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Reclaiming the Self: An Intersectional Analysis of Post-Sexual Abuse Narratives in Anglophone Television Series

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Reclaiming the Self: An Intersectional Analysis of Post-Sexual Abuse Narratives in Anglophone Television Series

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Anxhela Filaj

Ph.D. Candidate

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Summary

The creative and ethical psychology of television producers and creators has undergone a profound transformation, particularly in the aftermath of the Weinstein revelations. In 2017, through a simple but life-changing Twitter post, #MeToo broke the long-standing silence surrounding sexual harassment in the entertainment industry. Hollywood's reaction to Harvey Weinstein's public trial was immediate and highly publicised, as #MeToo rapidly evolved into a global feminist movement. In the years following, often referred to as the post-Weinstein era, the influence of the movement prompted a re-evaluation of sexual abuse narratives across film and television industries, allowing new representational approaches to emerge both on- and off-screen. This dissertation critically explores these emerging tactics of representation employed by contemporary television creators in the series *Broadchurch*, *Unbelievable*, and *I May Destroy You*.

A central concern regarding consumer culture in this context is that, through a repeated process of rereading, reinterpreting, and normalizing[1] the language around rape, consumers have become "immune to the horrors of rape", as Gay describes (*Bad Feminist* 106). Sarah Projansky similarly argues that "the pervasiveness of representations of rape naturalize rape's place in our everyday world, not only as a real physical event but also as part of our fantasies, fears, desires and consumptive practices" (*Watching Rape* 198). Ron Lembo adds that television viewing is not merely a personal act, but a deeply political one, as "people are making meaning in image worlds that are already inscribed with social logics of power and the powerful" (12). Smith also observes that cultural representations of rape–from ancient mythology and classical art to literary and visual texts–tend to "naturalize" sexual violence (118). Thus, the symbiotic relationship between society and television is shaped by content creators who embed contemporary societal expectations into the narratives, often aligning with viewers' fantasies. Television not only reflects but also actively shapes cultural attitudes toward women; in representing the female body, it may demystify it (Rintoul 75) or, conversely, defenselessly expose it to violent control.

There are important arguments about the ways societies shape television narratives and how the abundance of rape narratives in neoliberal capitalist societies leads to a "desensitising influence" (Casey et al. 297) and an unrealistic distance between viewers and the crimes portrayed. "How do you write violence authentically without making it exploitative?" asks Roxane Gay, a question that encapsulates a core tension within these

[1] (i.e., erotic literature elides the phenomenon of rape and promotes rape culture myths: *How to Rape a Straight Guy*; Heather Brown *The Rape Girls*).

narratives. In light of the traumatic nature of sexual violence and socio-cultural shifts prompted by #MeToo, creators have sought ethically responsible methods to render it as a visceral on-screen experience. They increasingly approach the subject with greater sensitivity, positioning female survivors as dominant narrative makers and their narratives as heartfelt pieces of autoethnography, instead of ameliorating rape as a plot device.

The central conflict between victim-blaming cultures, rooted in entitlement and discourses of victimisation, and survivor-centered narratives of empowerment, lies “not over the determination of truth but over the determination of the statable” (Alcoff and Gray 269). Remembering and publicly talking about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims, states Judith Herman, since the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma (1). Similarly, Alcoff and Gray emphasize that speaking out about sexual violence empowers individuals to make the transition from passive victimhood to active survivorship, despite the ongoing psychological burden of trauma, shame, and humiliation (262)[2].

Accordingly, in my dissertation, the spoken discourse of female survivors/victims is analysed as the capacity to articulate experience through language, “a communicative act that presupposes a reciprocal recognition of intentions” (Kaplan 31), not as a mere linguistic component. #MeToo and the post-Weinstein era are analysed as potentially empowering spaces that redirected attention towards the ethical and political stance of media products. The years following the post-Weinstein era have witnessed the production of many other media representations in which survivors of sexual violence articulate their narratives and bodies as symbols of autonomy, self-representation, and control. These media narratives, like the television series I analyse in the following pages, can be understood as attempts to engage with sexual violence in ways that allow the reowning of both the body and the self, by reclaiming previously unarticulated and socially undermined experience of trauma.

[2] When referring to rape survivors, I will employ the dual term “victim/survivor” to avoid their continual societal victimization, and simultaneously to reduce the diminishing potential these terms communicate.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Violence on screen has consistently captivated audiences, offering one of film's most enduring and provocative modes of representation, as Prince (279) argues. Since film's inception, filmmakers have grappled with balancing stylized depictions of violence with ethical representations, particularly given violence's broad legibility and influence due to "the little translation it requires" to resonate with global audiences[3] (Casey et al. 296). From early on, screen representations of sexual abuse have sparked debate due to their role in shaping the public's understanding of sexual abuse while perpetuating rape myths, "the idea that women in some way provoke or deserve their ordeal" (Gill et al. 57). As Lembo asserts, the reiteration of alternative and triumphant discourses is essential in destabilizing traditional rape narratives, as "practice is performance and performativity" (77). This dissertation addresses a critical gap in existing scholarship on female-centered narratives of sexual abuse on film, particularly concerning the post-Weinstein era's cultural reckoning. It examines how this period prompted television creators and critics to re-evaluate the ethical representation of female survivors, while simultaneously altering the formal and visual aesthetics used to depict these narratives on screen. These interventions aim to engage viewers[4] as active co-participants, rather than mere spectators.

In 2017, the world re-evaluated the importance of fostering a non-sexist culture. The Harvey Weinstein case, the most prominent sexual harassment scandal in Hollywood[5] (Nikolova 1), significantly influenced the growth and visibility of the #MeToo movement by drawing attention to the unresolved dynamics of gender discrimination and sexual coercion in the entertainment industry, while also raising the question of "whether there was an epidemic of sexual harassment" (Grossman 950). After Weinstein was outed, a trail of victims telling their long-hidden stories of working for these men under conditions that were discriminatory, oppressive, and downright dangerous began (Grossman 947). His trial not only added a heightened public awareness around sexual violence but also encouraged TV creators to turn their focus on personal narratives of sexual abuse and the manifestation of consent, dis/trust, and trauma-induced shame in the mainstream discourse.

This dissertation investigates the evolving portrayal of rape narratives in three key television series: *Unbelievable* (Netflix 2019), *Broadchurch* (ITV 2017), and *I May Destroy You* (HBO 2020), as products of the post-Weinstein and #MeToo movement cultural

[3] Watching acts of violence which they otherwise could not have imagined results in mimicry of behaviour by children and adolescents (Casey et al. 297).
[4] This dissertation does not aim to instruct viewers on how to interpret the selected visual series; instead, it exposes potential reasons why certain visual elements elicit more empathetic responses from audiences.
[5] The Weinstein bomb (Grossman 949).

landscape. It examines how these series not only reframe sexual violence through character development but also render visible the embodied aftermaths of sexual violence. In this research, violence is examined as a complex, multi-faceted, cultural concept, whose meaning is "dependent on a complexity of social, cultural, and historical circumstances" (Casey et al. 297), to avoid reductive or decontextualized interpretations. The current study challenges dominant narrative structures by foregrounding the articulation of female survivors' selfhood through a feminist intersectional sensibility. Drawing on disciplines such as anthropology, feminism, film and television studies, body politics, trauma studies, and psychology, it approaches intersectionality as "the predominant way of conceptualizing the relation between systems of oppression[6] which construct [women's] multiple identities and social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege" (Carastathis 304). In doing so, it seeks to foster media-critical awareness, encourage critical examinations of the influence of popular culture on women's lives, and prompt a re-evaluation of viewers' engagement with vulnerability, survival, and the ethics of witnessing.

Central to this inquiry is an investigation of contemporary television's transformative contribution to broader cultural shifts in representing sexual trauma. It highlights the importance of questions such as: How do survivors of sexual violence narratively reconstruct their identities in the aftermath of trauma, and how are these reconstructions reflected or distorted in screen media? What factors contribute to audience desensitization and emotional disengagement from recurring portrayals of sexual violence? How have visual and narrative strategies for representing rape in film and television evolved in the post-Weinstein era? To what extent do contemporary screen narratives reflect a shift toward authentic representations of female empowerment? Does the engagement of the global entertainment industry with #MeToo reflect genuine structural change or an appropriation of feminist discourse? Does it foster genuine gender equality, or does it perpetuate traditional gender norms under the guise of progressive representation?

Prior to 2017, across Europe and beyond, screen portrayals of sexual abuse reflected cultural anxieties and reinforced systemic mistrust by reducing failures of justice to simplified narratives of fear, blame, and exclusion. Many feature films released before the 2017 social awakening perpetuated rape myths without even attempting to seriously engage with the trauma suffered by the female victim/survivor. Some of these films have historically employed sexual violence primarily as a narrative device, "a diet of extreme sexual

[6] In discussing systems of oppression, my analysis extends beyond the axes of race, gender, and class oppression, traditionally emphasized by Crenshaw (1246), to include other intersecting forms of oppression such as appearance, age, familiar status, and geography.

immorality" which may exert an ambiguously negative effect on behaviour,[7] potentially serving as "a cause of anti-social and anti-democratic ways of thinking" (Casey et al. 296-297). Such representations often lack critical engagement with the ethical and emotional implications of depicting sexual violence. For instance, *Straw Dogs* (1971) and *Irréversible* (2002) depict sexual violence in ways that eroticize it on the verge of exploitation. Films such as *The Last Tango in Paris* (1972) and *Barbarian Queen* (1985) similarly aestheticize abuse, while others, like *The Accused* (1988), depict rape with such graphic realism that it risks voyeurism instead of cultivating empathy. Survivor-centered perspectives are frequently marginalized or omitted entirely, as seen in *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and its 2009 remake. Additionally, certain narratives sensationalize sexual violence (*Gone Girl*, 2014), instrumentalize sexual trauma for dramatic manipulation (*Red Sparrow*, 2018), blur the boundaries between consent and coercion (*Elle*, 2016; *Straw Dogs,* 1971), or position rape-revenge narratives as a proxy for justice (*I Spit on Your Grave,* 1978 and its 2010 remake; *Revenge*, 2017).

In these earlier portrayals, films often prioritized shock value and the graphic depiction of rape, as "part of a package of entertainment designed to pull in viewers" (Gill et al. 56), over a meaningful connection with the survivor's lived experience. These representations reduced the complexity of sexual trauma to simplistic survivor vengeance narratives, focusing more on the spectacle, "surveilling the female body" (Gill et al. 74), than on the emotional and social realities of survivors. As a result, the marginalized survivors on screen were the ones facing public suspicion and scrutiny instead of the perpetrators. In the wake of the Weinstein trial and the broader reckoning of the #MeToo movement, centering the stories of sexually abused women to the forefront emerged as a radical gesture of cultural and ethical reorientation. As Casey et al. note, "the perpetrator, the victim, the severity of the act, the justification behind the act and the wider cultural concepts of morality and justice, all contribute to the full weight of the meaning behind the act itself" (298), underscoring the complexity of representing sexual violence. Contemporary TV creators have since moved far beyond previous representations, such as *The Accused* (1988), which was emblematic of a time when victim-blaming narratives and limited trust in the U.S. legal system dominated the discourse. What initially began as a refusal to continuously exploit women on screen evolved into a broader rejection of their dehumanisation, ushering in new modes of representation grounded in survivor-centered storytelling.

This dissertation is divided into four chapters: an introduction and three thematic chapters, each of which explores one of the following recurring concepts—shame, distrust

[7] Sceen violence leading to copycat behaviour (Casey et al. 296).

and vulnerability, and consent. The chapters are connected through shared theoretical and textual frameworks, though each focuses individually on different aspects of selfhood in the aftermath of sexual abuse. Chapter Two explores the inextricable relation of the psychology of shame resulting from sexual abuse with survivors/victims' selfhood and their process of healing, as portrayed in *Broadchurch*. Chapter Three exposes the hermeneutics of suspicion faced by female survivors/victims in *Unbelievable,* particularly regarding the challenges they encounter when alleging their rape stories. The fourth chapter investigates the complex scope of consent by depicting the protagonist's assault and the fine line between sexual liberation and exploitation in *I May Destroy You*. The following sections of this introductory chapter examine how post-Weinstein representational strategies, the ethics of spectatorship, the use of autoethnography as a narrative strategy, and the crisis of care in neoliberal contexts are manifested in contemporary film and television.

1.1 Post-Weinstein Era Representational Strategies

2017 marked the year when the U.S.[8] and the world began reconsidering the pervasiveness of sexual misconduct. Weinstein's downfall triggered a global awakening of the #MeToo movement all around the world, encouraging an institutional response to sexual harassment that encouraged collective communication and actively empowered women to share their stories and connect, regardless of the consequences (Grossman 942-953). Filmic representations of sexual violence in the post-Weinstein era evolved, with storytelling shifting from narratives imposed upon female characters to narratives increasingly shaped through their perspectives and agency. This section outlines the ethical and narrative demands that emerged in post-2017 narrative texts, particularly regarding gendered violence and survivor testimony.

#MeToo challenged institutionalised oppression by building platforms for solidarity and inspiring new ideologies of identity and body politics. It reintroduced women to a foundational principle of self-empowerment, their voice, and challenged the marginalized meanings that sexist cultures created of female and male bodies, "conceiving a man's body as strong and impenetrable, while deeming a woman's body naturally violable" (Smith 168). In the post-Weinstein era, constructions of selfhood in screen narratives increasingly highlighted agency, conscience[9], and the inextricable relationship of self and the other. As such, themes

[8] Casey et al. discuss the concept of "Mean World Syndrome", suggesting that repeated exposure to violent content on U.S. television fosters an inflated sense of fear that is disproportionate to the actual risks individuals face (298).

[9] The four definitions of conscience as founded by Arendt in *Responsibility and Judgement* are: (a) witness; (b) my faculty of judging, i.e., of telling right from wrong; (c) what sits in judgment in myself over myself; and (d) a voice in myself, as against the biblical voice of God from without (280).

of shame, vulnerability, and trust are of crucial importance in understanding the subjectivity of sexually abused women. During this period, TV creators adopted more nuanced representational strategies, challenging television's pre-Weinstein tendencies toward reinforcing women's alienation and erotization. As Kozloff asserts, these liberal shifts in storytelling encouraged creators to foreground the dignity and agency of the less privileged, arguing that "never appearing on world screens is a kind of denial and death" ("Empathy" 19).

The television products that emerged in the post-Weinstein era sought not only to expose injustices but to elicit active viewer engagement by positioning the audience as ethically responsible co-participants in the characters' experiences. These new representational strategies of sexual violence shifted attention from the spectacle of the body to the subjectivity of survivors, inviting what Grodal and Kramer refer to as "radical empathy" (19). This shift facilitates the formation of emotional bonds between viewers and fictional characters, supported by neural mechanisms involved in representing others' emotional states, primarily empathy, and mediating the communication of feelings and intentions. Grodal and Kramer assert that the screen experience embodies the viewer somatically with the film's flow, and as a result produces "changes in muscular tension, perspiration, stomach state". Thus, the viewer's affective and cognitive processes allow the viewer to care for the Other, "especially agents who are 'like' the viewer in some manner or other" (22-24).

Through the sustained and deliberate use of close-up shots, TV creators encourage audiences to forge emotional connections with characters by facilitating an intimate visual engagement with their faces. The spectator understands POV editing, Persson maintains, because it is a representation of an event that is basic to humans, namely, the habit of following and determining the object of another person's gaze, so-called deictic gaze[10], "perspectual space", or joint visual attention (67, 68). This technique, as Grodal and Kramer insist, fosters a sense of privileged access to a character's inner self, as "close-ups make us believe that we are getting privileged information into the characters' thought processes" (22). When spectators observe pain or pleasure expressed through a character's facial features, as Grodal and Kramer state, they tend to mimic those features involuntarily, an activity primarily performed in the frontal cortex. Notably, such mimicry activates the same neural regions as if the viewer were to experience the pain or pleasure themselves (24). However, this capacity for embodied empathy is not universally applied, as Grodal and Kramer further observe, human ultrasociality is inherently selective, and viewers extend care only toward those belonging to

[10] Person A monitors the direction of person B's gaze and tries to establish the target of this gaze (Persson 67).

their group while remaining capable of withholding empathy for those falling outside their imagined boundaries of care (25-26).

I intentionally avoid invoking "naturalized" gendered binaries when discussing mediated spectatorship. To claim that men are most affected by ethical representations of sexual abuse on screen would imply that women are inherently more empathetic, an essentialist and reductive assumption. Instead, I conceptualize the ethics of viewing or witnessing as an acquired skill, developed over time by an ungendered[11] viewer through sustained exposure to survivor-centered representations and the assimilation of new perspectives, as the series discussed throughout this dissertation aim to demonstrate. This approach resonates with Judith Butler's assertion that "permutations of gender which do not fit the binary are as much a part of gender as its most normative instance" (*Undoing Gender* 42). Even if I were to address women as the primary audience for these post-Weinstein representations, such a claim would remain reductive. It would risk reinforcing the misconception that sexual abuse is a societal issue exclusive to women, rather than acknowledging it as a cultural, institutional, and social problem that transcends gender. As Butler further contends, ethical life demands openness to "the destruction and rearticulation of the human in the name of a more capacious world", a willingness to let go of the normative definitions in order to allow the human "become something other than what it is traditionally assumed to be" (35).

Another significant narrative shift in the post-Weinstein era is the increased and pronounced use of personal experience, often based on real-life experiences or developed closely with rape crisis centers. These narratives foreground both the subjectivity and vulnerability of the audience and the storyteller, inviting witnessing through an ethical engagement that resists objectification. Such modes of representation encourage a more ethical spectatorship that is more aware of the effects of the depicted action on real-life bodies and people. By connecting the personal to the cultural as well as critically writing about the self embedded in larger systems of cultural critiques, these audiovisual representations often come close to what is defined as autoethnography. While a fuller discussion on autoethnography follows in the next section, it is worth noting that the above-listed characteristics, together with the focus on embodied subjectivity, reflexivity, and cultural entanglement, can be well described as autoethnographic features of the narrative strategies emerging in recent films and series in Anglophone countries. As Bochner and Ellis suggest, autoethnography, or *insider studies*, is a genre of writing and research that foregrounds

[11] I do not deny the role gender plays in the production of survivor-centered media texts; however, I argue that ethical mediated spectatorship can be cultivated, consumed, and interpreted by viewers of any gender.

"multiple layers of consciousness" and frames storytelling both as a vehicle for ethical subjectivity and social critique (47, 65). Autoethnographers initially direct their gaze outward toward the social and cultural dimensions of their personal experience, before turning inward to reveal a vulnerable self, one that is affected by, and capable of navigating, refracting, and resisting dominant cultural interpretations (Bochner and Ellis 65). As a hybrid genre, it is widely used but not limited to screening documentaries where the autoethnographer employs the autoethnographic text through first-person narratives as an agent of self-understanding and ethical dialogue (Bochner and Ellis 71).

1.2 Autoethnography as a Narrative Strategy in Traumatic Experiences

Emerging in the 1980s, autoethnography introduced a reflexive mode of inquiry that heightened attention to human suffering, injustice, trauma, subjectivity, feeling, and loss by encouraging the development of methodologies for navigating the landscape of lived experiences through narrative (Bochner and Ellis 45). Over the last two decades, visual autoethnography has expanded across disciplines, including visual art, drama, performance studies, music, dance, and film, providing artists and scholars with a framework to contextualize and communicate the personal stories embedded in their artistic experiences (Bartleet 133). Autoethnography is a storytelling practice that situates selfhood in relational and political contexts (Bochner and Ellis 164), and focuses on the narrator's thoughts, feelings, and experiences while simultaneously examining the cultural contexts that shape them. The genre's growing recognition in the post-Weinstein era parallels a shift in the demographics of those "allowed" to become autoethnographers, encompassing greater representation of women, working-class individuals, ethnic and racial minorities, LGBTQ+ communities, and scholars from the Global South (Bochner and Ellis 167). At the core of autoethnography is embracing detail, dialogue, vulnerability, caring, and concern for all involved (Bochner and Ellis 167). As Henson reminds us, "stories matter because stories shape selves and lives" (344). They offer avenues for personal affirmation, intention, redemption, script memory and meaning, and most importantly, locate the "me" in meaning (Henson 344). This is particularly urgent in contexts of trauma coming from sexual abuse, where storytelling becomes a method of survival.

