body, pale skin, fangs, and blood owned by the Moroi represent power because they reflect the social status of the rulers.

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