

# **What to Make of Women-Led Crime Dramas?: An Interrogation of the Female Characters in Contemporary Crime Dramas**

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**Abstract.** While recent research suggests the proportion of lead characters in the mainstream Hollywood films and television shows is overwhelmingly male, white and middle-class, contemporary crime dramas led by women as central characters relatively enjoying a significant increase. This paper interrogates the way contemporary crime dramas represent their female or heroines characters by analysing four running shows: *The Fall*, *The Bridge*, *Deadwind* and *Unbelievable*. Each of the shows are being led by women as detectives in the pursuit of justice. This paper suggests that while it seemingly that women being depicted in a more nuanced and complicated characters, more development need to be addressed in the future. Female detectives are represented in a more agentive characters and while also acknowledging feminist issues within the narrative, however such shows also problematic in some aspects. Towards this paper it is suggested that female victims are treated as exotic objects and in a sexual way through the camera works and juxtapositions.

**Keywords:** *female, detective, television, crime, drama*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Despite recent research suggested that there aren’t many leading roles given to female in Hollywood movies and entertainment television in general, there has been an improvement in regards of television dramas. There has been a surge of female detectives roles in the US, UK and European dramas, which often defined by the specific genre “crime dramas”. Crime dramas, as in television and films, have been the most established and long enduring genre encompassing typical police or detectives investigation over complex murder cases and mysteries. Within the last 20 years, there has been surge of female-detectives led crime dramas which being successfully written and watched by the audience. The emerging of streaming services like Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime were given more platform for European crime dramas into the global audience and international prominence.

This paper analyses the way female detectives are depicted in four contemporary crime dramas: *The Fall* (2013-2016); *The Bridge* (2013-2018); *Deadwind* (2018 - ongoing) and *Unbelievable* (2019). The next section will illustrate the way contemporary crime dramas is being studied over the course recent years. This section will also proceed with literature on the subject on women being the central characters or lead detectives in contemporary crime dramas.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Female in Contemporary Crime Dramas**

Crime dramas often being called detectives story or police procedural dramas which usually follows the investigation of murder or other violent crimes. The reason on why crime drama has become immensely popular genre of literary, films and TV shows is that it offering what Thurnbull (2010) said as the mix between “Western and TV News”. Thurnbull (2010: 821) adds that the appealing factors of crime drama largely depend on confrontation and suspense but also on the portrayal of “violence, the dramatic incident and the selection of visuals with an eye to climactic moments”.

The emerging of female roles in the television industry is nothing new, with long-running shows such as *CSI* and *Law and Order : Special Victims Unit* which both begins from the year 2000 and in which portrayed the work of female polices and detectives as one of the central characters. Although these shows seemingly portrayed feminist figures in the forms of detectives Olivia Benson from *Law and Order: SVU* (played by Marishka Hargitay) and Catherine Willows from *CSI: Las Vegas* (played by Marg Helgenberger), several research also warned the underlying and complexities messages between feminist stance and traditional feminine roles. As research shown that despite the emerging theme of feminist issues such as rape and other sexual violence, such shows also depict feminine qualities as inferior (Cuklanz and Moorti 2006). The relatively same consideration also being highlighted by McRobbie (2004) that analyses the way feminist consideration permeates popular representation, such as television shows. McRobbie (2004) uses the term post-feminism to describes the way in which feminist sensibilities inspired popular films such as *Bridget Jones' Diary* and *Sex and the City*. Such shows and films seemingly depict the female empowerment agendas but also the pursuit of romance and feminine qualities still takes women's centered narratives. As elsewhere argued that towards the globalisation and digitally proliferation of entertainment television, women's centered entertainment not only enjoyed relatively positive representation but also those behind the cameras (Perkins and Schreiber 2019). However, the way in which female issues are taken into consideration when making such movies or shows need to be analysed whether or not such representation illuminate and put forward the feminist agenda.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Four different contemporary TV shows in the genre of crime dramas will be used as the corpus of this paper. They are: *The Fall* (2013-2016); *The Bridge* (2013-2018); *Deadwind* (2018 - onwards) and *Unbelievable* (2019). Each show is chosen not only because it has women detectives as the central characters but also being praised for their own accord as quality TV shows in the recent memories. This paper is therefore use character study to explore the way female detectives has been depicted in the aforementioned crime dramas.

These four crime dramas are chosen for several reasons, firstly all were being streamed in Netflix hence the accessibility factors. Secondly, all shows have an interesting portrayals of female detectives. Thirdly, all shows enjoy numerous commercial success across geographical locations and hence the emotional appeals. Several shows were also being nominated in various award shows and hence they are all fill the achievement of quality TV shows. Each of the show will be briefly described below.