Central to autoethnography is the creation of accessible, readable, and evocative narratives that seek a reciprocal, ethically engaged relationship with audiences through aesthetic forms (Adams et al. 6-7). In this context, television becomes especially powerful, intersecting dialogue, images, and music to craft affect-driven experiences that exceed the communicative scope of traditional narrative writing (Bartleet 136). As this section will

demonstrate, such storytelling not only engages viewers emotionally but also critically reflects on the cultural systems that shape identity, memory, and the "afterwardsness of trauma" (Eaglestone 12). Freud's concept of trauma's afterwardsness (*Nachträglichkeit*), that "although life is lived forward, it can only be understood backwards" (Eaglestone 12), captures a key feature of human suffering and wounding that shapes many of the post-sexual-abuse narratives I will analyse. While this dissertation does not aim to explore trauma sequentially in each of the series, such insights from trauma theory do inform my readings of these on-screen attempts of "backwards understanding". Although the actual traumatic event (the assault) is mentioned as the starting point and basic context of trauma, the dissertation's central focus is more on the psychosocial and interpretive aftermath of trauma, both by the surrounding community and the affected individuals directly, that is, on the narrative and audiovisual process through which the female protagonist, the surrounding community, and the TV series itself attempt to reclaim the unclaimed traumatic experience.

Eaglestone describes trauma theory as a network of analysis that enables new forms of interpretive responsiveness – both to texts and the world those texts respond to (19). Van der Kolk et al. define traumatic memory as the recollection of events marked by intense fear, helplessness, or horror (13). These memories often manifest as persistent flashbacks and nightmares, compelling survivors to repeatedly relive the trauma without relief (Eaglestone 13), while the nightmares themselves become triggers for panic, avoidance, and numbing, mechanisms that dissociate the emotional intensity of the experience (13). This extreme emotional turmoil impairs the memory integration of the individual and contributes to the emergence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (13). In line with this, the majority of adult trauma individuals report that their earliest recollections consist of sensory and affective experiences rather than coherent narratives (22).

Freyd and DePrince observe that questions about trauma memory inevitably raise two intertwined issues: belief (whether an event occurred), and narrative (how, when, and to whom the trauma is recounted) (2). Traumatic memory, however, remains a conceptual gap as it cannot be systematically studied in laboratory settings, as the event itself cannot be treated as a "controlled" variable (van der Kolk et al. 13). It is thus best understood as an interpersonal phenomenon and a product of social context. Under the influence of traumatic memories, individuals often cannot reconcile their overwhelming experiences with existing cognitive frameworks (van der Kolk et al. 23), producing involuntary dissociation. Extreme stress further disrupts hippocampal memory processing, hindering the formation of coherent autobiographical narratives (16-17). Empirical studies reveal that traumatic memories typically emerge as fragmented somatosensory and affective flashbacks (visual, auditory, and

kinesthetic), which do not initially coalesce. As these memories enter consciousness, multiple sensory and affective components become activated simultaneously.

I follow Donna Henson's (345) argument that both autoethnography and post-trauma meaning-making center on practices that are simultaneously process and product, means and ends, recovering and recovery. Building on this, I argue that all three TV shows examined in this study, *Broadchurch*, *Unbelievable*, and *I May Destroy You,* function as autoethnographic texts, or at least exhibit traces of autoethnography. Each series foregrounds survivor-centered narratives, invites social reflections, and employs reflexivity in its structure. These three case studies are intentionally arranged to reflect a progressive intensification of autoethnographic presence: beginning with Chris Chibnall's fictional *Broadchurch,* produced after his intense consultation with rape crisis centers to ensure ethical representation; followed by *Unbelievable*, co-created by Susannah Grant, Ayelet Waldman, and Michael Chabon, which adapts a real-life case of sexual abuse; and culminating with Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You* where the creator's presence is inseparable from the text as she writes, stars, and directs in the reconstruction of her sexual abuse.

Autoethnography is a mode of thinking, feeling, acting, and being with others that highlights compassion, relationality, and shared vulnerability (Adams et al. 8). It allows creators to mirror to the audience how to mold vulnerability into strength and write themselves as resilient survivors rather than victims (10). In the context of visual media, the importance of personal experience is increasingly central to how we understand and accept, embodied, social, and emotional behavior as autoethnography is a relational, rather than an individual practice (Adams et al. 10). Crucially, it is also a deliberately political practice revealing how personal experience is shaped and often constrained by institutions, communities, and structural injustice (11). Autoethnography is an ethical practice that, in form *and* content, challenges norms of research practice and invites all participants to listen, reflect, and (re)act (13).

First-person narratives in aethnographic screen texts evoke emotional reactions which prompt audiences not only to reflect critically on their lives, but potentially, to act. These narratives prioritize engagement with the audience morally, aesthetically, emotionally, politically, and intellectually, on behalf of social justice (Bochner and Ellis 62-63). In this framework, the viewer is heterogeneous and fragmented rather than socio-economically monolithic (Casey et al. 107). The audience is not merely a consumer of the story but, by implication, a character in it, a witness to another person's suffering, a co-performer (Bochner and Ellis 70-72; see also Adams et al. 7). Such reciprocity asks audiences to engage with a

sense of responsibility, and compel all who do, see, and listen to autoethnographic products to make room for difference, complexity, uncertainty, change, and justice (Adams et al. 8).

Trauma lives in the memory of the survivor and lingers as a recurring narrative disrupter (Henson 344). Autoethnographers emphasize the *craft* of representation, engaging in writing, performance, and visual expression that are clear, concise, and ethically oriented. The resulting "texts" visually convey emotional states and foster active viewer participation (Bartleet 134). All three television series I examine foreground the process of trauma visually, often through close-ups and shots that amplify facial expressions of the subjects, as these screening techniques forge social bonds, activate somatic empathy, and ethical witnessing (Grodal and Kramer 26). The thematic focus and affective tone of the series shift, as will be noticed in the following chapters, provoking engagement and challenging traditional narratives of suffering. These shifts are enabled in part by the creators' intentional use of framing as a strategy to disrupt discourses of victimhood and to center on survivors' subjectivities. In *I May Destroy You*, for instance, the boundaries between TV creator and character collapse entirely.

1.3 The Crisis of Care in a Neoliberal System

The post-Weinstein era of screen production is marked by a noticeable shift in sexual abuse representations, foregrounding the individuality of survivors, approaching each story with narrative complexity and ethical consideration. This section lays out the key aspects of the social, cultural, and cinematic context of these changes, and explores how the representation of rape operates within the broader cultural "crisis of care", which navigates moral questions, and the representational void in how care (institutional or personal) is rendered or denied.

Within the crisis of care, moral injury becomes an inevitable condition. Care ethics highlights not only the fundamental role of care in human life but also the political implications that follow from this, including the responsibilities of governments for ensuring care, as Lizzie Ward asserts (46). In Fiona Robinson's words, within feminist moral theory, the greatest strength of care ethics lies in its ability to bring back the political to feminism as it speaks with a transformative voice, offering a vision of a feminist future in which value is placed on human interdependence and vulnerability (294-295). Sarah Clark Miller further explains that moral injury occurs when individuals perpetrate, bear witness to, or fail to prevent an act that transgresses their deeply held moral beliefs (55).

Traditional moral theory, largely shaped by male philosophers, has often marginalized the relational dimensions foregrounded in care ethics (Friedman 109). While care ethics rejects the aggressive use of violence, it remains unsettled on how to react when such violence

is initiated by others (110). Within neoliberal societies amid the crisis of care, individuals are often forced to choose which aspect of their moral integrity they will sacrifice, as Miller contends (59). This crisis of care, fuelled and underwritten by neoliberal institutions, exposes the depths of everyone's moral precarity. By foregrounding the reciprocal giving and receiving of care as fundamental to the human experience, care ethics provides a shared moral framework for the development of social policy both within and across societies (Robinson 295). Applied as a critical lens in contemporary discourse, care ethics reveals how dominant norms perpetuate existing power structures, resulting in inequalities in the conditions under which care is given and received. Once we recognize this, we become empowered, as feminists, in new, solidarist ways (Robinson 306).

In *Care Ethics in the Age of Precarity,* Sarah Clark Miller describes the crisis of care under neoliberalism as both a moral and relational crisis (49). Miller emphasizes that articulating the moral dimensions of the crisis of care and the harms it produces is essential to motivating interventions across individual, social, and structural levels (54). Pornography, horror, and melodrama are organised around visceral systems of bodily intensification: orgasm in pornography, terror in horror, and uncontrolled weeping in melodrama (Williams 4). Overtaken by uncontrollable convulsions of the body "beside itself", each of these genres produces sensory overload rather than distance, and in all three, it is traditionally the female body that bears the burden of these convulsions (Miller 54). William contends that the success of these bodily genres is measured by how directly the viewer's bodily sensation mirrors what is depicted onscreen (4). However, post-2017 TV creators appear committed to rejecting both the feminine victimization and the affective manipulation characteristic of body genres. As Friedman and Valenti observe, one of the central challenges audiences face nowadays is the saturation of violent imagery in which women are consistently positioned as victims (124) because in such contexts, the clear boundaries between fetishized fiction and embodied realities have become increasingly blurred. In response to the ongoing crisis of care under neoliberalism, creators have begun to adopt narrative strategies that reexamine the screen representational ethics of sexual abuse.

Neoliberalism weaponizes care by distorting the human impulse to care for others into an individualized mandate of personal responsibility (Miller S 61). It undermines both the self-trust and self-respect that shape one's intrapersonal lives, as well as the strength and durability of the most valued interpersonal relationships (64). As Sarah Clark Miller explains further, under these conditions, moral injury can produce two forms of relational harm: intrapersonal harm (affecting one's relationship with oneself) and interpersonal harm (straining relationships with others) (64). For individuals guided by the ethics of care, the

repeated failure to uphold such standards can generate profound self-doubt. Within neoliberal frameworks that emphasize individual accountability, such individuals internalize systemic failure as personal deficiency.

Robinson describes care ethics as a critical feminist theory grounded in social responsibility and feminist solidarity, rather than as a claim about women's universal oppression (308). Such breakdowns of care violate one's duty to self. That is, one fails to respect oneself as a moral agent. In more extreme cases, this failure erodes a person's sense of moral standing, as the repeated violation of one's ethical commitments compromises the belief that one is worthy of others' reciprocal care (Miller 62). This breakdown not only damages one's moral self-conception but also threatens core aspects of personal identity (62). When care is neglected or unsustainable over time, its relational bonds deteriorate beyond repair, leaving the individual not only isolated but ethically destabilized (63).

In this post-Weinstein era, the crisis of care has been reconfigured by television creators who seek to instill care in the viewer, as a co-participant in sexual abuse narratives. A clear illustration of this shift from sensationalized depictions toward more nuanced explorations of trauma and selfhood is the film *She Said* (2022). This is a cinematic reflection of the investigative power of journalism and the efforts of two *New York Times* journalists, Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, as they investigate the case against Harvey Weinstein, gather evidence, and encourage actresses to come forward to expose him. The film highlights the flaws within major film production companies, where NDAs and financial power buy silence, allowing abusers to protect themselves by evading justice for decades and obstructing accountability.

Evelin Nikolova (2) identifies the exclusion of women's feelings and perspectives on the violence they have endured as a recurring theme in media representations of sexual violence. However, a turning point in these representations came with the announcement of charges against Harvey Weinstein (1). In the post-Weinstein era, survivors/victims began to impose change by publicly voicing their stories, promoting an evolution of screen portrayals of sexual violence against women. These new representations acknowledge the individuality and autonomy of each female subject, serving as a "bridge" for them to return to their bodies and social standing, and refrain from frameworks that construct their sexual sovereignty. The following films exemplify post-Weinstein era productions that have revolutionized stylistic approaches in survivor-centered narratives of sexual abuse.

The Tale (2018) depicts the abuse of thirteen-year-old Jennifer Fox by her riding coach. The filmmaker, Jennifer Fox, herself, based the film on her own experience of sexual abuse. As Fox explains in her letter, the inclusion of physically explicit scenes was necessary

to "show how painful and confusing this event was for me and the true awfulness of it", intending to intersect personal narrative (autoethnography) with broader cultural critiques of sexual abuse. Similar to *I May Destroy You*, Jennifer Fox's *The Tale* disrupts traditional boundaries between filmmaker and subject by employing framing as a deliberate narrative strategy where the survivor actively participates as the co-creator of her own story. The film explores themes such as loneliness, isolation, courage, and the truth. While *The Tale* centers on Jennifer's self-construction as a woman in her late forties, the British psychological horror, *She Will* (2021), approaches childhood grooming and sexual abuse on screen differently. *She Will* avoids explicit graphics of the assault, instead relying only on the thoughts and flashbacks of Veronica, a famous actress in her sixties who, like Jennifer, revisits her past while struggling to grapple with the reality of who she is.

Both *The Tale* and *She Will* center on female protagonists who seek to reclaim agency and reconstruct their identities in the aftermath of childhood sexual trauma, though they do this differently: Jennifer adopts an investigative approach, while Veronica embarks on a symbolic journey of healing grounded in a spiritual connection with nature and the earth. However, the nude scenes of a young Jennifer in *The Tale* risk romanticizing, desensitizing, or even fetishizing the child's body, despite the filmmaker's intention to portray the emotional complexity of Jennifer's relationship with the abuser. In contrast, *She Will* deliberately avoids any explicit visual representation of abuse, focusing instead on Veronica's adult body and her psychological transformation. This artistic choice shifts the viewer's attention toward Veronica's process of self-reclamation rather than the trauma itself.

Another important film that emphasizes the need for justice and the importance of being heard is *Promising Young Woman* (2020). The story centers on the sexual assault of Nina Fisher, a medical student who was raped at a party. Despite the incident being recorded, the medical school failed to take any action and dismissed the case. The crime drama thriller follows Nina's best friend, Cassie, who, devastated by Nina's suicide, seeks revenge by confronting those responsible and exposing the deeply rooted culture of complicity. The film sharply critiques the failures of both the U.S. justice system and academic institutions, highlighting how survivors of sexual abuse are often silenced or disbelieved. Although Cassie is murdered at the end, her efforts ultimately lead to the truth being revealed and the perpetrators facing justice. *Women Talking* (2022) tells the story of a group of women in an isolated, religious colony who were drugged with animal tranquilizers and raped repeatedly by the man of the community. Deprived of education and autonomy, they struggle to trust their voices. One day, they reclaim their power by voting to leave the colony. The film

explores complex themes, including freedom, oppression, forgiveness, revenge, security, safety, love, and hate.

While these films, produced and released in the post-Weinstein period, provide clear evidence of a significant shift in how trauma and sexual abuse are represented in the film industries of Anglophone countries, I have deliberately chosen to rely on the television series *Broadchurch* (2017), *Unbelievable* (2019), and *I May Destory You* (2020), instead of feature films, as each offers a lengthier exploration of the complexities of sexual abuse alongside a range of intersecting themes. Additionally, as Sarah Kozloff states, "television series have more power to change society than any single movie" ("Empathy" 30). Police and legal dramas, such as those examined in this dissertation, are designed to chronicle the pursuit of justice following the commission of a crime. All three shows are genre hybrids (*Broadchurch* as a crime/mystery drama, *Unbelievable* as a docudrama/crime drama, and *I May Destroy You* as a dark comedy/psychological drama). Consequently, all three integrate intersectional perspectives and provide significant psychological depth in their exploration of identity, interpersonal relationships, and power dynamics. To establish a focused and coherent analytical framework, this dissertation structures its discussion around distinct thematic categories, as outlined in the chapters that follow. This approach enables a more detailed exploration of individual themes while managing the expansive and layered narrative contexts these series present.

As a white, Eastern European feminist scholar, I approach intersectionality with a commitment to resist its manistream appropriation and to remain attentive to its Black origin feminist thought, because as Carastathis argues, "the appropriation of intersectionality by feminist theory can serve to obscure its origins in Black feminist thought" (304). In this dissertation, intersectionality is not limited to race or gender but is understood as a framework for analyzing how women's lives are constructed by multiple, intersecting systems of oppression and identity categories. These include age, social class, geographical origin (urban, rural, or small communities), family background (divorced parents, single, or orphanhood), and beauty standards informed by heteronormative thought. As Carastathis further argues, "simultaneity, complexity, irreducibilits, and inclusivity are the four main analytic benefits of intersectionality" (307). These narratives reveal how assumptions about believability, the mutability of consent, and the internalization of shame, often reinforced by those closest to the survivor, hinge on complex, intersecting identities. In this context, intersectionality is mobilized as a broader feminist tradition that critiques essentialist frameworks and attends to the uneven distribution of visibility, voice, and vulnerability among survivors of sexual violence.

1.4 Television Viewing, Social Empathy, and the Ethics of Witnessing

The public exposure of Weinstein's trial catalyzed what Kozloff refers to as the "cinema of engagement", a mode of television making which rearranged structures of power by basing scripts on real-life events, manifesting a level gaze to humanize characters, and inspiring viewers toward social injustice activism ("Empathy" 1). Given the diverse cinematic schools, this dissertation focuses exclusively on televisual texts produced by Anglophone television creators as they tend to share comparable techniques in filming, character development, and cultural settings. The three series examined, *Broadchurch*, *Unbelievable,* and *I May Destroy You,* feature refreshingly diverse female protagonists from Hollywood archetypes and emotionally engage viewers as co-participants, rather than neutral spectators.

These series intervene in the viewers' political knowledge, actively engage them against social injustice, and emotionally raise their awareness to inspire action, to borrow Sarah Kozloff's words ("Empathy" 2). Namely, by inciting emotional responses, the TV creators of the above series aim to influence viewers' behaviours and "what audiences do with the information" (Roberts 819). As Kozloff describes, the "level gaze" invites viewers to respond to the characters' humanity, granting them dignity, asking for compassion, and implying commonality, equality, and above all, respect ("Empathy" 17). These TV creators highlight cultural, institutional, and social issues with a firm understanding of ingrained interests, a willingness to challenge traditional orthodoxies of class, race, or gender (18-19). In the years following the Weinstein scandal, screen representations of sexual abuse, previously regarded as "natural" despite upholding oppressive structures, have been subject to critique and, as Kozloff describes it, have been *de-naturalized* ("Empathy" 12). This transformation in representational aesthetics invites further consideration of the ethics of viewing and witnessing sexual abuse on screen.

The ethics of visuality lie in the aesthetic commitment of the creator to modes of representation that foster a visual culture not too dissimilar from life, as Grønstad argues (120). Screen viewing functions as a powerful mechanism for regulating pain, care, empathy, and sympathy. Guided by an aesthetic orchestration of on-screen narrative, viewers process events through empathic resonance, a process that may either be supported or disrupted by the narrative itself (Grodal and Kramer 28). In this regard, films function as rituals of social emotion regulation, grounded in the human capacity for affective resonance, as they evoke personal experiences in the viewer that serve as pathways toward understanding others (32).

For a filmic experience to effectively evoke empathy and immerse the viewer, narratives, framing, composition, and the director's authorial vision have to work together to "choreograph" an emotional and cognitive journey (Jones and Dawkins 300). As Jones and

Dawkins further observe, the point of view (POV) becomes especially significant in an empathy-driven immersive film. While 360-degree cameras can position the viewer within the narrative, granting them a sense of protagonism as an independent experiencer and heightened narrative presence (300), such immersive techniques are not employed in the series *Broadchurch*, *Unbelievable*, and *I May Destroy You*. Instead, the television creators rely on traditional screening techniques, such as single-hand cameras and close-ups, to generate tension and intimacy with the viewer.

Jones and Dawkins argue that different aesthetic cues, such as visual and audio, can stimulate viewer exploration and drive narratives in unique ways that exceed the limitations of flat, traditional media (308). Televisual music, as Grodal and Kramer further imply, plays a central role in emotional attunement and regulation while binding viewers together emotionally (31). However, Jones and Dawkins also caution on the inauthenticity of this empathy, "we may well be able to imagine ourselves within an experience but that does not mean that we fully empathise with the characters or their situations" (310), as the intersectionality of "our" experience is always going to be different to the intersectionality of "theirs".

Jane Stadler refers to empathy on screen as "an emotional process that occurs when audience members perceive, imagine, or hear about a character's affective and mental state and, in so doing, vicariously experience a shared or congruent state" (317). Recent scholarly interest in empathy has arisen about spectatorship, emotion, and embodied responses, primarily in screen ethics, cognitive narratology, and phenomenological analysis (Stadler 317). Film and television enable access to both cognitive-imaginative and affective-experiential forms of empathy, as audiences engage with the audiovisual elements of the story and mirror characters' emotional expressions (Stadler 319). They simultaneously "express" not just the sounds and images that their recording technologies "perceive" but also the optical and acoustic point-of-view shots and internal subjective imagery or flashbacks that express what screen characters perceive within the story world (Stadler 322). Moral injury does not stem from a lack of understanding about what ought to be done; rather, it arises from the full awareness of what is needed, coupled with the inability to act accordingly (Miller S, 55); therefore, television plays an important role in developing models of empathic engagement and intersubjective understanding.

Sexual abuse is a traumatic event. While there are certainly many people who understand rape and its damage, we also live at a time when male aggression and violence toward women is considered axiomatic and often inevitable, "an appropriate response to crisis" (*Black Looks* 41), as bell hooks denotes. A recent case that drew widespread attention

in France and internationally is the rape trial of Dominique Pelicot, 71, and his 51 co-defendants. Over a decade, Pelicot allegedly drugged his wife, Gisèle Pelicot, rendering her unconscious, before inviting online strangers to sexually assault her. More than 200 rapes occurred between 2011 and 2020, all of them filmed (Chrisafis, 2024). Gisèle Pelicot, 72, a mother of three and a grandmother of seven, requested a public trial to reclaim her dignity and remove shame from her name. Her explicit act signals a critical shift in how survivors of sexual violence are navigating trauma, not through shame and withdrawal but through public testimony. This growing insistence on voice and visibility marks an important cultural development in the aftermath of sexual violence. Within this expanded framework of public witnessing, sexual trauma, shame, and institutional response are being reconfigured.

The materiality of the series examined in this dissertation cultivates social empathy and compels viewers to engage with sexual violence as an embodied, ongoing reality, one that recognizes not only the humanity but also the political agency of survivors, often rendered invisible. The focus on their voices offers a way of connecting the intimate with the systemic, an attunement to understanding how female survivors of abuse navigate their experiences, not through victimhood but through the presence of matter, a new sense of physicality (bodies and voices coalesce to produce a different product beyond the screen and into public consciousness). These three series are an enactment of "thick solidarity", deeply committed to unsettling disruptive, exclusionary, and hostile narratives that confine and reduce the lives of female survivors of sexual abuse as fractured identities. They call for a reimaging of solidarity rooted in comfort, recognition, trust, and connection.

1.5 Methodology: The Non-Neutral Framing Strategies Post-Weinstein

Rape not only sexually objectifies victims/survivors but also renders them powerless and subordinate to the perpetrator. "Selfhood is a complicated matter. We are many things", says David Kaplan when explaining the complexities of human relationships, because "there is no single, unitary conception of the self but multiple aspects of selfhood that are illuminated by posing different questions" (83). This research contributes to ongoing debates on the ethics of sexual abuse representations by proposing theoretical frameworks for analyzing how post-Weinstein era television creators visualize sexual trauma.

There is no single overarching pattern in how female subjects of sexual abuse navigate their lives after the assault. This dissertation employs close readings of selected television series released between 2017 and 2024, intersecting feminist media theories, trauma studies, and ethical criticism, and drawing on interviews and director commentaries when relevant. The chosen series individually depict the transformation of female characters from states of

self-denial, dehumanization, and inferiority in the aftermath of the attack to viewing themselves as independent subjects not bound by the assault. Thus, their shifting identity transformations, shaped by psychological trauma, serve as acts of resistance against dominant societal powers that often cast them as individuals "marked" for life (Gay, *Hunger* 38).

The hierarchical relation between the discourse produced by the survivor and the one by the perpetrator is consciously avoided in the analysis in this dissertation, as "conflating the perspective of perpetrator and victim has led some to assert that rape is caused by a desire to find unwilling people to force into sex" (Smith 167). Instead, the personal experiences of female survivors/victims[12], primarily their exposure to trauma and the journey to selfhood, are prioritized. In this dissertation, intersectional analysis concerning the construction of sexually abused women's subjectivities is applied. I rely on David Kaplan's definition of subjectivity as "the result of understanding, not the condition of understanding" (24). Thus, subjectivity will be grasped in discourses that unite narratives of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, age, and so on, since the different categorizations are seen as mutually pervading and interpenetrating without any possibility of being separated analytically (Lykke 73).

In the analysis, the articulation of women's selfhood and its intersectionality with body politics, trauma studies, shame, vulnerability, violence, and media studies is incorporated. First, I rely on Merril Smith's *Encyclopedia of Rape* as it provides an extensive account of the history of rape. Molly Haskell, a media critic, offers in *From Reverence to Rape* a feminist history of women's treatment on screen. *Sexual Violence and Humiliation* by Dianne Taylor is particularly enlightening, not only for its in-depth philosophical analysis of sexual humiliation but also for cultivating modes of self-relation. The post-sexual-abuse narratives I analyse are also dramas of meaning-making that experiment with various types of hermeneutics. Therefore, I found David Kaplan's work on Ricoeur and Gadamer particularly useful. *Ricoeur's Critical Theory* is an excellent book that revisits Gadamer's debates to prove the uniqueness of Ricoeur's hermeneutics philosophy by applying it to add depth to the politics of identity and recognition. Similarly, *Hermeneutics of the Film World* by Alberto Baracco traces the Ricoeurian tradition, exploring the hermeneutics of film interpretation and emphasizing the active participation of the "filmgoer" (304) in the process of meaning-making.

Ancient Greek and Roman texts describe the roots of sexual violence and the many ways in which the possessive and violent nature of gods is eroticized, and the frequency of rape is explained as an assertion of masculinity. The Code of the Nesilim (Hittites), c.

[12] I recognize the existence of male survivors, yet most of the reported sexual abuse occurs between perpetrators who are male and victims who are women or children.

1650-1500 b.c.e., is one of the oldest texts regarding consent to have sexual relations, which defined rape by location. It noted that "if the woman did not scream or show much resistance, bringing others to her rescue, she must have consented to have sexual intercourse with the man" (37). In this general historical context, the lack of survivors' discourse has distorted and twisted the articulation of rape-representations and survivors/victims' integrity. Rape takes place most often when there is a social hierarchy; therefore, sexual violence narratives do not "ponder an alien and uncontrollable part of human nature but the power dynamics of a particular culture" (Smith 166), as the disembowelled bodies of Chinese women in the Rape of Nanking suggest.

In *On Violence*, Arendt examines the power of negation, arguing that opposites and contradictions often transition seamlessly into each other, instead of bringing destruction (56). Although such positivist arguments have been used for a long time to inspire hope and dispel fear, the same cannot be said for power: "violence cannot be derived from its opposite, which is power, and that to understand it for what it is, we shall have to examine its roots and nature" (Arendt 56). Watching sexual violence on screen matters because looking is not just a matter of gathering information but signals complicity with unequal power relations. Through television, viewers are inundated with graphic and gratuitous images of sexual and domestic violence, which emphasize the medium's influence and discursive power. Eagerly, viewers absorb and deplete violent representations without questioning or critically thinking about them because the intellectual distance they have willingly grown between the *real* violence and its depiction keeps them safe: "We delude ourselves that rape can be washed away as neatly as it is on TV and in the movies" (Gay *Bad* 103-105). Media functions as an "infrastructural support" when facilitating modes of solidarity between characters and those living outside the visual frame (Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance" 14). Thus, television is responsible for providing the mediator (the one who attentively listens to the victim's confession) with the power of verification, "an expertise that is nothing less than a power to validate or invalidate what the victim says" (Dorlin 254).

Is there a gendered role assigned to the camera's gaze and the fictional narrators of *Broadchurch* (2017), *Unbelievable* (2019), and *I May Destroy You* (2020)? By focusing on the development of Marie, Trish, and Arabella as the protagonist female characters and creating narratives that empathize with them, these series take the time to educate the viewers[13] about the aftermath of sexual abuse. The articulation of the terms *victim* and *survivor* impacts the transformation of these characters and their self-acceptance after the assault. In *Assaults on*

[13] It is important to point out that rape is not a crime defined by gender. Although the chosen shows in this dissertation spotlight the individual experiences of female survivors, rape is a human's issue not a woman's issue.

the Small Screen, Magestro critiques the tendency to label sexually abused survivors as "victims", arguing that this framing interferes with their ability to overcome trauma and shame (83). Additionally, Alison Phipps explains that the discourse around the term victim/survivor articulates the victim's psychology since the gradual pathologizing of someone as a "victim" is analogous to having "a long-term illness", whereas "survivor" focuses on "the personal journey of empowerment" (42-43). Contrastingly, in the memoir *Hunger* (2017), an autoethnographic piece, rape survivor Roxane Gay does not consider the victim-survivor dichotomy as problematic. Gay insists that she prefers the term victim to survivor: "I do not want to diminish the gravity of what happened. I do not want to pretend I am on some triumphant, uplifting journey. I do not want to pretend that everything is okay" (Gay 20). From her perspective, identifying as a victim grants a better impact on the assault and resists devaluing the intensity of physical and psychological trauma; however, she acknowledges none of the terms as imputable for the reflection of her autonomous subjectivity.

In their analysis of survivors' discourse, Alcoff and Gray explain a transformation of the dominant discourse surrounding sexual violence, which shifts the emphasis "from strategies of silencing to the development of strategies of recuperation" (268). When representing victims/survivors' speech in the chosen shows, I analyse the shift from strategies of silencing to those of empowerment. By focusing primarily on the abuse of three heterosexual women, I do not intend to persuade the readers into the hegemony of the heteronormative gender order. Instead, this choice reflects heteronormativity's ongoing effort to assert its dominance within televisual representations and marginalize the abuse experiences of queer individuals. The notable absence of series that center on the sexual abuse of queer individuals constitutes a gap that warrants further scholarly investigation. To avoid cultural essentialism, the parables will not be placed within the context of heterosexual, white, middle-class women's interests as universal representatives of identities. Thus, the duality of 'we' and 'they' will intentionally be avoided to support and better reflect the perspective of women's voices as the sole narrative makers of their stories of sexual abuse. The intersectionality of sexual consent with the physical and psychological components is thoroughly examined, particularly by explaining the connection between trauma, shame, dehumanization, vulnerability, and sexual victimization.

Broadchurch, Unbelievable, and *I May Destroy You* signal a shift toward new politics grounded in solidarity, recognition, and response, beyond mere emotional identification with the suffering of the Other. They aim to provoke an awakening, a complicity, a recognition that the only dominant narrative that matters is that coming from the survivor, and the viewers'

understanding that their lives are intertwined with those whose voices are silenced by pre-determined narratives. The series resist the tendency to render the sexually abused characters' lives only as symbols of suffering, and instead draw them into acts of self-inscription by presenting their stories with meaning. Through choosing these series as the focus for my dissertation, I seek to illustrate how fast TV series can transcend and adapt to ongoing social change, fostering more collective presence for the audience's interaction with the abused subjects, as well as shaping the narratives in such ways that honour the agencies of women who have survived sexual abuse.

Considering that the representation of sexually abused women's stories on screen is analysed in the wake of a feminist movement, my approach is interdisciplinary from the start. The scope of research is not limited to feminist readings of the TV shows considered as theoretical apparatuses. This study analyzes *Unbelievabl*e, *Broadchurch,* and *I May Destroy You* as televisual texts, employing close readings of their semiotic elements while situating interpretations within relevant contextual frameworks. Relying on Sarah Kozloff's *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (2000), Louis Gianetti's *Understanding Movies* (2001), and Monika Bednarek's *Telecinematic Discourse* (2011), both verbal and visual signifiers are interpreted interchangeably to deepen the analysis. My discussion also incorporates the poetic-expressive dimension of television series, focusing specifically on shots, angles, lighting, camera movement, sound, mise-en-scène, and editing.

To examine the central issues of these TV shows, this study interprets several philosophical concepts, including truth, personal identity, free will, shame, and consent. Since these series can be regarded as dramas of understanding, sense-making, and empathy, I employ Paul Ricoeur's concept of hermeneutics in explaining victims'/survivors' individuality and self-understanding. Relying on Ricoeur's hermeneutics, the conflict of interpretation in victims/survivors' testimonies will be viewed under the dialectic of trust and suspicion (doubting their reliability).

1.6 Overview of the Following Chapters

To provide an overview of what will follow, Chapter 2, "'Nobody Can Be Vulgar All Alone': The Power of Shame in *Broadchurch*", explores the inextricable intersection of survivors'/victims' shame with the local community in the third season of *Broadchurch* (2017). Shame is examined as a channelled and distributed experience with the power to dictate the lives of the local community since rape is seen as "dirt" which sullies the entire Scottish village. Across eight episodes, the series meticulously traces the work of D.I. Hardy and D.S. Miller, revealing the challenges of operating within a small, local environment

where everyone is a suspect, and shame and humiliation escalate exponentially. First, Trish shames herself for being the "imperfect victim", thus for failing to fulfill her "moral" obligation as a victim/survivor, not remembering the details of the assault, and having hazy memories. With each episode, Trish's confidence grows. She abandons the feeling of guilt and instead becomes more self-reliant. In Episode 4, Trish leads the investigators to the crime scene, where she, having recollected all her memories and feeling relieved from the burden of not being believed, tries to "make things right". Thus, the show establishes a bond of trust between Trish and the investigators, as her fear of disbelief dissipates when she asks Detectives Hardy and Miller, "Do you believe me?" and they respond with calm affirmation. Other characters manifest the feeling of shame, too, for not seeing the assault coming, not preventing it, or even the shame of "being a man". Through carefully crafted lighting and shots, the series highlights how shame and grief are exhibited in different characters, particularly depicting women as the primary 'bearers' of shame (often depicted as struggling with dysfunctional interpersonal relationships). What distinguishes *Broadchurch* from other shows is its sensitivity in addressing the theme of sexual abuse. Although *Broadchurch* is a fictional portrayal of the trauma rape victims/survivors go through, it manages to specifically tackle the role of mental health services in victims'/survivors' recovery from sexual assault and outline pornography's desensitizing effect on young males' understanding of sex.

Chapter 3. "When a Rape Case Is Derailed: Portraying a Culture of Disbelief in *Unbelievable*" considers the construction of victims'/survivors' subjectivity in a setting that questions the believability of their testimonies, focusing on the Netflix series *Unbelievable* (2019). Here, I intend to explore whether the language used by rape survivors/victims becomes a productive expression of their power or is "amended" appropriately. Ricoeur's theory of hermeneutics as a contested process that involves both suspicion and belief will serve as the main theoretical framework in this section of my dissertation: "the 'hermeneutics of belief' aimed at recovering a lost message animated by faith and a willingness to listen, and the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' aimed at demystification animated by mistrust and scepticism" (Kaplan 21). *Unbelievable* exposes the emerging scepticism and constraints faced by female survivors/victims of sexual abuse when alleging their rape stories. It uncovers the story of Marie Adler, who has to recant her police statements because her testimony was doubted by the (male) investigators. *Unbelievable* is divided into eight agonizing episodes and two different timelines depicting the life of the eighteen-year-old girl in Washington on the one hand, and on the other, the stories of four other women in Colorado raped by the same man. The series is based on the book *A False Report: A True Story of Rape in America* (2015), written by two investigative reporters, T. Christian Miller and Ken Armstrong. It is

important to note that the story is set in the U.S.A.; consequently, Susannah Grant's televisual lens, as the co-creator of the series, criticizes the dysfunctional criminal justice system and elucidates how survivors' experiences of disbelief intersect with social and institutional mechanisms that fail to provide adequate care. The focus of this chapter is on analyzing how victims'/survivors' marginalized position is imbued with the fear of their transformed social image in the aftermath of the attack and how their narratives are met with disbelief. This chapter not only argues that the problem of perspectives related to rape investigations arises from the use of contrasting investigative approaches by male and female detectives, but also highlights, through examining the camera shots, how the distortion of a woman's testimony can affect the overall interrogation process. This series deliberately reinvestigates the consciousness of survivors/victims by utilizing, intersecting, and contrasting their stories. It also challenges several traditional cultural constructions and myths about sexual violence, for example, by indicating that a woman does not necessarily need to be sexually appealing to the rapist to be raped.

Chapter 4. "(Re) Manufacturing Consent on Screen, *I May Destroy You*", explores the identity of a black-British woman and feminist-of-colour critiques of rape culture through the analysis of the British drama series *I May Destroy You* (2020). This limited series depicts the sexual abuse of a rising author named Arabella Essiedu, whose drink was spiked one night when she was out with friends. Dealing persistently with sexual consent, the twelve episodes become increasingly considerate of Arabella's identity and conscientiously examine her journey to unconditional self-worth. This chapter focuses on the concept of consent, which the series problematicizes not only through the drug-facilitated abuse of Arabella, but also through depicting her second assault (stealthing during intercourse), through highlighting the fine line between sexual liberation and exploitation (Terry's threesome), and finally through the story of the sexual abuse of their gay friend, Kwame. The stagnation of the concept of consent, its inadequate definitions, and the difficulty of naming and criminalizing various forms of abuse are explored in different contexts in this chapter. Similarly, it critically interrogates the double standards in the contrasting quality of treatments "worthy and unworthy" victims receive, as Herman and Chomsky refer to them (21). In this chapter's analysis, Arabella represents the "worthy victim" as her story of abuse receives extensive screen time and psychological support from the entire community surrounding her. In contrast, Kwame is portrayed as the "unworthy" one due to the minimal attention his rape case receives on screen.

I conclude the dissertation with a summarisation and comparison of the close readings of each show's representational strategies and explore the potential psychological effects these

strategies have on viewers and their approach toward sexual abuse. Neither rape nor its representations in popular culture is simple or univocal. Rape is a challenging act to portray appropriately on television, yet its depiction plays a significant role in the audience.

Chapter 2: "Nobody Can Be Vulgar All Alone": Shame, Survivorship, and Visual Ethics in *Broadchurch* Season 3

"What did I do to make this happen?" asks Trish Winterman, the rape survivor at the center of the final season of ITV series *Broadchurch* (2017). Spoken quietly in Episode 3 during one of her interactions with detectives, her question captures the emotional terrain the series confronts, not only the trauma and self-blame tied to sexual abuse, but also the social and psychological burden it bears in the aftermath of the abuse. In this chapter, I argue that Season 3 of *Broadchurch* constructs shame not as a personal emotion that only the survivor bears, but as a relational and systemic force that destroys intrapersonal relationships, inflicts silence and gender scrutiny, yet by its conclusion reassembles these fragments into broader ethical reflections on care and communal accountability.

Season 3 of Broadchurch, written by Chris Chibnall and directed primarily by Paul Andrew Williams, departs from the thematic concerns of earlier seasons to focus entirely on the investigation of Trish Winterman, a 49-year-old woman who was sexually abused while intoxicated at a party. Across eight episodes, the series foregrounds the aftermath of Trish's rape as a process marked by doubt, exposure, guilt, and hesitancy. Central to this depiction are the layered effects of shame that intersect through the community's response, institutional reaction, and Trish's struggle. From Episode 1, Trish confronts the viewers with the question of veracity regarding her abuse, "Do you believe me?". In answering that question, the camera follows D.I. Alec Hardy and D.S. Ellie Miller's observation of Trish's facial expression and behavioural mannerisms. The positive assemblage of their percepts, coupled with their internal empathetic responses, generates a congruence in Trish, which authenticates her experience and legitimizes her pain.

Drawing on affect theory and feminist media criticism, this chapter analyses the ethical and formal choices of *Broadchurch* under the critical lens of shame. It grapples with the question of what shame is, how it manifests itself, and how it is mobilized, performed, felt, and experienced across different contexts, bodies, and images. The analysis of *Broadchurch* focuses on dismantling the look and the social discomfort shame elicits by mirroring the experience of shamed subjects before the camera. Emotions are isolated, states Sara Ahmed, and do not have referents: "It is us who, after recognizing their effect on us, attribute them as referential" (105). The Australian academic, Elspeth Probyn, defines shame as the painful exposure of the intimacies of selves in public ("Writing" 72), while Sara Ahmed conceptualizes it as contagious, an emotion that creates contact between people and then passes on, dangerously intensifying the risk of miscommunication (*The Cultural Politics* 10). For Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, shame is a torment, a sickness of the soul that targets the self in

a devaluing manner (132). Contrarily, Jean-Paul Sartre describes shame as an opportunity to discover one's relationship with oneself through the eyes of the Other.