*The Fall* (2013-2016) was produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) which encompassed 3 seasons. It is ended in 2016 and now being streamed by Netflix. The whole three seasons followed the investigation procedural lead by DSI Stella Gibson (played by actor Gillian Andersen) in uncovering the death and abduction of four young and attractive female victims. *The Bridge* (2011-2015) is a Scandinavian Noir produced both by Sweden and Denmark within which featured two detectives: Saga Noren (Swedish detective) and Kim Bodnia (Danish detective) following a dead body lied in the middle of the bridge connecting Malmo (Swedia) and Copenhagen (Denmark). The success of *The Bridge* (*Forbrydelsen*) catapulted the term “Scandi Noir” or “Nordic Noir” trends following crime literatures, TV shows and movies centered around murder and bleak dramas since the international prominence of Stieg’s Larrson Millenium Trilogy novels (Russo and Steenberg 2016). As it analysed that the bleakness of Scandi Noir drama is what draw the global audience. Scandi Noir also frequently raises social issues and problems related to global inequalities (Stougaard-Nielsen 2016). Another Scandi Noir genre, *Deadwind* (2018- onwards) is made and produced in Finland. It still running during its first season, following the work of detective Sofia Karppi, a recently widow with two daughters chasing the serial killer on the loose with all victims considered to be a young and attractive women. And finally, *Unbelievable* (2019) is often hailed as a feminist-led drama which depicted and inspired by true story of serial rapist in U.S operated in 2008 to 2011. Four shows are chosen not only they depict female detectives as the central roles, but more than that, it shows the complexities of such portrayal of female detectives. Next section will elaborate these depictions with more detailed analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Liberal feminism in the 1970s has put women's right to enter the workforce has become its central agenda. There was increase number of women working in public including some of the highest profile women in politics and business since. This condition and realities, as stated by Brunson (2013) affects the way crime drama is portrayed in television since 1980's. TV shows such as *Prime Suspect* (BBC) which is popular in the UK and *Cagney and Lacey* in the US during 1990-s were portrayed female detectives as the central characters. Towards the new centuries, the crime drama on TV which is already established as one of the most enduring genre, has started to portrayed this female detectives in more complex and nuanced characters.

Stella Gibson as being portrayed by Gillian Andersen in *The Fall* (2013-2016) has *femme fatale* characteristic. Stella is beautiful, blonde and always wear silk blouses. In several episodes, Stella used her sexuality to lure some of the young male detectives to come into her hotel room. Some scenes also suggest and emphasis her allure by exposing her lace bras and cleavage. The whole narrative of *The Fall*, while focusing upon the investigation procedure of catching serial killer also put emphasis to study Gibson's character. While alluring and frequently slept with younger men, Stella Gibson being portrayed as cold, calculated and not surprisingly unapologetic for her behaviours. There were some dialogue which deemed feminist when Stella Gibson talked about misogynistic view of her boss, who also used to slept with her, think of her when she slept with much younger men.

*Deadwind* and *the Bridge* have slightly different take on the portrayal of their female detectives. Both which considered to be *Scandi Noir* or *Nordic Noir* have a very minimal scenes that portrayed female characters in sexual scenes. While both female detectives characters are being described as cold, distant, anti-social and obsessed with their cases, both Sofia Karppi in *Deadwind* and Saga Noren in *The Bridge* never to be represented as alluring female detectives. Sofia Karppi in *Deadwind* is portrayed as a recently widowed with two daughters who struggled with loss and grief for her deceased husband. Saga Noren, while being depicted sometimes as pursuing a brief one night stand, being depicted as alone throughout the season. Some fans discussion also suggested that Saga Noren is also a portrayal of a person with autism spectrum with consistent 'autistic signs' throughout the whole season, although the creator of this highly successful drama never addressed this fans' theory. *Deadwind* has a serial killer as its central premises whereas *The Bridge* is more of a killer with more political motive.

*Unbelievable* (Netflix, 2019) takes two female detectives as its central characters with an opposite characters. Detective Karen Duvall (played by actor Merritt Weaver) is a soft-spoken, emphatic, mother of two with a policeman husband while her partner, Detective Grace Rasmussen (played by actor Toni Colette) is an ambitious, hot headed and thorough with a husband works in the District Attorney's office. Together they joined investigation to chase serial rapist operated in Washington and Colorado during 2008 to 2011. Both female detectives, while being

relentless to the pursuit of justice, also being portrayed as a happily married wives and mother. There were no slightly portrayal of them being cold, distant and ambitious. This show which often being hailed as the ‘true feminist drama’, puts a very little emphasis on the rapist character and rape scenes. Instead, it focuses its narrative and of the victims and the work of both detectives. This show also illuminates the cruel attitudes and incompetence of male detectives when dealing with rape cases.

It seems that the characterisation of the female detectives in the contemporary crime dramas are more nuanced and complex. While *The Fall* still use the sex appeal in the form of detective Stella Gibson, other shows put little or no emphasise at all towards its characters’ sexualities. Female detectives as the central heroines in these four shows illuminates the complex detective characters. While television and films often portrayed women as sex objects, contemporary crime dramas seemingly tries to subvert such portrayals.

However, many have suggested (Nunn and Biressi 2003; Sydney-Smith 2007; Turnbull 2014) that contemporary texts may have portrayed ‘feminist’ theme and ‘feminist issues’ such as female in the position power and sexual violence against women without really acknowledging the structural inequalities on and off-the cameras. Women as crime victims in *the Fall* and *Deadwind*, for example, are being exoticised towards the use of camera angle. For example the way the killer (Paul Spector) in *The Fall* treated his victims by bathe them, beautify them, even coloured their nails in such a careful and delicate acts that it seems like the camera has what Sigmund Freud called as “the devour” of female corpses (Freud in Nunn and Biressi 2003). In *Deadwind*, the victim was found in the crime scene naked with white lilies across her chest. The camera juxtaposed the corpse from above, making the corpse look like a blonde fallen angel. This is all suggested that contemporary crime dramas, although seemingly uses feminist narrative to portrayed its female central characters, have a complex and ambiguous stance towards the portrayal of women as crime victims.

## CONCLUSION

This paper analyses the way female detectives have been portrayed in four contemporary crime dramas: *The Fall* (2013-2016); *The Bridge* (2013-2018); *Deadwind* (2018 - onwards) and *Unbelievable* (2019). Female detectives are represented in a more nuanced characters and while some dramas also acknowledging feminist issues within the narrative, they are problematic in some aspects. Towards this paper it has been suggested that female victims are treated as exotic objects where sexual-based violence victims (in some dramas) are treated in sexual way through the camera works and juxtaposition. There being said, Post-Weinstein culture has given space for more critical investigation into the way women have been treated on and off the cameras and the rise of women-led crime dramas should not be treated as a brief one-off trend in the television history.

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