In *Broadchurch*, these social and emotional complexities of shame are mirrored through Trish's struggle to reclaim her agency. The series explores the dichotomous relationship between shame and the Other[14], and the differences between shame (as an intense sensation related to one's morals) and other social emotions such as embarrassment, humiliation, and guilt.

The chapter unfolds across six sections. It begins by examining the lens of investigation employed within a small-town context where the public perception of guilt and moral code shape community dynamics. The discussion then turns to the social construction of femininity through mechanisms of shame, followed by an analysis of how shame is visually encoded, particularly through the expressive dimensions of one's face. The chapter further interrogates the framing of aging female bodies within patriarchal structures of desire and regulation, followed by the exploration of the politics of silence in regards to sexual trauma, and finally, tracing the trajectory from shame and silencing to empowerment and agency.

2.1 Community, Crime, and the Investigative Gaze

Today's television landscape is increasingly described as "post-national," aiming to address global audiences by cutting across national boundaries (Chakravarti 46). While many series fall into the category of small-town murder mysteries, Chakravarti argues that *Broadchurch* "may arguably be the best contribution to the sub-genre of British television crime series in the last decade" (47). Season 3, however, marks a tonal and thematic shift. Its production was guided by an ethical commitment to represent sexual abuse as deftly as possible. The creators worked closely with The Shores, the Dorset Rape Crisis Center, and Dorset Police (Kelly). The primary intention was to avoid myths about sexual abuse and show that every woman can be affected. The inclusion of support hotlines at the end of every episode underscores the broader intention of the series: to provide resources without judgment and to extend the narrative's impact beyond entertainment.

The narrative unfolds in the fictional English town of Broadchurch, whose visual representation evokes the supportive locals and the existential estrangement that shame bears within the community. Broadchurch's coastline is consistently framed with long, wide shots providing an emotional counterpoint to the intimacy of interviews. Although *Broadchurch* is

[14] It is the Other (imaginary or present) that gives meaning and significance to shame (Dolezal 422). Once the defaming social gaze is internalized, shame no longer requires a social audience to judge its subject.

not a direct adaptation of a literary work, its narrative structure follows well-known patterns from detective fiction: its detectives move together from suspect to suspect, ultimately revealing the perpetrator at the very end. Their investigation is crafted so that the viewer is unable to solve the crime before the detectives. Yet, there are many narrative arcs in which the viewers are not consistently following Alec and Ellie but are allowed to have their own interpretation and link elements between them. There are scenes without the detectives, which allow the viewers to have access to certain elements before them, an access that is absent in literature, and form independent interpretations.

The landscape of the fictional town of Broadchurch takes on a persona of its own, becoming more than a backdrop; "it assumes an independent identity" (Chakravarti 38). The imaginary town "cannot be found on the map, but it is every British small town" (40), and as such, it encapsulates the ideal of a close-knit community while simultaneously challenging it (Chakravarti 40). The town operates as a microcosm of real society (41), functioning as a representational "other" space, one that is both familiar and embedded within known society, yet capable of questioning and reinterpreting it. As Chakravarti writes, "Broadchurch is its people" (41).

While telling the story of the crime investigation, *Broadchurch* also foregrounds the town's background and the tight-knit community it created. The script by Chris Chibnall focuses on the shared emotional response of the community as they live through the crime investigation and process the trauma of its aftermath simultaneously. While *Broadchurch* is not an autoethnographic text in the strict sense–Chibnall does not narrate his personal experience–the production reflects many autoethnographic elements. As Beattie explains, autoethnographs intersect auto- (self), -ethno- (the sociocultural connection), and -graphy- (the process of writing the story) (3). Though the personal -auto- is not reflected in Chibnall's writing, his ethical and empathetic engagement with social issues while screening sexual abuse is evident. Before drafting Season 3, he explored cultural practices and behaviours by conducting extensive consultations with survivors, support organisations, and law enforcement, and placed significant value on self-observation and self-reflection throughout his research. As he stated in his *BBC News* interview, "When I thought about telling this story, the first thing I did [...] was go and talk to various people and charities who worked supporting survivors of sexual assault" ("Broadchurch Creator"). In *The Telegraph*, when discussing the ethics of filming, Chibnall elaborates, "We asked [survivors and professionals] if *Broadchurch* was the forum in which to tell this story, and everyone said yes" (Tate). Chibnall further addresses the responsibility of programme-makers to examine how their choices of screening violence play out in the wider world (Tate).

Chibnall's position, as both a resident and native of the place the series is set, grants him insider status, which Beattie describes as a researcher embedded in the community they examine (4). This embeddedness shapes his empathetic, socially engaged approach to depicting community response and sexual violence. As he notes in an interview with *Paste Magazine*, the decision to end *Broadchurch's* trilogy with the investigation of a rape case arose from real-world shifts: "There has been a massive upturn in the reporting of sexual assaults in the U.K. [...] I wanted to dig into that and talk about that as an issue, as well as things like the sexualization of society and children, and access to porn and what that's doing to everyone" (Young). Chibnall suggests a model of screenwriting that is ethically situated, blending research and cultural awareness.

Chibnall demonstrates a clear awareness of the social and political neglect in screening sexual abuse empathetically. In crafting Season 3, he foregrounds a nuanced understanding of human nature through qualitative social methodologies, emphasizing the subjective variability of experience, illustrated in the forthcoming analysis of Nira and Laura. His substantive contribution to the understanding of social inequalities before the screening of Season 3 is evident in his own words:

> [...]What we wanted to do is debunk the myths and the tropes—for example, the girl in the short skirt in [her] mid-20s going down a dark alley. People who work in the support services said there is a whole swath of stories that are not being told. All of this came out of research. The point of the story is that rape is not about sex. It is about power and it is about control (Young).

This exemplifies his writing, grounded in social listening to result in ethical narrative construction. While *Broadchurch* is not conventionally autoethnographic, Chibnall brings to the forefront what Beattie calls "the researcher's subjectivity" (5). Considering that autoethnography blends the personal, cultural, and political as an approach to qualitative inquiry, "there is no single definition that would bring unanimity into the ongoing definitional debates" (Beattie 7), thus remaining theoretically open. Autoethnography can be examined as a research strategy that qualitatively makes sense of the self and society; it does not always need to project the self directly into the text with the fusion of 'auto', 'ethno', and 'graphy'. In this context, in his position as a writer and resident of that community, Chibnall offers a unique vantage point. He collects and analyzes data to achieve cultural understanding of the Other, similarly to an ethnographer; the difference is that his personal experience enriches the narrative and offers reflexive insights. Thus, although he does not foreground his narrative,

Chibnall's fears, emotions, and doubts surface through placing characters in different sociocultural contexts, especially in regards to the shared emotion of shame.

Television crime dramas function as key signifiers of channel branding, and ITV's broadcast of *Broadchurch* illustrates how the network uses this genre to shape its brand identity. With *Broadchurch*, ITV aimed to construct a brand identity with cross-demographic appeal (Garner 141). Nevertheless, the network is frequently associated with the term "mainstream", a term that, as critics argue, carries connotations of "melodrama" and reductively gendered, "primarily appeals to female audiences" (Garner 144). *Broadchurch* complicates this perception as it emphasizes not only the crime drama credentials of the show, but also the seriousness, accessibility, and, as Garner observes, "the channel's core brand values, particularly its relevance to everyday viewers' lives" (149).

The discourse surrounding crime dramas is often shaped by aesthetic strategies that evoke emotional intensity: medium close-ups, emotionally charged music, and the foregrounding of high-tension moments contribute to this affect-laden framing (Garner 144–45). In the case of *Broadchurch,* its trailer has been described as drawing on discourses of "quality television" (Garner 146) through the star casting of David Tennant and Olivia Colman as detectives in the series. By foregrounding its high-profile actors in promotional materials, ITV positions its crime dramas as emotionally intense yet elevated by respected performances. As Garner notes, while the trailer of the series suggests that the drama may be melodramatic, it should be interpreted through an appreciation of performance, rather than purely sensationalist (146).

Beyond its visual composition, *Broadchurch* crafts its intensity through sound, too. The minimalistic and melancholic auditory landscape of the series extends its emotional reach. In his work on Dakota epistemology, George W. Linden offers a grounded distinction between vision and sound, writing within the Dakota philosophical tradition. While Linden's analyses emerge from Indigenous understandings of perception and memory, his insights into the participatory nature of sound offer a useful provocation when analysing *Broadchurch's* acoustic atmosphere:

> Vision arrests. Vision is spectation; sound is participation. Sound engulfs, surrounds, and envelops us. [...] Sound reciprocates. Sound centers. Sound engenders simultaneity, not sequentiality (Linden 20).

Linden's theory of sound as a theory of experience, a unifying acoustic space which intensely unites subjects without divisions, is what differentiates television from photography or literary

fiction. The atmosphere created (mostly) by the soundtrack of the classic Icelandic composer, Ólafur Arnalds, intensifies the dramatic tone of the show through instrumental melancholia. One of his featured songs, called "So Close", was composed specifically for the series and is played in the closing credits of each episode. An article in *The Guardian* refers to the starkly melodic and unsettling music of Arnalds as an integral part of *Broadchurch* in building tension: "Stripped of the distractions of visuals and ad breaks, the emotional cues submerged in Arnald's *Broadchurch* themes seem to break the surface more often" (Virtue).

2.2 Written on the Body: Shame, Gender, and the Cultural Regulation of Femininity

Throughout human culture, nudity[15] has carried contradictory meanings, symbolizing both humiliation and dominance. This tension, central to the emotional structure of shame, has prompted feminist scholars to explore how shame functions as a cultural mechanism for both constructing and deconstructing the female body, as "a key source of identity" (Gill et al.70). Dianne Taylor identifies gendered power relations as operating through two mutually exclusive modes of recognition: inferior women and dominant men. In this framework, shame works to secure heteronormativity (Healicon 30). Taylor specifically examines women's sexual humiliation as a marker of their perceived subhumanity. By situating rape within broader structures of gendered power, she reflects on "the internalization of a broader view of oneself as subhuman" (Taylor D 48). These normalized and uncritically accepted forms of degradation ultimately become naturalized to the extent that they provide the basis for women's inferiority, stigmatization, and subhumanity (Taylor D 41).

In her essay for *Talking Visions*, bell hooks describes the life journey of women as a history of shame "written on the body we cannot erase" (65). While she affirms the potential of the naked body as a powerful instrument of resistance, hooks warns that the shameful and contradictory meanings attributed to nakedness are shaped by gender and entrenched systems of social inequality. These systems compel women to hide the femininity of their bodies, deny their existence, invent gestures of detachment, and live in a state of isolated invisibility (hooks 66). Jessica Valenti similarly notes that in many early cultures, women's bodies were seen as needing regulation and restraint (97). From this perspective, "shame inhibits identification" (Valenti 84): we, as spectators, resist associating ourselves with bodies that have been socially, morally, and legally stigmatized. This resistance facilitates one's detachment from others' shame, allowing him/her to imagine their sexual journeys as pure and autonomous. This detachment is evident, for example, in the cultural response to an obese body. Tara

[15] Jacoby provides examples from the ancient Athenians, Romans, and Japanese where the practice of nudity predominantly implied shame (Jacoby 11-13).

Pauliny explores how the obese female body becomes an exaggerated object of visual scrutiny, eliciting affective responses such as pity, revulsion, and shame (72).

In his *Essays on Sexuality,* dating from 1896, Sigmund Freud indicates for the first time the connection between erotogenic zones in one's body and repressive forces such as disgust, shame, and morality (Freud xi). He further refers to these forces as mental dams against sexual excesses and sexual development, which try to determine the development of individuals' sexual instinct (28). Over time, these internalized resistances contribute to sexual repression and, in some cases, hysteria. Mapping shame in women's lives is particularly complex, as shame, violence, and pleasure often become entangled in many women's first sexual experiences. Although speaking of sex as an unashamed, pleasurable inquiry should be elemental in the formation of sexual subjectivities (Fischel 199), shame remains a deeply embedded human emotion (Jacoby 47). As Jacoby further notes, shame is born with individuals, and each being has a unique developmental history of shame (47).

Shame has long served as a mechanism for justifying violence, silencing discomfort, and constraining women's sexuality. As Martha Nussbaum observes, "The stigmatizing behaviour in which all societies engage is typically an aggressive reaction to infantile narcissism and the shame born of our own incompleteness" (219). This stigma is not simply psychological; it carries profound political and moral implications.

Slagter critiques Freud's model of repression for narcissism, which he sees as inadequate for understanding the complexity of the self. Instead, he advocates for a more dynamic conception, "a psychic agency that always has a dual orientation, that operates dialectically in movements healthy or pathological, mature or immature, centrifugal or centripetal" (161). Being restrictive, satisfactory narcissism fastens individuals to already established orders of domination produced through psychological manipulation, indoctrination, and the denial of autonomy. The price extracted for the satisfaction of repressive needs is high, for "guilt, shame and obsessional states of consciousness" accompany them (Bartky 139).

Were people indifferent to other people's opinions, shame would lose its power. As Aristotle remarka in his *Rhetoric* (4th century BCE):

> We feel no shame before those upon whose opinions we quite look down as untrustworthy; nor are we ashamed of the same things before intimates as before strangers, but before the former of what seem genuine faults, before the latter of what seem conventional ones (Barnes 4728).

One feels shame only before those whose opinion matters, those who know of his/her grace.[16] Sara Ahmed further explores the ambivalence of shame, framing it as a response to a scene that engages one's interest, particularly the desire for recognition from another. The one before whom we feel shame is not a neutral observer but someone "who has already elicited desire or even love" (Ahmed 105).

Edwards describes shame as an involuntary emotion rooted in a "negative global assessment" of the self (Edwards 571). It is intimately connected with the moral dimension of one's identity and emerges from an appreciation of why another would perceive one as inferior or lowly (571). Shame is not merely discomfort; it is an inner torment, "a sickness of the soul", as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick puts it (132). It engulfs the self in a totalising sense of devaluation, a sense of being irreparably flawed (Zahavi 211). In this state, the shamed subject feels figuratively stripped bare, unable to endure exposure. Shame thus entails secrecy, concealment, a deep urge to hide what one believes should remain unseen and unknown (Fischer 832). Jean-Paul Sartre captures this experience vividly:

> Shame is an immediate shudder which runs through me from head to foot without any discursive preparation. I am unable to bring about any relation between what I am in the intimacy of the For-Itself, without distance, without recoil, without perspective, and this unjustifiable being-in-itself which I am for the Other. There is no standard here, no table of correlation (222).

Though shame is a self-conscious emotion, it is fundamentally shaped by internalized social norms and expectations. It operates as "an interruption for any action that violates either internally or externally derived standards" (Lewis 50). The Other, real or imagined, serves as the witness and arbiter, the mediation between the being-looked-at and the outside world. It is through the Other's gaze that the shamed subject becomes alienated from themselves: "I am ashamed of myself, not qua elusive first-person perspective, but qua the way I appear to the other" (Zahavi 216).

"Nobody can be vulgar all alone," Sartre observes (222). When conjugating shame with vulgarity, he portrays non-verbal vulgarity as inherently relational, which requires the presence of a witness capable of interpreting it: "my vulgarity and my awkwardness surpass the body and refer to a witness capable of understanding them and the totality of my human reality" (Sartre 222). Sartre distinguishes sharply between verbal and gestural (or non-verbal)

[16] Such persons are: those who admire us, those whom we admire, those by whom we wish to be admired, those with whom we are competing, and those whose opinion of us we respect (Barnes 4727).

vulgarity. Verbal vulgarity[17] refers to the aversion of a particular set of linguistic features with moral worth (Bray 124), while non-verbal vulgarity is often read as symptomatic of cultural inferiority, "the betrayal of civilized virtues" (Bray 108). It is problematic to equate these modes of vulgarity or to judge individuals accordingly, as manners and speech evolve independently. In contemporary society, notions of acceptable verbal behaviour (i.e., verbal sins)[18] have shifted more rapidly than gestural vulgarity since the latter is symptomatic of a surpassing deficiency in moral and ethical standards.

Sartre's framing of gestural vulgarity as an all-encompassing, social experience is, in fact, a benevolent representation of this morally crude, lewdly, and "unregenerate"[19] state of being. Rather than reinforcing the idea of vulgarity as a personal failing, he presents it as a condition shaped by broader systems of domination, which involves everyone who in/directly observes one's vulgarity and instantaneously associates it with immorality. Instead of confining one particular individual as socially degraded and coarse, Sartre calls attention to the "banality of power" and communal decadence of the masses who "join in madness and clothe themselves in the flashy rags of power" (Mbembe 29). Through this lens, shame and vulgarity are not simply markers of individual failure but revelations of a communal hypocrisy that adopts a position of moral superiority and shame "one of their own".

Some scholars argue that shame, far from being merely oppressive, plays an important foundational role in living an ethical life. It can act as a moral compass, "a bonding mechanism that enables groups to withstand social difficulties" (Billig 23), rather than an obstacle. For Dolezal, shame functions as a mechanism that fosters belonging, helping individuals maintain the social connections necessary for their survival (422). In this view, shame is not simply alienating but can form the basis of "a shared understanding of circumstances similarly felt" with other individuals (Fischer 838). Moreover, the anticipation of "milder" emotions, such as embarrassment, serves a reparative function, allowing individuals to restore their self-presentation and repair threatened social harmony (Billig 25-28).

Although systems of social inequality provoke the invisibility of women's bodies, some researchers argue that shame can be mediated because certain power-dressing manuals can command the social meanings attributed to their looks. From this privileged "control

[17] Most of the literature written about vulgarity circulates around the precariousness of its language use, rather than judging morally one's actions.
[18] A study concerning the use of vulgar words as rhetoric tools concluded that in political discourses vulgar communication between the candidates not only intensifies the discourse, but also defines an informal and friendly communication with the receiving public, thus reinforcing social connections (Cavazza 538). What appears to be vulgar speech can in fact be a sign of warm-heartedness, moral worth, down-to-earth common sense, and honesty (Bray 107-120).
[19] As defined by Merriam-Webster: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vulgar.

room" position, women can garner a degree of authority, sovereignty, and dominance in how their bodies are read. These manuals offer guidance to women on how to avoid potentially career-damaging wardrobe errors that construct their appearance as either too feminine, sex objects, or too masculine and threatening in the eyes of their male colleagues (Edwards 573). This ongoing dichotomy between (in)visibility and shameful visibility exposes women to mimicking patriarchal dress codes, encourages them to be more critical of other women's clothes, and continually becomes the referee of other women on account of what they wear. Although women joined the corporate world much later than men, the very existence of these power-dressing manuals is problematic and precarious because it reinforces women's powerlessness as a constitutional, and constantly exposes their bodies to the risk of being a potential source of shame, because it is the Other who has most control over its meanings.

2.3 The Face and the Other: The Apparatus of Shame

The face plays a central role in the expression and communication of emotions, and its importance has only been amplified by the pervasiveness of media in everyday life. The face is ubiquitous in the realm of the image, where it conjures both the discrete affects and the frequent attempts to mask them, which television soap actors are especially good at signaling. These signatures, or logos, whether in sound or image form, generate feelings that mobilize the body's capacity for synesthesia, in which affect seems to act as a switchboard through which all sensory signals are passed (Gibbs 191-192).

In *Broadchurch*, rape is recognized as the "dirt" which contaminates the entire English town, "An act like this, it sullies everything. It sullies us all,"[20], as the Axehampton House owner refers to it. In this section, close attention is paid to the symbolic and public significance of the community in the development of shame. Consequently, shame is analysed as an emotion that reveals the relationality and being-for-others of characters in *Broadchurch*. It is examined as a channelled experience with the power to control the lives of the abused women and the whole local community.

Figure 1 captures a moment of visible strain between Alex Hardy, Ellie Miller, and a third officer, partially turned away from the camera. This shot triangulates institutional authority, tension, and visible emotional vulnerability. Miller's face, slightly turned away from the camera, becomes a site of affective intensity. With each setup change, the "stage" is redefined, stated Gianetti, meaning that intrinsic meanings associated with positions of the

[20] Arthur Tamworth- landlord of the house where the crime took place, *Broadchurch*, Season 3, Episode 3, 19:05 – 19:14.

frame are closely related to the significance of certain kinds of movement (123). D.I. Alec Hardy, as depicted in Figure 1, is positioned near the top of the frame, and the upward movement of the camera in this particular introductory scene suggests “ideas dealing with power, authority, and aspiration” (Gianetti 82), as indicated by the spatial structure of the frame. Despite the authoritative framing, D.I. Hary does not appear intrinsically superior to D.S. Miller or the third police officer; instead, the emphasis of this shot is on the collective, the communal.

Figure 1: D.I. Alec Hardy (David Tennant) and D.S. Ellie Miller (Olivia Colman), *Broadchurch*, Season 3, ITV, 2017.

D.S. Miller’s furrowed eyebrows, tear-filled eyes, and parted lips convey an unspoken burden that moves away from personal fatigue to a collective sense of moral injury, as shame is affectively contagious and proximity to someone’s shame generates shame (Ahmed “Happy” 39). Although the object of emotion is shared in this case (the traumatic discovery of what happened to a victim in a tight-knit community), Miller and Hardy manifest it differently. Although Miller’s gaze remains focused, his face is unreadable: “even when we feel we have the same feeling, we don’t necessarily have the same relationship to the feeling”, as Ahmed argues (“Introduction” 10). Shame’s stickiness shapes the bodies of those who witness and respond to it, demanding adhesion and circulating between social encounters (Ahmed 11). The presence of the third officer introduces a visual contrast between emotional responsiveness and bureaucratic detachment. His averted posture appears deliberate, redirecting the viewer’s attention toward Hardy’s and Miller’s faces, the affective centers of

the frame. This early reception of Season 3 of *Broadchurch* points to its classical form of narration, where POV editing functions not only to support the spatial immersion of the spectator but also represents an initial step toward narrative immersion. This technique enables spectators to attribute beliefs, emotions, goals, and knowledge to characters, facilitating the processes of alliance, empathy, and identification (Persson 66).

Shame works over the body in certain ways. The body not only feels different in shame than in enjoyment, but it also reworks how one understands the body and its relation to other bodies or the social (Probyn "Writing" 74). It is a product of the machine of subjective disposition, which is produced as both idea and affect, out of the clashing of body and mind (Probyn 79, 81). In many accounts of rape or torture, the splitting off from the body is one way in which victims say they were able to endure the experience (Probyn 80). The word 'shame' comes from the Indo-European verb for 'to-cover', which associates shame with words such as 'hide', 'hut', or 'house' (Ahmed 104). This impulse to cover oneself is intrinsically connected with the failure of the subject to provide concealment for oneself. A significant portion of this chapter's literary review is based on Jean-Paul Sartre and Aristotle, two influential Western philosophers, who propose the basis of shame, and whose analysis creates discourses of freedom and self-identity. Their reasoning relates meaningfully to the present-day manifestation of the emotion of shame in the post-Weinstein era, which prioritizes the individual construction of women's self-perception in the aftermath of sexual abuse by exposing the vulnerability, separation, and interdependence that the complex emotion of shame manifests.

Sexual abuse is not a self-limiting incident in life. It marks the beginning of an amplified experience of shame, which rapidly retrieves all the trauma and constructs the present reality of survivors. Considering the current era of social change promoted by feminist movements, Chibnall and Williams render the abuse on screen as a visceral experience, refraining from traumatic shots which might inflict shock to the viewers, and any traits of masculinity which "normalize" sexual assault and harassment in the media industry (Fileborn 14). Their ambition is to convey messages that echo actual problems beyond the narrative of sexual abuse. At the same time, Chibnall and Williams represent female characters as three-dimensional humans rather than sex objects or villainous sexual manipulators. This representation of female shame holds great importance for feminist visual politics because it attempts to restore female dignity through image-making.

The camera in *Broadchurch* functions as an apparatus that reflects and critiques female vulnerabilities, employing visual strategies that insist on opening new parameters for representing sexual violence with ethical complexity. It becomes a tool through which

Williams and Chibnall criticize the erasure that shame provokes and offer alternative, compassionate framings of female subjectivity. Figure 2 captures an important moment during Trish's medical examination where the exposure of her shame response becomes visible. The camera closely follows her face, yet Trish consistently averts her gaze, not only from the camera and viewers, but symbolically from herself. This act of avoidance becomes a mode of self-protection, an attempt to preserve dignity during a personal procedure (the swab inside her mouth, which becomes a symbol of silencing, a literal invasion of her body during evidence collection). During the procedure, the viewer becomes complicit in Trish's voicelessness and "involuntarily reevaluation of one's self", as Probyn states (*Blush* 55). According to Persson, an active spectator accesses a character's psychology through textual cues and pre-existing knowledge about mental states. This process involves the *mental attribution* of beliefs, emotions, and intentions, which involve *inferential activities* by the observer. Striving for narrative coherence, the spectator "constantly uses everyday knowledge about mental states and their relations to understand character behaviour" (159). The camera's fixed, frontal framing creates further affective and ethical tension, compelling viewers to reckon with the politics of witnessing.

Figure 2: Trish (Julie Hesmondhalgh) during the medical examination, Episode 1, *Broadchurch*, ITV, 2017.

The viewers' understanding of Trish's suffering is based solely on bits and pieces of her memory as they travel back and forth with her. Memory is personal and is space-oriented; thus, it defines everyone's personal space, states Linden (19). Williams and Chibnall approach the topic sensitively and address female survivors as dominant narrative makers instead of

ameliorating rape as a mere televisual plot device, i.e., *Broadchurch* captures the violating experience of Trish's routine rape kit[21] (from the mouth swabs, the bagging of all evidence, to the prophylactic morning after pills) and the shame it carries, in a delicate light, contrary to *Unbelievable*.

Initially, in the first episode, Trish internalizes the gaze of those around her and begins to shame herself for being the "imperfect victim" and for failing to fulfill her "moral" obligations as a survivor. The rape imposes both a physical and psychological burden that disconnects her from her personal values, though, as Probyn argues, the promiscuity of shame destabilizes the boundaries of what is personal and what is social (*Blush* 41). During her medical examination, Trish physically turns her body away from the camera, trying to conceal herself by averting her gaze and dropping her head in a sensation more acute and intense than embarrassment, as shown in Figure 2. From an existentialist perspective, "we cannot escape internalizing the presence of the gaze of the Other", writes Slagter (156), and Trish's posture reveals how shame restructures bodily space in relation to perceived judgment. It is not only concealment that she seeks but the very impossible relief from visibility. This moment speaks to broader cultural mechanisms of shame. As Martha Nussbaum notes, society maintains illusions of safety and moral order by idealizing "normalcy", a norm that depends on stigmatizing those who deviate from it. "The idea of normalcy is like a surrogate womb, blotting out intrusive stimuli from the world of difference", she writes, but this comfort comes at the cost of casting others as "morally depraved" (Nussbaum 219). Within *Broadchurch*, Trish's experience of sexual abuse is filtered through Other's expectations about her age, sexuality, and credibility, expectations that function as tools of distancing, allowing the community to preserve its illusion of "normalcy".

The dichotomous relationship between shame and the Other gives meaning and significance to shame as an affective force. In Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, the Other is not merely an observer but a mirror that distorts: "Through shame I have discovered an aspect of my being; I am ashamed of what I am" (Sartre 221). The Other conditions a feeling of negation, of the subject being against the self, which is at the same time viewed in one's consciousness as a sign of its failure experienced before another. Trish, too, becomes aware of herself through the community's gaze, triggered by being seen through their moral and social lens. Following the assault, she refuses contact with the outside world (see Figure 6). This isolation reveals not only fear, but the unbearable weight of visibility, what Sartre describes as the "immense presence" of the Other (269). Shame is mediated through imagined or actual judgment, so even in solitude, the sense of being-looked-at persists. The only way for the

[21] See Figure 2.

shamed subject to liberate the self from the Other's critical look and from seeking constant validation is by recreating the self and reconstructing the inward gaze.

Michael Lewis argues that shame arises from the self's evaluation of its own perceived failure, where the self is simultaneously subject and object of judgment (48). This identity crisis resonates with Probyn's observation that shame produces a "failure of the self" as it is measured both through internal and external standards (*Blush* 27). While Trish embodies this explicitly, shame reverberates through other characters in *Broadchurch*. Some experience the feeling of shame for not seeing the assault coming, not reporting or preventing it on time; others, like D.I. Hardy in Episode 5, register a deeper shame tied to masculinity itself. Through muted lighting, facial close-ups, the series visualizes shame as a collective condition. Women, in particular, are positioned as the shame "bearers", often framed as caught in dysfunctional relationships or bringing dishonour upon themselves. Yet, rather than reinforcing these stereotypes, *Broadchurch* critiques the social structures that disproportionately assign shame to women, highlighting how it circulates through communal silence and gendered expectations.

After publicly releasing details of Tish's case, D.I. Hardy and D.S. Miller discover that two other women in the community have been assaulted by the same man over the last few years. One woman is eager to help and make a formal statement, whereas the other refuses to do so. The eight episodes meticulously follow the work of the detectives, revealing the challenges of operating in an environment where everyone is a suspect, and shame and humiliation alternate interchangeably. Although three rape stories evolve simultaneously, the viewers never experience close-up shots of the abuse. Instead, Williams focuses only on shots that frame the abused women's faces at a close range and brings their stories intimately close to the viewers, "Because the face is the seat of one's identity, and one wishes to conceal oneself during shame, the face becomes the focus of the shame", observes Michael Lewis, noting facial blushing as a symbolic manifestation of shame (37).

The decision not to identify the attacker until later in the series intensifies the moral ambiguity of every male character in *Broadchurch*, positioning them all as the potential intruder. The ambiguity compounds Trish's isolation, as the non-reciprocal nature of her shame directed toward an anonymous perpetrator prevents her from redirecting her emotional burden. When shame comes from sexual abuse, in the absence of acknowledgement or remorse from the attacker, Trish was left to carry the burden of shame alone. She experiences the isolation acutely, and her psychological response manifests as dissociation and disconnection from her body, which Ann Kaplan defines as the major symptoms of trauma (27). A variety of psychological symptoms and disorders can follow exposure to traumatic

events, including posttraumatic and acute stress, dissociation, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and guilt, sexual difficulties, psychosomatic symptoms, substance abuse, and suicidality (Berliner and Briere 3). Trish's solitude and inability to collect exactly what had happened to her are not signs of passivity or weakness, but instead reflect what Cathy Caruth refers to as the paradox of trauma: a state in which the individual is between survival and destructiveness at the heart of a catastrophic experience (58). Kaplan further emphasizes dissociation as a condition in which trauma resists cognitive processing; in extreme cases, the event is understood to come from outside, as something radically external to the self (38).

2.4 Aging, Autonomy, and the Masculine Gaze

In the context of *Broadchurch*, female characters are frequently portrayed as carriers of shame within the socio-cultural frameworks of neoliberal and conservative environments. These depictions are situated within marriages and intimate relationships marked by emotional neglect or disrespect from male partners, which expose the gendered dynamic of vulnerability and blame. This section of the chapter focuses on the transfer or "contagious" effect of shame, which bystanders (female and male) feel when witnessing the shameful behavior of those closest to them. Central to the analysis is the connection between the other's shame and one's dignity, as articulated by Jacoby: "our personal dignity consists not only of our self-worth but our sense of worth of everything we feel belongs to us: marriage partner, family, clan, perhaps even religion[22] and nation" (25). In this light, *Broadchurch* not only traces the emotional repercussions of shame but also highlights its impact on interpersonal bonds, particularly friendships and intimate relationships, suggesting that these effects may be irreversible.

Although maintaining dignity holds a central position in the psychic economy, the boundaries between shame and dignity are not fixed; they fluctuate significantly depending on the subjective and culturally contingent value systems individuals adopt. This variability is reflected through the character of Lindsay Lucas, the downtrodden wife of the taxi driver, Clive. Seemingly timid, Lindsay discloses to D.I. Hardy and D.S. Miller that she married Clive sixteen years ago, when she was only nineteen, and has endured a decade-long period of infidelity.

Her decision to remain in a marriage devoid of emotional and sexual reciprocity, mainly for the sake of her son Michael, reflects a broader social reality wherein some women remain in emotionally abusive relationships and abandon their identities under the perceived

[22] However, the correlation of shame, dignity and morality with one's religion demands careful consideration because "when moral and religious commandments are pronounced in public in defiance of the diversity of human opinions they corrupt both the world and themselves" (*Responsibility and Judgement* xxi).

illusions of familial duty. Lindsay's internalisation of a hierarchical relational dynamic, along with her being excluded from any sexual fulfilment, underscores how sustained emotional neglect fractured her sense of self and embodied identity. Over time, her sexuality becomes not only repressed but devalued, both by her partner and, crucially, herself. Clive's manipulative behaviour, marked by fear and control over Lindsay, reconfigures Lindsay's experience of shame. The ethical weight of this gendered asymmetry is captured in D.I. Hardy's response to the situation: "You know what is bothering me about this case? It makes me ashamed to be a man."[23]

Figure 3: Lindsay Lucas (Becky Brunning) and Clive Lucas (Sebastian Armesto), Episode 4, *Broadchurch*, ITV, 2017.

Figure 3 captures a moment of heightened emotional tension between Lindsay Lucas and her husband, Clive, in Episode 4. The composition of this particular scene visually reinforces the underlying dynamics of power, shame, and emotional alienation. Lindsay, a character navigating a strained marriage, stands in the foreground, her expression marked by unease and inner conflict, while Clive stands behind her, obscured by shadow. This spatial arrangement is significant because it reflects Lindsay's psychological isolation and retreat into herself (subtly mirrored by her modest clothing and downward gaze), which further implies her self-erasure as a coping mechanism. In contrast, Clive looks outward with a more

[23] Alec Hardy, *Broadchurch*, Season 3, Episode 3, 39:14 – 39:19.

assertive posture, directing the gaze across the room as if challenging the viewer or proudly seeking recognition. This scene transmits discomfort because it captures the banal, everydayness of emotional abuse by exposing its visibility to the outside world.

Figure 4: Cath (Sarah Parish) confronting Trish, Episode 5, *Broadchurch*, ITV, 2017.

Cath Atwood, Trish's closest friend, exhibits a bold and assertive personality, in contrast to Lindsay's more reserved demeanor. Despite this, Cath remains in an unhappy, emotionally unfulfilling marriage with Jim, her cheating husband. In Episode 5, she expresses disdain and shame over Jim's perceived "weakness," as she refers to his disloyalty, yet feels unable to leave him. The episode highlights how shaming can operate as a response within sexual dynamics, particularly when one partner perceives themselves as disadvantaged. Cath's devastation upon learning that Jim had sex with Trish on the morning of her birthday illustrates the intensity of her emotional devastation. Figure 4 captures a moment of emotional rupture, as Cath struggles to regain agency in the wake of personal betrayal. Her facial expression, torn between shame and humiliation, reveals a complex mix of anger, disappointment, and emotional dissonance. The soft lighting on her face stands in stark contrast with the emotional tension of the scene, reverting to what Nussbaum refers to as "self-protective aggression when weakness makes itself felt" (219), as the viewer witnesses Cath's vulnerability with a defensive, confrontational posture.

Cath's disappointment in Trish's deceitfulness and betrayal manifests in her use of shaming as a retaliatory strategy. When recalling the sexual encounter between Trish and her

husband, she remarks, "Christ, his standards have slipped. […] Jesus, I never knew the smell of mildew turned him on."[24] Her tone reflects a complex emotional response, not only to her husband's infidelity, but also to the rupture of trust between intimates. Cath's anger derives its intensity not only from Trish's perceived hypocrisy and Jim's preference for Trish over her, but also from the sense of betrayal she feels at being deceived by them. The aftermath of Cath and Trish's relationship navigates social scripts shaped by male validation, which have historically encouraged competition and punitive regulation rather than solidarity between women, especially when "women's bodies are represented as sexual bodies" (Gill et al. 78). In ridiculing Trish's desirability, Cath seeks to deflect her shame and reassert power in a situation where she feels extremely fragile, shame-prone, and undermined. As Elspeth Probyn argues, shame is not inherently pathological; rather, it can produce different forms of responsiveness shaped by marginalization, not as essential traits but survival strategies (*Blush* 87). Yet, when shame is construed primarily as a means of moral reproach, it risks becoming ethically fraught and politically unpalatable (Probyn 94).

Cath's reaction can be situated within larger cultural frameworks of the community that produce and regulate shame around aging, the body, and sexuality. As Bartky notes, religious institutions have historically cultivated profound anxieties about bodily desires, only to offer themselves as the only instrument available for the guilt and shame they generate ("Narcissism", 137). In visual media, middle-aged women are visible only to the extent that they appear ageless, reinforcing what Bartky describes as the demand to "trap [the] body and remove it from time" (136). These outside pressures shape intrapersonal dynamics, such as Cath's attempt to ridicule Trish's desirability and sexualization as an attempt to regain her agency. As Calasanti observes, age-based oppression is often treated as an "et cetera", despite its profound impact on how older women navigate shame, visibility, and power (13). Gill et al. also state that the rare "sexualisation" of the bodies of older people and of some disabled people, for instance, ultimately fails to recognize these groups as sexual, as it produces erasure and denies their sexual subjecthood (81). The restriction of older women in media, as Jeannette King further argues, is not confined to visual imagery but is the product of broader cultural discourses that reflect and shape societal attitudes toward aging (xiii).

These broader cultural pressures surrounding aging, beauty, and visibility intensify the interpersonal dynamic at play in *Broadchurch*. Vengeance to Cath involves actively dishonouring Trish's aging body relentlessly by giving Trish looks of disgust[25] and uttering:

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[24] Cath Atwood, Trish Winterman, Broadchurch, Season 3, Episode 5, 17:32 – 17:47.

[25] Through the look of disgust, Cath not only measures the level of the act's social harmfulness, but disgust at the same time helps her cope with accepting that reality and separating herself from the danger of their moral infliction.

"Here is what I don't understand. Of all the women at that party...why would somebody rape you? Doesn't make sense."[26] In casting her friend as unsuitable to be desired, thus an implausible rape victim, Cath reproduces a complex cultural logic that equates sexual abuse with desire and sexual appeal. Her reaction aligns with narrow, normative assumptions about the "ideal" rape victim: young, attractive, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and free from perceived sexual transgression (Fileborn 9). Rather than reflecting an inherent trait of women, Cath's behavior illustrates how shame is often imposed by people from the same community, age, and social circle, who, in seeking to reinforce her *own* respectability, reinforce harsher norms on Trish. By erasing Trish's legitimacy as a victim and then reconstructing her trauma through the lens of beauty standards, Cath intentionally conforms to a deeply objectifying gaze, one that reduces her friend's body to a failed instrument of sexual abuse and, in this way, regards her as less human. As Bartky writes, sexual objectification[27] is "a form of fragmentation", "an impoverishment of the objectified individual," which involves "the denial to those who suffer it that they have capacities which transcend the merely sexual" ("Narcissism", 130). Cath's vengeance is more than a response to betrayal. It is a symptom of gendered and ageist structures that "regulate" women's values and visibility.

This act of objectification, however, is not isolated to Cath's personal betrayal but is deeply entangled with patriarchal constructions of femininity. Femininity, as constructed by patriarchy, is a form of masquerade apparent as it becomes increasingly remote from reality (King 175). When we, as outside observers, internalize such frameworks, we risk viewing those marked by social stigma (such as ageing or violated women) as less than fully human (Nussbaum 221). Cath rationalizes her reaction as morally appropriate to "good" citizens motivated by a demand for freedom from the "contamination" shame brings. Thus, part of Cath's "healing journey" is projecting her shame onto Trish through the punishing practices of insult and scorn that target the desirability of her friend. In doing so, Cath becomes complicit with the patriarchal ideology that "equates sexuality with youthfulness" (King 137), and criticizes Trish for not replicating the ideal image of femininity predicated on the youthful body. She imposes meanings onto Trish's body that fit into popular patriarchal discourses of aging, and gradually begins a humiliating process of sexual disqualification. Trish becomes not a victim but just a "spur-of-the-moment", "a stupid mistake", and someone men sleep with out of pity: "I felt sorry for her".[28]

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[26] Cath Atwood, *Broadchurch*, Season 3, Episode 5, 19:32 – 19:46.
[27] Now sexual objectification typically involves two persons, one who objectifies and one who is objectified. "But the objectifier and objectified can be one and the same person: a woman can become a sex object for herself, taking toward her own person the attitude of the man. She will then take erotic satisfaction in her physical self, revelling in her body as a beautiful object to be gazed at and decorated"- such an attitude Bartky baptises as "narcissism" (based on psychoanalysis) (Bartky, "Narcissism", 132).
[28] Jim Atwood, *Broadchurch*, Season 3, Episode 5, 20:45- 20:47.

The pressure to maintain a youthful image lies at the heart of ageism: “we deny that we are aging, and when forced to confront the process, treat it as ugly and tragic” (Calasanti 16). The controversy in this situation stems from the fact that Trish’s aging body threatens Cath’s self-confidence, as it reflects her own insecurities about appearance and how she might be perceived by the male gaze. Cath’s emotional unraveling intensifies as she grapples with this impossible ideal, particularly in moments of confrontation, such as her conversation with Ed Burnett after learning that Jim had sex with Trish (see Figure 5). Cath’s emotional vulnerability is poignantly represented in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Cath Atwood (Sarah Parish) and Ed Burnett (Lenny Henry), *Broadchurch*, Season 3, Episode 5, ITV, 2017.

In this scene, a very vulnerable Cath confirms that, as a woman, she styles herself to function as an erotic spectacle for the pleasure of men and asks for external validation:

> **Cath**: Am I attractive, Ed?
>
> **Ed**: What?
>
> **Cath**: Come on. It is a simple enough question.
>
> **Ed**: Right, well, erm...I have to be careful because, as your boss, you know, sexual harassment laws...
>
> **Cath**: All right, look. If you didn't know me, would you want to...to have sex with me?
>
> **Ed**: Well, yeah, probably,

Cath: God, probably? Well, thanks for the ringing endorsement.

Ed: All right, definitely! What sort of question is that, anyway?

Cath: I don't know. I just want to know if I am past it.

Ed: Of course, you are not past it. Why would you say that? You are a good-looking woman. You have got a husband who is a bit of a knob, but that is not your fault.

Cath: Jim slept with Trish.[29]

While conversing with Ed, Cath's internalized age-based insecurities foreshadow. Her posture suggests a defensive emotional state, while her face conveys a mix of hurt and defiance. Ed's body language, in contrast, reflects his discomfort and confusion, mirroring the awkwardness of the exchange. The conversation reveals her anxiety over whether she is sexually desirable, reinforced by the ordinariness of the setting (outside the workplace), which brings forward Cath's raw question: "Am I attractive, Ed?" This exchange describes what Calasanti refers to as "successful aging," where women have to remain sexually viable while discreetly suppressing the signs of aging (15). Cath's need for reassurance reveals her fear of invisibility intensified by Trish's desirability and the consequences of no longer fitting the youthful feminine ideal. This interaction between the two is not simply vanity or flirtation. It underscores how shame, objectification, and ageism create emotional disorientation.

Cath's emotional plea to Ed, "I just want to know if I am past it", reveals the underlying mechanisms through which she tries to distance herself from her aging body. Her reliance on shame as a public motive allows her to marginalize and reduce Trish's body to a symbolic entity that fails to conform to prevalent representations of femininity. The body has become central to identity and aging, and the maintenance of its youthful appearance has become a lifelong project that requires increasing levels of work, argues Calasanti (15). In youth-obsessed cultures, as Deborah Jermyn and Holmes note, the everyday realities and appearances of older people remain 'Other'" (2). Cath's shaming of Trish functions as a masquerade, an attempt to distance herself from her fears and disgust of being undesirable or invisible.

Just as Cath weaponizes shame to distance herself from the perceived loss of value she herself associates with ageing, Trish's former husband, Ian, too mobilizes shame as a way of policing Trish's sexuality and asserting control over her body post-divorce. While *Broadchurch* has been praised for defying traditional representations of rape, it does not resist dominant images of masculine norms. Initially, Trish appears to be in control of her life, determined regarding the end of her marriage, and brave enough to separate from him. Yet,

[29] Cath Atwood, Ed Burnett, *Broadchurch*, Season 3, Episode 5, 35:20- 36:05.

her assault activates deeply ingrained social scripts in the community surrounding her, exposing how her sexual autonomy becomes a moral concern for the men around her. Following the attack, the police interrogated over 50 men who attended the party, revealing the extent to which Trish's body became a public spectacle and site for communal anxiety. Among those affected is her former husband, Ian, whose reaction reflects the culture of shame. When questioned by the detectives about his relationship with Trish, Ian states:

> It is not very nice seeing the woman you used to be married to drunk and cavorting with a lot of strange men. I mean, by all accounts, she has slept with half a dozen blokes in the last few months. God knows how many of them were at the party. It is embarrassing. Technically, we are still married.[30]

Through his monologue, Ian expresses his discontent regarding Trish's lifestyle. He admits to the detectives feeling humiliated that his former wife no longer conforms to "respectable" standards of age-appropriate behaviour. His conservative view on sex positions it as a male prerogative, and marriage as a stabilizing symbol of status and control. His inner revolt arises from the fact that Trish's casual sexual autonomy appears not as carelessness but as a threat to his masculinity. Her refusal to abide by normative expectations of aging and femininity incites a sense of betrayal, further deepening his anger, loss of power, and shame.

Ian's resentment does not remain confined to words. Further in the series, Ian confesses to having installed spyware on Trish's computer, justifying the act by claiming he missed her and wanted to check in. His invasive behaviour, however, reflects more than nostalgia; it is an extension of the honour culture he upholds, wherein Trish's autonomy threatens his masculine[31] dignity. The surveillant gaze, as Gill et al. state, "is becoming more and more intense—operating at ever finer-grained levels and with a proliferating range of lenses that do not necessarily regard the outer membrane of the body, the skin, as their boundary" (74). Ian's lenses of surveillance penetrate deeper than the surface, becoming more intrusive and intimate than ever before.

In surveilling her, Ian positions himself as the moral arbiter of her behaviour, establishes important expectations of behaviour toward Trish, and unconsciously confirms that it is her behaviour that governs and "threatens" his masculine honour. Through this act, he offers prescriptions about what constitutes proper feminine behaviour and enhances formerly influential theories of innate female sexual passivity. Regardless, as Bartky argues,

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[30] Ian Winterman, *Broadchurch,* Season 3, Episode 2, 23:23 – 23:50.

[31] The term masculinity is not used as representing a *certain* type of man but, rather, "a way that men position themselves through discursive practices" (*Messerschmidt* 41).

the consequences of sexual alienation are not merely moral or symbolic because they manifest as “a larger alienation from the body” (“Narcissism” 130).

General discussions of sexual desire, as stated in *Gender and Aging*, marginalize men and women as “opposites” and reinforce conversations that regard male sexuality as active and female sexuality as passive and regulated (Arber 69). In other words, the male sexual ‘urge’ is seen as an uncontrolled natural force over which men could exert little control. Trish, however, disrupts this dichotomy. By actively asserting her desires post-divorce, she resists the stereotype that passive middle-aged women should recede from sexual visibility. She reiterates broader misogynistic discourses that try to shape and reform the celebration of her sexuality based on the accepted social norms. As Whelehan describes it, such expressions of midlife sexual agency constitute "the scandal of anachronism,”[32], a refusal to disappear quietly or to perform self-erasure(162). Trish claims her body from shame, and in doing so, unsettles the very structures that seek to silence her.

Trish’s resistance to sexual invisibility is more than a personal rebellion. The rhetoric of honour culture operates at such an abstract level that it manages to masterfully conceal inherent contradictions and moral ambiguities, states Gilbert (258). In studies on masculine honour, researchers define manhood as a status dependent on public recognition and constant performance, which needs to be continuously proven through visible behaviours[33], otherwise, it risks being revoked (Chalman 2). Being a fundamentally social status, masculine honour cannot be cultivated in a vacuum; it is “a man's claim on the world, the ultimate explanation for a man’s choice” (Gilbert 277).

The notion of honour is celebrated in Ian’s behaviour by being intrinsically connected with his public reputation and public esteem: “If a man has lost his reputation, then he has lost his value in the eyes of all the members of the group, and this includes himself” (Taylor G 55). His discomfort is more than emotional; it is reputational. His need for surveillance reveals a deep investment in protecting his social value. Michael Kimmel’s work on fragile masculinity identifies a prevailing fear among men: “the fear of humiliation, of losing in the competitive ranking among men, of being dominated by other men” (127). Through his perniciously controlling attitude, Ian insists on maintaining the standard social norms of a male honour culture by bolstering his reputation, which in turn provides him with a false sense of safety. Simultaneously, he is the agent of a cruel order whose main intention is to

[32] This very often exposes the female subject to ridicule contempt, pity, and scorn, as Arber states (162).
[33] “As a man's reputation grows in strength, it not only protects against physical attacks to an individual's self and property, but protects against lesser threats such as insults and slights to a person's character” (Chalman 2).

compel Trish to his "social regulatory system". Ignoring Trish's autonomy[34], Ian proves that his masculine honour is socially nuanced by his wife's actions since she poses a threat to his character and status, which could result in a loss of his identity. Chibnall's decision to keep Trish visible and complex throughout the series exposes how honour-based culture depends on the erasure of female autonomy, and collapses when that erasure fails.

Ian is not the only man in *Broadchurch* who jeopardizes Trish's autonomy. Ed Burnett, the owner of the local farm shop where Trish worked, was stalking Trish for almost a decade. When D.I. Hardy and D.S. Miller searched his phone, they uncovered 5,219 photos, spanning ten years. When confronted about his unhealthy obsession, he professed his love for Trish and stated, "I have told you how I feel about her. It is not against the law". He framed his obsession as love, unable or unwilling to recognize his act as a violation of her personhood.

Together, Ian and Ed represent a stereotypical image of manhood that relies on control, subordination, and surveillance. Both see themselves as justified "observers" of Trish, occupying a vantage point from which they scrutinize and regulate her. In this system, Trish becomes a prisoner of the male gaze. As Achille Mbembe argues, "It is precisely the situations of powerlessness [impouvoir] that are the situations of violence par excellence" (30). Trish's loss of privacy is part of a broader system of female oppression prioritizing the reinforcement of masculine power.

Yet, Broadchurch offers a contrasting view on masculinity through D.I. Alec Hardy. Several times in the show, Hardy expresses shame over the attitude of men surrounding him, stating, "I am ashamed of being a man", and referring to male abusers as "aberrations". His character gestures toward a more empathetic and tender version of masculinity[35], one that tries to instill healthier ideas about fatherhood and provide support for women. However, this attempt to reclaim manhood through moral distinctions does not come without complications. Hardy's disavowal of bad men risks reinforcing another binary that divides masculinity into "models", whom he glorifies and romanticizes, and "monsters", of whose behaviour he is critical. As Buchwald argues, "The male ideal is so deeply seated within us that we buy it for our daughters" (198). In trying to replace destructive male stereotypes with seemingly "better" role models, we may still be operating from a framework that restricts its range. While Hardy offers a more progressive figure, aligning too closely with his model risks shaming and demonizing Jim Atwood, Ian Winterman, Ed Burnett, and Clive Lucas, who do

[34] Individual's autonomy should not be understood as a lack of relations. As Linden writes, "freedom conceived negatively becomes freedom *from*, freedom from obligation, freedom from restraint, freedom from responsibility" (28).

[35] This is used as a descriptive term, not a labelling. I do not intend reinforcing gender stereotypes by creating big groups of "toxic", versus "non-toxic" masculinity because those binary oppositions are reductive traps that every researcher ought to be cautious of. In describing the behavioural characteristics of male characters, I refer to terms such as gentle, compassionate, tender, empathetic as explanatory ones only.

not conform to his standards of manhood. Categorizing men in Broadchurch as either irredeemable or virtuous simplifies the ways masculinity is performed and negotiated. Hardy represents only himself, and so does every other man in the show. The use of highly rhetorical categories is reductive and provides myopic views of manhood and masculinity.

2.5 "I Don't Want a Conversation": Shame, Silence, and Victimhood

The series also introduces other survivors whose experiences complicate dominant narratives of shame. Nira, a young girl from a racial minority, refuses to make a public statement or report the assault to the local authorities, as it is difficult for her to deal with the fallout and cope with the perceived stigma. Instead, she chooses to confide only in sexual violence advisors, reflecting the complex intersection of cultural, social, and racial pressures that shape her silence. The shame she experiences cannot be fully understood without the broader dynamics at play. Her internalized sense of worthlessness emerges from her perceived "deficiency" as a representative of a minority group lacking any racial privileges, and expands to the external shame she endures because of engaging in "morally inappropriate behaviour".

Shame, in this context, wounds not only the self but also reverberates through family, ethnic, or religious affiliations. The consequences are inevitably not personal but communal, as group-based tensions emerge from the perceived dishonour. As Kaufman explains, "Just as personal identity becomes molded by shame, ethnic-religious identity and national character are similarly shaped", since it is through identifying with an ethnic group that individuals experience rootedness and a sense of belonging (7). For individuals like Nira, whose sense of belonging is closely tied to the group identity, silence is a form of self-preservation as much as it is a symptom of shame.

While recalling the assault, Nira turns visibly pale, her eyes freeze, her face trembles, and she becomes defensive, an embodiment of the emotional poll exerted by the pressure to disclose (see Fig. 7). Alison Healicon, in *The Politics of Sexual Violence*, identifies a range of responses necessary to prevent secondary harm in personal and societal responses to sexual violence. Among them is the imperative not to police the boundaries of victimhood by "dictating the remit of the conversation or confining the articulation of rape to particular environments or specific 'experts'" (Healicon 119). In her conversation with the Independent Sexual Violence Advisor, Nira perceives judgment and boundary-crossing as her autonomy over how to narrate, or not to narrate, is challenged. When her potential testimony becomes framed as a transactional requirement for access to justice by the bureaucratic system, her abuse is transformed from a personal matter to a public obligation. In this process, her empowerment is eroded. Nira embodies those survivors whose refusal to participate in

state-sanctioned scripts of disclosure renders them ineligible for ongoing continuous support. Consequently, her presence in the series is limited, visually reinforcing how society sidelines those who refuse to conform to dominant expectations of victimhood.

Figure 6: Nira (Ellora Torchia) talking about the assault, *Broadchurch*, Season 3, Episode 6, ITV, 2017.

In Figure 6, Nira is captured in an emotionally charged moment as she discusses the traumatic experience of sexual abuse. Her facial expression (downward gaze, tension in the face, closed lips) conveys the internal struggle to articulate the violence she endured. Similar to Trish, Nira's posture communicates the weight survivors carry in their everyday life, quiet, heavy, and invisible to others. The use of an intimate frame captures Nira's face, drawing attention to her micro emotions and struggles, all essential in the aftermath of trauma, while the shallow depth of field of the shot highlights her isolation and fragility. The framing resists objectification by foregrounding her subjectivity, rather than positioning her as a spectacle. Even though in vulnerability, her autonomy is respected as she is portrayed as someone who wants to reclaim her voice, not to be pitied.

> **Nira:** If I report it, I have to tell my family. And they will be upset. And they will tell others, and...to all those people, I will *forever* be the girl who was raped.
> **Sahana:** You don't have to go public. It is just a conversation with the detectives.

Nira: I don't want a conversation. I want it to go away.[36]

This exchange reveals Nira's anxiety about how her identity might be renegotiated in the eyes of others following the disclosure of her sexual abuse. Her fear lies not only in trauma but in enduring the social perception that would mark her primarily through the lens of victimhood. Hence, her choice between seeking justice and preserving a sense of self is to repress her memories and remain silent as an attempt to protect her integrity.

Her silence is deplored as a self-defense symbol of self-preservation, passivity, and powerlessness,[37] not a heroic act of defiance. Her refusal, "I don't want a conversation. I want it to go away", highlights her attempt to protect herself from a public narrative she cannot control. In her article for *Feminist Studies*, Mahoney argues that the postmodern feminist agenda requires the transformation of silence from a shameful experience to an empowering space of resistance and agency (604). However, in Nira's case, silence becomes an extension of subordination. By relinquishing speech, she attempts to assert autonomy and retain her female agency, yet the very act of withholding her voice is interpreted by others as reinforcing her marginality. Her resistance to public "surveillance" and fear of exposure suggest a deeper concern about being labeled vulnerable under familial expectations. As Mahoney explains, the loss of voice is "equated with loss of self or at best with an inauthentic or 'fraudulent' self" (615).

Although Nira's choice to remain invisible carried risks and "demanded" justification within the narrative, it functioned as her mode of asserting control, refusing to be consumed by a system and a hostile public discourse that, as shown in the past, fostered stigmatization, victim-blaming, and surveillance. The detectives' persistent attempts to "extract" her voice, her story, by "border-crossing" neglect to acknowledge Nira's withdrawal as her act of resistance, or a form of self-protection through strategic invisibility. By framing Nira's anonymity and silence as an obstacle to justice, *Broadchurch* does not encourage audiences to think about rape outside traditional frames of victimhood, and misses the opportunity to reframe invisibility as a deliberate, political act. It fails to push viewers to understand that invisibility is not always silence. It is an act of protection and self‑definition. As Grodal and Kramer acknowledge, viewer engagement with fictional characters is a "plastic" process dictated by the viewer's relation to the agent. When that frame lacks nuance, it limits the potential for empathetic resonance and vicarious emotional understanding (27).

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[36] Sahana Harrison, Nira, *Broadchurch*, Season 3, Episode 6, 13:23 – 13:47.

[37] Nira's silence is not interpreted unidimensionally; however, her noncommunication has no potential for strength or resistance. It does not foster her capacity, or the capacity of any other abused women in her communicty, to speak out confidently and authoritatively.

In examining the cultural scripts that shape responses to sexual violence, Edwards notes that women's shame proneness remains an important component of their continued oppression. He argues that individuals who are read through a culturally "feminized" lens, especially those whose bodies are marked as always sexually available, are particularly vulnerable to shame (572). Importantly, he analyzes clothing not as an inherent gendered object of shame for women but as a socially constructed site of exposure. In this way, shame becomes tied not only to the event of violation but to how the body is perceived and presented: "It may be speculated that clothing originated in the generalization of shame to the whole body, and the consequent need to cover it from the stare of the other" (Edwards 572). This dynamic is reflected in the character of Laura Benson, another sexually abused woman in *Broadchurch*, who voices her tensions during her interview with the detectives:

> **Alec:** Did you speak to anyone about the attack at the time?
> **Laura:** My GP. A week or two after. She told me I should report it. I told her I didn't want to. I didn't tell anyone. Till now.
> **Alec:** Why didn't you want to report this at the time?
> **Laura:** I know what happened. I read the papers. I had had a lot to drink. I mean, a lot. Plus, a short skirt. Nice top. Make-up. You think I don't know what they would do to me? I know how women like me get treated.
> **Alec:** Not by us.[38]

Similar to Nira, Laura's reluctance to report stems from a keen awareness of how survivors are subjected to moral scrutiny. Her comment, "I know how women like me get treated", exposes her anticipation of judgment shaped by broader cultural narratives that associate clothing, drinking, and appearance with culpability. Although Alec's response attempts to reassure her, "Not by us", the exchange reveals the biases survivors must navigate on a personal level, regardless of institutional intentions and systemic guarantees.

The short dialogue between Laura and D.I. Hardy captures a profound, internalized negotiation between shame, social morality, and self-perception. Laura's distress over what she was wearing at the time of the assault expresses a tragic but culturally conditioned belief: that clothing holds the power to prevent violence, to signal worth, and command respect. As Jacoby notes, clothing functions symbolically as a form of social armour, a way to establish validity in a world where women are taught that their bodies are always just being read, judged, and potentially violated (Jacoby 60).

[38] Alec Hardy, Laura Benson, *Broadchurch*, Season 3, Episode 5, 03:36 – 04:13.

Figure 7: Laura (Kelly Gough) confessing the details of her assault, *Broadchurch*, Season 3, Episode 5, ITV, 2017.

Her guilt reflects an internal split between social morality and personal autonomy. However, the series powerfully critiques this mindset by not validating her self-blame. Laura's pain is treated with empathy, emphasizing that no clothing choice can cause or justify violence. Freud's notion of shame-anxiety illuminates the depth of Laura's emotional collapse. Her shame is not about what happened, but about the fear of being seen complicit in it. This aligns with Freud's idea that guilt becomes harsher in the aftermath of suffering (Freud 87). At the same time, her shame-anxiety over the clothing is connected with reprehension, something that must not be carried out (Freud 85), and a fear of being shamed through one's fault, "one's own carelessness, adverse circumstances" (Jacoby viii). As Freud describes, this helplessness and desperation that comes with guilt is internalized by the shamed individual up to the extent that a fear of loss of love is foreshadowed (85): the victim takes on the role of both accused and judge, punishing themselves to make sense of what feels senseless (Freud 87).

Sedgwick describes the face as the main apparatus through which shame is exposed since even in the cry, all the facial features are merged: the corners of the lips are pulled downwards (see Figure 7), vocalization and breathing are more continuous, and there is an arching of the eyebrows (Sedgwick 109). Laura's face becomes a canvas of involuntary revelation; her pain is quiet but no less intense. The director's attention is solely on her face, emphasizing the isolation and intimacy of her confession.

Sedgwick further parallels clothing with veiling one's genitals. In different cultures, a cover over one's genitals is essential as it provides people with safety from exposing the most intimate and vulnerable part of their bodies (Sedgwick 134). In the aftermath of rape, Laura's intimacy with herself was interrupted as she felt polluted, a psychological nakedness that leaves her feeling unworthy and deeply exposed. Her insistence on clothing is not superficial but profoundly symbolic as she sees the outfit not as fabric but as a failed defense, a catalyst that supposedly incited the abuse. Through Sedgwick's lens, Laura's shame is culturally scripted, rooted in a system that associates clothing and bodies with guilt and culpability.

2.6 Breaking Silence and Moving Forward

Historically, the experience of shame has been intrinsically tied to the regulation of bodies, particularly those perceived as symbolic bearers of the community's identity. Discourses of nationalism, morality, and purity have often projected societal values onto these bodies, turning them into sites of moral scrutiny. In his early writings, Sigmund Freud discusses how the individual's relationship to shame and morality is constructed by the internalization of communal norms. He argues that the authority of the community constitutes civilization, and the cultural development of the individual is always interlocked with the cultural development of the group (Freud 49, 107). Within this framework, sexual abuse is often framed not solely as a violation of bodily autonomy but as a transgression that marks the individual "contaminated" for ending up with corrupted ethical values and morals[39]. This framing, however, dangerously shifts the focus from systemic violence to individual blame.

Mario Jacoby's Jungian framework highlights how shame is intricately tied to one's social context and sense of worth: "The more I doubt my self-worth, the more important the opinions of others become and the more sensitive I will be to the smallest hint of rejection" (Jacoby, viii). Often, individuals assigned subordinate social roles, frequently women, are disproportionately cast out as the "moral breakers" and are made to feel shame in the major sites of social life (Bartky 93). Bartky further explains that those subject to such marginalization have little control over the cultural apparatus itself and are often confronted with incomplete images of themselves (129). Exploring whether shame holds significance based on social identity, Lehtinen probes the gendered dimensions of this complex emotion (59). This section focuses on the experience of Trish, Laura, and Nira, highlighting how shame functions in contexts where bodies are regulated as sites of moral judgement.

[39] Behind the parade of moralism and high ideals, there is often likely to be something much more primitive going on to which the precise content of the ideals in question, and their normative value, is basically irrelevant. Such reflections ought to make us more sceptical about even the moralizing type of shaming, more determined to sift and analyse the ideals in question to see if they have more going for them than their sheer ubiquity (Nussbaum 220).

The Judeo-Christian mythology depicted women's desires as uncontrollable sites of danger and disgust, in opposition to the male body, which was routinely represented as contained, orderly, and with definite boundaries (Wilz 81). Additionally, Gill et al. state that news reporting frequently emphasizes that "it is women's responsibility to protect themselves against men" (57). As a consequence, this dichotomy reinforced societal expectations for women to present themselves as "pure" at every stage of their lives, even during pregnancy, which was often erased from the public sphere as "obscene and socially unacceptable" (Wilz 82). The physicality of the body (its aches, bleeding, and aging) poses a psychological burden across genders, reminding individuals of their vulnerability (Tracy 390). In this regard, shame is a universal emotion, intensely experienced by both female and male subjects. However, the unique biological processes that women undergo, combined with the heightened risk of sexual assault, turn the female body into a site that faces constant vulnerabilities (Tracy 395; Bartky 84).

Lehtinen distinguishes two prominent kinds of shame, the "aristocrat" one and shame of the underdog, and argues that women and other socially subordinate groups are more shame-prone than men (Lehtinen 60), due to their marginalization. In this framework, shame experienced by socially subordinate individuals functions as "an atonement to the social environment rather than an emotion" because it breeds a stagnant, unconstructive, and self-destructive self-obsession (Lehtinen 69). Due to the social conditions in their lives and "the moral panic" that shame cautions (Fileborn 100), Laura and Nira initially submit to maintaining the status quo and not reporting sexual abuse. They caught themselves in the vicious cycle of comparing themselves to utopian social standards of the community, which, in turn, undermined their agency. As the narrative unfolds, however, they chose to speak up, understanding that silence perpetuates systemic sexism and misogyny.

After the traumatic invasion of their bodies, an overpowering system of domination emerges, provoking intense feelings of pain, moral inadequacy, and unworthiness. The growing sense of inferiority discomforted them to an extent that their views of themselves as individuals and women were corrupted. Being the objects and the subjects of their shame, the boundaries of shame were inevitably fused and blurred. This fusion is portrayed through their bodily responses, dropping their eyes, their heads, and sometimes shrinking their whole upper bodies as an urge for invisibility and avoidance of the other person's face in particular. When public attention is drawn to the physical self instead of the soul, notes Tracy, gaze aversion, smile control, and sometimes a blush are incited (395).

Similarly, Sedgwick highlights the significance of the face in expressing shame, "because the self lives in the face, the self burns brightest in the eyes (136). Shame heightens

the visibility of the face and generates the torment of self-consciousness. The face is the most common locus of blushing because it represents the chief organ of general speech and of affect alike (Sedgwick 136), which explains Williams's frequent use of close-ups during moments of emotional intensity. The self lives where it exposes itself and where it receives similar exposures from others. The mouth talks, the eyes perceive, and the movements of the facial musculature are uniquely related to one's experience and to the effects transmitted to others (Sedgwick 137). Thus, in the case of shame from sexual abuse, body, face, and mind create separate discourses which at first appear confusing but in the end intermingle, articulate one sole experience, and are read as one text.

In the aftermath of the violation of her body, Trish felt shame not only because of the importance of others in her life but due to the judgment attached to the opinion those people held about her before the assault: "I hate myself. I don't want to be in my body. I don't want to be in my head". Kaufman explains that with experiences of violation, the self is disowned and betrayed to the extent that it "withdraws deeper inside to escape the agony of exposure, and the victim experiences identity crises" (121). Coming forward about her abuse exposed Trish to an urge to hide, disappear, and become invisible. By focusing on her through a close-up, Williams invites the viewers to consider her metamorphosis.

Figure 8: Trish (Julie Hesmondhalgh), Broadchurch, Season 3, Episode 3, ITV, 2017.

At first, shame isolates Trish. In Figure 8, she is positioned precisely at the center of the frame in a medium close-up, enclosed by the sharp, straight lines of the window and the parallel

lines of the radiator behind her. These geometric elements create a visual cage around her, emphasizing her entrapment within the domestic space. She is portrayed within the confines of her home, physically and emotionally withdrawn from external engagement. Although shame has not fully overtaken her, the visual composition effectively conveys her desire for concealment. The side lighting creates a dramatic interplay of light and shadow over her face, emphasising her wrinkles, frown, and inner conflicts. Her gaze is averted, her eyes reveal apprehension, and the visible bruises on her face indicate the trauma she has endured. The yellow jumper contrasts strikingly with the paleness of her skin, drawing the viewer's attention to the emotional burden she carries, symbolically weighing down on her shoulders. Within the large universe of patriarchal social relations, it is the harmonious relationship with the surrounding community that makes it difficult for rape survivors as "shame-existing subjects" (Zahavi 221) to separate "the inner from the outer shame" (Bartky 85). Survivors often imagine that others view them with pure contempt, superficially disguised as pity. This explains why many women prefer to remain silent about their experiences of rape.

In the case of Trish, as a middle-aged woman, shame takes another form, especially upon learning that her rapist was a teenage boy. The discourse of aging makes women of a certain age invisible, yet simultaneously "easy prey", as King regards them (99). Trish's internal conflict arises from the vulnerability of her aging body, the disruption of the "natural" order caused by someone in the age of her daughter (since she strongly believes that age should defer to youth), and her inability to defend herself against an adolescent rapist.

In her speech after learning the identity of her sexual predator, she mistakenly correlates sexual abuse with desire, and finds it difficult articulating why a 16-year-old boy would consider her as "the object" of his desire, hence her question in Episode 8: "Why me? Why did he pick me? What had I done?". The echo of this question is meaningful. Trish asks the same thing in Episode 1, where she knew nothing about the man who raped her, and keeps repeating it, confused, even after the identity of her rapist is revealed. It appears that her expectations of how she would feel after everything would come to light did not align with the final result. There is no "Why?" when it comes to sexual abuse. Trying to answer that question would render anyone on a vicious journey where there is no promise of a solution, only dangerous repercussions. Although guilt accompanies her in almost every episode of the show, Trish appears more assured and certain in Episode 8:

> **Cath**: Look, I know you are not the same person you were before you were raped, but…
> **Trish**: I am more the person now than I have ever been. Now get out.
> **Cath**: Fine.

> **Trish**: No, no, no, no. Not that way. Not through my house. Back way. Slink out like your husband did.[40]

This conversation between the two childhood friends marks the definitive end of their friendship. At this moment, a transformed and confident Trish breaks free from the shame, guilt, and all the other social stigmas that burdened her throughout the narrative. She appears unapologetic, symbolizing her readiness to leave the past behind and undertake the next stage of her life.

After publicly releasing details of Trish's case, the detectives discover that two other young women in the community have also been assaulted by a sexual perpetrator over the last few years, Nira and Laura. One woman is eager and eager to cooperate formally, while the other has chosen not to come forward, having sought to heal and move on with the trauma. Both women's experiences are written with sympathy, highlighting the complex fears associated with sexual abuse.

After the assault, Nira, Trish, and Laura's sense of self-dignity was traumatized so severely that, initially, shame prohibited them from talking about it. Their shame stems from their commitment to the established standards of the community. Their consent to this alienation caused by the Other's look constitutes them as defenceless beings incapable of determining, regulating, and controlling their relationship to themselves. Sartre construes shamed individuals as slaves who give up their freedom to the extent that "their being is dependent on a freedom which is not even theirs" (Sartre 267). The social anxieties that follow shame narrow down individuals' freedom and impair their abilities to attune to the requirements of particular situations (Jacoby 6). Being perceived as a malign emotion, shame reveals itself by directly decreasing Trish, Laura, and Nira's confidence and self-respect and alternatively involving "feelings of worthlessness and inferiority" (Mayer 2).

The silent protest of all women of the community of Broadchurch in Episode 8 embodies remarkably not only their resistance to shame but also how those women vociferously manifest each other's vulnerabilities in a way that ensures they are all heard and believed and their truths are ascertained. Such gestures of solidarity not only limit the manifestation of prevailing responses to sexual violence but also function as commitments to "acknowledge, validate, and support the disclosure of other victims/survivors" (Taylor D 110). Such shared transformative disclosures also give rise to joint sentiments that bind women together in a community of feeling and help them reclaim personal control over judgments that reverberate with shame.

[40] Cath Atwood, Trish Winterman, *Broadchurch*, Season 3, Episode 8, 36:13 -36:32.

Broadchurch calls for the creation of a *new co-participant*, not spectator, an integrative and collective significant Other that would revolutionize the whole cultural and sensual orientation. In her article "Narcissism", Bartky calls for a revolutionary aesthetics of the body: "We must create a new witness, a significant Other, integrated into the self but nourished and strengthened from without, from a revolutionary feminist community" (140). The ideas of what constitutes beauty in film, drama, and visual arts need to be expanded and altered. The gathering of all women of the community represents a fascinating union of supportive agendas of feminine power, which, on one end of the spectrum, chart and mobilize their freedom through authenticity and anti-oppressive protests. On the other end, the harmonic merging of their consolidation builds contemporary and safe spaces where the basis for a new sexual morality can be articulated without chastisement, and victimhood is not recognized as an influential marker of one's identity.

It speaks of a need for new ways of imagining the body and aims for a need for sensual emancipation, which does not lie in "new" images, nor is it sex-specific. After the assault, the subjectivity of Nira, Trish, and Laura was diminished. Their selfhood is discussed as frozen and closely bound up with their "otherness" due to their sexually stimulating bodies. As the events unfold, they prove that the boundaries given to one's self-image after a physical and/or psychological abuse are blurred, and in that vulnerable position, external judgements of the self are applied. In community-based cultures that so often and so early make girls and women feel powerless, everything that nourishes playfulness and the ecstatic ought to be cherished and cultivated daily instead of oppressed.

While Trish, Nira, and Laura each navigate the terrain of shame and survival, their stories expose a broader pattern where individual trauma is compounded by social mechanisms of shame which result in silencing, an issue that becomes even more urgent when disbelief is not only communal and cultural but also deeply embedded in institutions meant to offer protection, as explored in the following chapter through *Unbelievable*.

Chapter 3: When a Rape Case Is Derailed: Portraying a Culture of Disbelief in *Unbelievable*

> "The truth is... I would lie earlier...and better…Because even with good people...even with people that you can kind of trust...if the truth is inconvenient...and... if the truth does not fit...they do not believe it", states Marie Adler in Episode 7, during a fragile moment of confession.

While *Broadchurch* interrogates shame as a communal and relational force, Netflix's *Unbelievable* (2019), based on a true story, shifts the focus toward another pervasive and destructive instrument: disbelief and the conditional nature of trust. This chapter explores how the series *Unbelievable* constructs a culture of disbelief, one that not only attempts to silence women by trivializing their stories but also delegitimizes them through institutional misogyny. This culture of "institutionalized misogyny", as defined by Harmer and Lewis, is one where credibility is gendered, trauma is pathologized, and justice is denied (5). Drawing on feminist media theory and trauma studies, this chapter examines how *Unbelievable* reclaims the narrative space of the survivor and the origin of the culture of disbelief by primarily highlighting the ethical failures of institutional response to sexual abuse and the extent to which disbelief limits justice by "corrupting" the medical and judicial opinion. It reclaims the power of individual narratives of sexual abuse by challenging a system that, shaped by disbelief, reduces rape to a question of science and law rather than an individual experience. It demands empathy, credibility, and justice on the survivor's terms.

Unbelievable, co-created, written, and co-directed by Sussanah Grant and based on the Pulitzer Price winning investigative book by T. Christian Miller and Ken Armstrong (*A False Report: A True Story of Rape in America*), is an investigative and drama series focusing on the real-life case of Marie Adler, an 18 year-old teenager whose rape complaint was dismissed by the police and detectives, leading to profound re-traumatization. In adapting the investigative framework of the original text, *Unbelievable*, Grant shifts the lens from procedural objectivity to narrative intimacy. As she states, the goal was to screen "the authenticity of someone's experience", using only essential factual elements while ethically fictionalizing others, "primarily out of respect for their privacy and their families' privacy" (Hill). While not an autoethnographer in the strict academic sense, Grant constructs a mediated, survivor-centered narrative that resonates with the goals of relational autoethnography—foregrounding emotional authenticity, social critique, and ethical responsibility in representing trauma. Avoiding voyeristic or "slightly porny" depictions of

rape, the first episode is devoted entirely to Marie's subjectivity, cultivating viewer empathy before introducing what she refers to for *IndieWire* as "the whole notion of people approaching sexual assault in a different way" (Hill).

Grant's storytelling aligns with the principles of evocative and relational autoethnography, which seek to "elicit emotions" and explore "subjective motives and intentions that underpin human actions" (Beattie 5, 19). Although Grant is not recounting personal trauma, her approach emphasizes deep subjectivity and narrative accountability, allowing viewers to see the world through the eyes of sexual abuse survivors. Her storytelling reflects what Beattie refers to as a "congruence between embodied and procedural ethics," where meaning is co-produced through symbiotic interaction with the Other (Beattie 163-164).

The series is divided into eight agonizing episodes and two different timelines depicting the life of Marie in Washington on the one hand, and on the other, the stories of four women in Colorado raped by the same man. It is important to note that the story takes place in America, thus Susannah Grant's lens criticizes the dysfunctional law enforcement and the U.S. criminal justice system. Through the embodied empathy of her female investigators and survivor-focused storytelling, Grant foregrounds new strategies of characterizing the power of women's television in the process of imaging, positioning her work within the affective feminist cultural production.

At the core of the series lies a critique of the way rape is interpreted institutionally and by the community surrounding Marie, not as a deeply embodied and emotional experience, but as a problem of science, legal credibility, and lack of evidence. As Chancellor explains, rape myths operate as culturally entrenched beliefs that obscure the realities of sexual violence and are thoroughly embedded in our society and culture (23). *Unbelievable* intentionally challenges these myths by foregrounding victims who do not conform to stereotypical ideals: a woman does not necessarily need to be sexually appealing to the rapist, and the rapist does not need sexual stimulation to rape. Similar to *Broadchurch*, it resists sensationalism and challenges televisual representations of sexual abuse prior to Weinstein's scandal: survivors are not hypersexualised and rapists are not depicted as monsters, but as products of institutional negligence.

Media coverage of sexual abuse, whether in arthouse cinema or in episodic television that deploys rape as a narrative strategy, has long been shaped by the victim's class, race, moral character, and sexual history, as Harmer and Lewis observe (2-3), meaning that certain

kinds of perpetrators and victims of sexual abuse received varying levels of coverage[41]. This has resulted in uneven representation, where certain perpetrators and victims receive disproportionate attention. Consequently, the focus of public narratives shifts from the question "What kind of man commits rape?" to "What kind of woman is raped?", thereby intensifying victim-blaming by subjecting survivors to heightened scutiny rather than interrogating the conditions that enable sexual violence. As a post-Weinstein cultural product, *Unbelievable* meticulously traces the institutional dismantling of Marie's credibility, thereby redirecting focus from the structural mechanisms that uphold misogyny and disbelief toward solutions that advocate for systemic reform and survivor-centered justice.

This chapter traces the series' critical depiction of disbelief as it operates on multiple levels: interpersonal, investigative, institutional, and medical. The series focuses on three perspectives: Marie's as the rape survivor, the male detectives representing the hermeneutics of suspicion by neglecting the existence of rape in her case, and the female detectives as the hermeneutics of empathy (the determined ones who would spend considerable screen time running down leads and connecting dots). This intersection that the series' narrative offers through male and female detectives explores the moral and hermeneutical dilemmas associated with truth-seeking in the case of rape narratives. It further offers devastating insights into the social mechanisms of police procedures that, too often, as visually represented, decelerate the law enforcement investigation, defer institutional trust, postpone justice, and prevent rape victims from being believed. At the core of the analysis is also the manifestation of trauma in fragmented memory and somatic responses, as theorized by van der Kolk et al., who explain how sensory memory disrupts narrative coherence in trauma survivors (17).

Ultimately, the current chapter raises a whole set of questions relevant to the present study: How do institutional frameworks of justice perpetuate disbelief? Can legal paradigms account for trauma's discontinuities? Can disbelief and doubt corrupt professionalism and mold institutional weakness?

3.1 Procedural Harms and Institutional Failures

Susannah Grant's *Unbelievable* (2019) resists the imposition of a single, all-controlling gaze, and instead encourages its viewers to actively seek meaning through the show's narrative, subjective survival testimonies, empathetic listening, and police evidence. Throughout the series, Grant adopts alternative audiovisual methods that frame survivors not as *the other,* but

[41] Cases most likely to be reported include stranger assaults, inter-racial assaults, sexual murder and serial rape even though most sexual assaults are committed by those known to the victim (Harmer and Lewis 3).

foreshadow them as active storytellers of their experiences of abuse. Through a careful analysis of its formal and compositional elements, this section contends that the flawed dynamics of rape investigations are rooted not simply in institutional bureaucracy, but in the divergent methodologies employed by female and male investigators. In particular, it emphasizes how the dismissal of a survivor's voice by the (male) investigators shapes the broader sociocultural understanding of sexual violence, too.

Figure 9: Marie (Kaitlyn Dever) on her first appearance after the rape; Episode 1, Netflix, 2019.

The emotional weight of Marie's story stems from its insistence on ordinary detail, and the central conflict arises from the treatment Marie receives at the hands of Detectives Pruitt and Parker following her report of sexual assault. Their presumption of deceit, coupled with coercive questioning techniques, culminates in Marie's forced recantation, turning the investigation process into a site of secondary victimisation. It is essential to highlight that Marie is a victim of continuous institutional neglect, having grown up without parental support, and moving as a child between multiple foster families, a background subtly conveyed in Episode 1 through the emotionally detached presence of her former foster mom, Judith.

In *Unbelievable*, the first appearance of Marie, portrayed by Kaitlyn Dever (see Figure 9), is framed through a non-neutral camera lens that captures her in a state of psychological distress. The eye-level medium shots position her as disoriented and isolated: she is wrapped in a blanket, her eyes are fixed downward, thereby visually encoding her trauma without

sensationalizing it. The mise-en-scène is intentionally muted; the grey, beige, and washed-out blue colours create a subdued atmosphere as Marie is sitting on the floor, in front of closed shutters, in a dimly lit room, with a hunched posture. This visual composition encodes her trauma without presenting her as an abstract victim: Marie's dislevelled hair and pale complexion convey her as an emotionally present subject, while the blanket becomes a literal and metaphorical shield. The controlled, static, and observational camerawork further highlights her isolation and alienation. It does not impose pity, consciously avoids sensationalism, but rather adopts a neutral empathy, aligning the viewer with her inner state while maintaining her subjectivity; therefore, it is captured through a non-neutral lens.

Although initially Marie is the object of the audience's and other characters' combined gaze, she is not a victim of screen sexualization, nor is she a passive image of visual perfection. Grant foregrounds a feminist ethics of looking, establishing a mode of spectatorship that follows a kind of muted emotional realism. Despite being ostensibly disempowered by the circumstances, Marie's affective impact on the viewer to sympathize with her is grounded in her authenticity as a character. As the narrative unfolds, viewers are invited to follow her transformation from marginalization to agency, a trajectory that sustains their engagement without compromising her dignity. In doing so, *Unbelievable* not only foregrounds the female perspective but also subverts traditional modes of representation by replacing objectification with a female-centered narrative and seriousness in screening emotional complexity.

Establishing trust with the victim is vital to a successful interrogation because it might be likely that it may be their first time disclosing the experience of victimisation (Chancellor, *Investigating Sexual Assault Cases* 63). In *Unbelievable* (Episode 1), Marie's preliminary interview with Officer Curran explains how early interactions shape both the trajectory of the investigation and the survivor's willingness to engage. The exchange begins:

> **Officer Curran:** Marie, I am Officer Curran. I am here to help you. Can you tell me what happened?
>
> **Marie:** I was raped.
>
> **Officer Curran:** Okay!

This initial moment demonstrates a striking absence of affective sensitivity. The officer's reaction lacks any gesture of validation or emotional attunement to the gravity of Marie's disclosure, although she is still seated at the crime scene and is visibly distressed. Scholars, such as Fisher, highlight that preliminary interviews are crucial because they determine the

scope of evidence the officer needs to focus on. Simultaneously, it is required that the first officer be a skilled interviewer "to elicit from the victim the painful details of the assault" (353).

Figure 10: Officer Curran interrogating Marie, Episode 1, *Unbelievable,* Netflix, 2019.

Following Marie's statement, Officer Curran pauses before repeating his question with a heightened sense of procedural urgency: "Can you tell me everything that happened? Everything you remember?". This shift in tone risks introducing the dynamics of interrogation, rather than care. Curran's body language[42], as depicted in Figure 10 through a medium close-up, signals concentration, perhaps discomfort, and skepticism, but is critically devoid of receptivity. The low-angle camera situates him over Marie, while his uniform and military-style haircut further emphasise detachment and the lack of empathy or reciprocity. The absence of affect is not incidental and does not register as an individual neglect but more of an institutional disposition shaped by procedural rigidity and lack of trauma-informed frameworks. The muted colour palette (dominated by washed-out blue, greys, and beiges) mirrors the emotional sterility of his interaction with Marie. The lighting is neither intimate nor expressive, aligning with a bureaucratic gaze rather than an empathetic one. The camera never allows for a sense of emotional reciprocity between him and Marie; therefore, his body language remains self-contained, almost clinically detached. However, as Eaglestone asserts, trauma should be approached from the vantage point of the victim (13); when that is absent, the risk of secondary harm intensifies. Curran is not a villainized character but a professional constrained by the limits of a system that prioritizes protocol over care.

[42] looking downward, furrowed brows, locked lips.

In *Responsibility and Judgement*, Hannah Arendt reflects on the nature of moral philosophy and the "faculty of prejudgment", interrogating the tension between free will and desire:

> What we have lost sight of entirely is the will as arbiter, that which chooses freely. Free choice meant free from desire. Where desire intervened, the choice was prejudged. The arbiter was originally the man who approached an occurrence as an unconcerned spectator. He was an eyewitness, and as such, noncommitted. Because of his unconcern, he was held to be capable of impartial judgment. Hence, freedom of will as *liberum arbitrium* never starts something new; it is always confronted with things as they are (283).

Arendt's insight frames the complexities of institutional response to trauma. In *Unbelievable*, Officer Curran's interview with Marie unfolds in ways that complicate the ideal of impartial judgment. As shown in Figure 10, his non-verbal responses invite the viewer to reflect on how such gestures may be perceived by a vulnerable subject, such as Marie.

Research by Dawtry et al. suggests that individuals with high rape myth acceptance (RMA) tend to retain information that supports rape myths, making this information more influential in their thinking, which, in turn, increases their likelihood of blaming the victim (2). Chancellor further emphasizes that confidence in a victim's credibility often increases when the victim has visible signs of injuries, as this reinforces their beliefs in the victim's credibility (*Investigating Sexual* 23). Within this context, this scene underscores how Marie's testimony, delivered without visible signs of injury, may be perceived with unwarranted suspicion. In this light, Curran's behaviour may not reflect his skepticism but mirror broader institutional failures, particularly those rooted in a system that has historically lacked comprehensive rape response trainings, and has contributed to systemic disbeliefs in victims' testimonies. The episode invites viewers to consider how systems of judgment are shaped less by individual intent, rather than structural gaps in understanding trauma responses while interviewing.

Chancellor describes counterintuitive victim behaviours as responses carried by the victim, during and after the assault, that may appear inconsistent with stereotypical expectations of how survivors "should" react in the aftermath of their assault (*Investigating Sexual* 28). Such behaviours are often copying mechanisms shaped by the survivor's need to navigate trauma and preserve psychological safety. In Episode 1, approximately five minutes into the narrative, Marie begins to recount the incident, yet her speech is actively interrupted

by Officer Curran, whose questions, such as asking why she was out late, continuously reflect a victim-blaming framework. The interrogation dynamic becomes even denser with the presence of Judith, Marie's former foster mother. Rather than offering emotional support, Judith appears focused on eliciting specific details, contributing to an atmosphere of scrutiny rather than care.

While both Curran and Judith may believe they are acting in the service of truth, their shared approach demonstrates how individuals, consciously or not, reproduce systems of disbelief. Arendt, in her meditation on reason and judgement, reminds us that true reasoning must transcend all temporalities, as reason visits a timeless space where "numbers, for instance, are forever what they are" (281). In this sense, both characters operate within the constraints of temporal judgement, reacting to the immediate discomfort of ambiguity rather than entering, what Arendt refers to, a "timeless space" where impartial judgement is exercised. Their responses reflect symptomatic failures to establish frameworks of care, trust, and openness within institutional and relational settings.

Although during a sexual abuse interrogation, it is not inherently inappropriate to ask very sensitive questions, the timing, tone, and context in which they are asked are critically important. Within five minutes in the series and in the absence of medical professionals, Curran proceeds by asking Marie if the penetration was only vaginal or with the perpetrator's fingers too, to which she responds shamefully, "not his fingers". This early focus on graphic details, before any medical examination has occurred, further illustrates his lack of trauma-informed practice.

As the first responding officer, Curran is the first point of institutional contact, having the responsibility to establish not only the investigative framework but also a sense of psychological safety for the survivor. The lack of guidance and protection from this figure of authority retraumatizes Marie, pushing her to relive every detail of the attack through flashbacks, which are "external representations of what occurs in the psyche of the character", as Persson argues (227). Her minimal response (*"not his fingers"*) indicates that she feels overwhelmed about providing more details; however, it is still unclear to Curran that he needs to pause, assure her that she feels safe, and somehow give back some control instead of pressuring her for further details. Fisher emphasizes that after the preliminary interview, the victim/survivor should be taken to the hospital emergency room for a thorough examination because time is of the essence for such crimes (353-354). This standard protocol is bypassed in Marie's case, which, afterwards, compromised both her well-being and the evidentiary process.

Within ten minutes of the show's opening, Marie is asked to recount the incident again, this time to the medical personnel. "Sorry! We need it for our records!", she is told, underscoring a procedural/clinical priority over her emotional state. The nurse, while providing critical information, does so in a tone that appears detached, reading aloud a list of post-assault symptoms, "excessive bleeding, vaginal discharge, shortness of breath, trouble swallowing, hives, thoughts of killing yourself…", without any contextual explanation or emotional reassurance. Presented without any emotional grounding, this information, although very undoubtedly important, does not meet the emotional needs of a sexually abused teenager already experiencing disbelief, shame, and anxiety. What unfolds is an institutional pattern of procedural detachment where care is conflated with protocol and empathy is sidelined for efficiency. A clinician's capacity for empathy, as Kaplan observes, is not an isolated trait but is shaped by the clinician's own access to an emotional and institutional support system (*Why Trauma* 41).

3.2 The Architecture of Distrust: Authority and Personal Truth at Risk

To understand where trust can be meaningfully located, we must map the contours of its absence. As Baier argues, trust must precede the very virtues that sustain it because some degree of trust is the starting point and very basis of morality (175-179). *Unbelievable* exemplifies how institutional distrust governs the response of professionals to sexual assault. It accentuates the corruption of a contaminated justice system that lacks the ethics of trust and is easily "bribed" by human fallibility and inconsistent discourse.

The reliance of the judicial system on medico-legal evidence in rape cases shapes a static definition of what counts as evidence. "Science is always unfinished business", argue Max Lugavere and Paul Grewal, who emphasize that science should be seen as an instrument for understanding, not an infallible measure of truth (17). When the body becomes the primary site of evidence, the subjective understandings of trauma are often disregarded. This reductivity not only flattens the complex relationship between embodiment and memory but also fails to understand how gendered assumptions shape interpretations of one's credibility.

In *Unbelievable*, the standard of truth imposed by the male investigators renders Marie's narrative almost impossible to validate. Through their interrogation technique, they reinforce cultural scripts that demand physical proof, linearity, and coherence, privileging these over the fragmented nature of her memory. As Harmer and Lewis note, the logic of rape myths, unexamined cultural beliefs that cast doubt on sexual assault claims, invalidate women's accounts of violence, often suggesting fabrication or exaggeration (7). McMillan identifies a "hierarchy" of presumed false allegations that ranges from vengeful/ malicious to

mistaken/ confused, with a corresponding reduced level of culpability attributed to women for the supposedly false allegation (1). One of the clearest ways Marie's testimony is undermined is through comments that outwardly expressed skepticism about the accuracy of what she reported. As Barry A.J. Fisher states, rape investigations differ immensely from any other crime investigation since they rely on physical evidence (the victims'/survivors' body is the crime scene), and for this reason, "the testimony of the victim is viewed with as much mistrust by juries, courts, and sometimes even prosecutors and police" (Fisher 352).

The opening scenes of *Unbelievable* offer a visual commentary on institutional response to sexual assault. When Marie reports her rape, a team of police officers thoroughly searches her flat for evidence. Their methodical inspection (rifling through her clothes and personal objects) resembles a forensic sweep for incriminating evidence, rather than an effort to support a sexually abused victim at a crime scene. The atmosphere of suspicion is palpable. This visual language closely parallels a similar sequence in the British crime drama *Adolescence* (2025), where officers evade the home of a suspected murderer, Jamie. While both scenes deploy similar cinematic techniques, tense pacing, muted lighting, and close-up framing, the distinction lies in the narrative framing as Marie is treated as a suspect despite being the victim, while the scrutiny of Jamie's flat is rooted in his culpability. The visual language underscores similar assumptions of guilt, a sense of accusatory surveillance, reinforcing the assumption that Marie's narrative must be tested, doubted, or potentially disproven.

This lack of distinction between perpetrator and victim becomes a driving force in Marie's psychological trajectory. Surrounded by disbelief, Marie begins to internalize it and reaches a point of inducing self-deception. At one point, her sense of reality becomes destabilized, as she can no longer distinguish reality from her truth and ultimately fails to keep her truth "alive". As the series unfolds, it becomes evident that Marie's primary struggle is against the force of institutional doubt rather than the trauma of the assault.

Having established how distrust can distort professional authority, the series depicts its gradual erosion. After Marie's initial statement to Officer Curran, Detectives Pruitt and Parker enter the scene and take over the investigation. "I know this is hard, but I need to ask you some questions about what happened", says Detective Parker (Episode 1, 06:35). Despite the sensitive nature of the encounter, his tone remains procedural and detached. Marie's response, "I already told him", referring to Officer Curran, registers a growing awareness that her testimony is being met with a lot of scrutiny rather than trust and care.

The mise-en-scène of Marie's interrogation by the male detectives Pruitt and Parker (see Figure 11) ensures the oppression of her position as a testifier. Framed between the two

men, Marie is positioned at the center of a rigid composition that heightens her isolation. The symmetrical wall behind her, the perfectly squared shape of the ceiling with the high-angle gridlike lines, and the window on her left side reinforce her entrapment. By placing her tiny and fragile figure in such a geometrical room devoid of any personal objects, warmth, or colour, the scene emphasises the way bureaucratic procedures may create a threatening, hostile environment for trauma survivors. By confronting the camera, Marie implies a greater intimacy with the viewers than the detectives do. Her gaze, despite seeming distant, is imbued with feelings of a desire to embrace outer space, begging the audience to believe and help her. Marie's positioning at the far end of the frame, visually constrained by parallel lines, underscores her marginality within the justice system. Her rare glances toward the camera foster a momentary intimacy with the viewer, extending a silent appeal for trust. This visual alignment contrasts sharply with the detectives whose posture communicates procedural detachment.

Figure 11: Detectives Pruitt (Bill Fagerbakke) and Parker (Eric Lange) interrogating Marie; Episode 1, Netflix, 2019.

Director and co-writer, Susanah Grant, symbolically uses this structural mechanism while filming this scene to expose all institutional mechanisms that render as passive victims those who these procedures are expected to defend. The symmetrical shot of Marie's figure, while being surrounded by the wide-shouldered detectives, is a conscious attempt by Grant to imply her vulnerability and powerlessness. As Louise Gianetti notes, framing techniques are rarely neutral: "When there are two or more figures in the frame and they are approximately the

same size, the figure nearer the bottom of the screen tends to be dominated by those above" (53).

Grant's intention during the portrayal of police procedure in *Unbelievable* was to evict Marie from a discourse purportedly created for her, and focus only on the problematic narrative the detectives design by screening them as emotionally detached from the victim to retain their traditional masculinity. As echoed by camera shots, Pruitt and Parker, through interrogating Marie repeatedly, using puzzling procedures, and neglecting her traumatic experience, appear hesitant and suspicious toward her testimony. Their portrayal aligns with Fisher's reminder that contemporary investigative approaches require care:

> The victim should be treated nonjudgmentally and with sensitivity. Observations about the victim noted in the crime report will be important at a later time. The psychological state of the victim may be significant. The officer should realize, however, that people in serious emotional crises might not immediately exhibit states of anguish and grief that might be expected. The victim might appear perfectly calm and in control of herself when interviewed by the police. This behaviour is not uncommon (Fisher 353).

Marie's composure, far from any signs of dishonesty, is in fact consistent with trauma-informed responses. However, the detectives interpret her lack of affect through a biased lens shaped by expectation. Their authoritative position suggests institutional power and domination, reinforcing the imbalance and asymmetry between them and Marie's shrinking posture.

The preoccupation of Detectives Pruitt and Parker with coherence in Marie's confession becomes a limiting factor in the development of her case. By denying the legitimacy of her narrative, they create a hypertrophy of the apparatus of distrust and intensify its dominance in their investigation. The institutional power that they both represent is the monopoly of power that leads them to be permanently in their jurisdiction and, by all means, enhances their authority. In opposition to them, Marie's influence is narrowed down to being an inferior subordinate due to the fallibility of her speech. The inconsistencies of her story are used as an entry ticket to the world of falsity, where she is the leading character. However, Dawtry et al. describe one's memory as a constructive process subject to distortion through the influence of pre-existing beliefs, attitudes, and expectations. When recalling events, individuals often fill in memory gaps using generalized knowledge, which can either overwrite original details or generate new, inaccurate information that is inconsistent with

previously stated frameworks (2). Unable to resist the negation of her truth, Marie felt trapped in the detectives' alienation and was powerless to oppose the deterioration of her situation.

The interrogation reaches a turning point in Episode 1, where Detective Pruitt directly challenges Marie's credibility:

> **Detective Pruitt**: You are a smart young woman, clearly. You must understand the way you are handling this...You say one thing, and you write another. There is a rapist, there is not one. It is a dream; it is a blackout. You have told us four different versions. At this point, regardless of what the truth is, the only thing we know for sure is that you have told us at least three lies. What do you think should happen...to someone who would...lie about something like this?[43]

This moment encapsulates another structural failure: rather than adopting a tone of curiosity and compassion to clarify the inconsistencies of her statement, the interrogation becomes a test of credibility and confrontation. While inconsistencies in statements are a natural result of trauma, the tone of Pruitt's words implies blame and dishonesty rather than understanding or seeking clarity from Marie. Thus, the language used ("What do you think should happen...To someone who would...Lie about something like this?") intimidates, shames, and discourages Marie from cooperating.

Figure 12: Detective Pruitt (Bill Fagerbakke) intimidating Marie during the interrogation; Episode 1, Netflix, 2019.

[43] Detective Pruitt to Marie, *Unbelievable*, Episode 1, 45:44- 46:20.

Figure 12 captures a pivotal moment where institutional intimidation is rendered through the visual language of coercion, starting from the camera angle, lighting, and expression. The low-angle, extreme close-up of Detective Pruitt's face dominates the frame. By placing the camera lower, this composition accentuates his dominance as the viewer is witnessing the same image as Marie, who is sitting below him, reinforcing his authoritative figure. His face creates the illusion of a threat, mirroring the emotional entrapment Marie is experiencing in the interrogation room. His tense eyes and tight jaw embody aggression masked as authority, while the clinical lighting lacks warmth and continues the dehumanizing atmosphere.

Arthur S. Chancellor, a U.S. expert in violent crimes, explains the difficulties coming from written statements when investigating sexual assault. He notes that while written statements during interrogation are considered traditional police techniques, they also risk prematurely fixing a survivor's testimony in ways that conflict with the nature of traumatic memories. "Locking the victim into their own statement", Chancellor explains, becomes detrimental if the survivor remembers new details after time has passed (*Investigating* 60).

In *Unbelievable*, Officer Curran's notes from Marie's initial interview vanish once Detectives Pruit and Parker take over. This reflects the institutional eagerness to expedite the case by prioritizing institutional clarity over narrative complexity. Chancellor explains that, in addition to collecting details from the testimony, asking the victim to prepare a rough sketch of the room or area where the attack happened is crucial, as it serves as corroborative evidence when conducting the scene examination later by the police (60). Yet, in this investigation, such practices are notably absent. Instead, Marie's inconsistencies become the object of scrutiny.

Although there is a question of trust, it is not because Marie is misleading the detectives. The distrust inherently challenges Detectives Pruitt and Parker while building their case. It is further amplified by the intervention of Judith, her previous foster mother, who reaches out to Detective Parker and casts suspicion on Marie's motives, drawing comparisons to herself since Judith, too, was subjected to sexual abuse years ago. Pardoxically, rather than fostering solidarity, Judith's intervention becomes a tool for further discrediting Marie. This, in turn, further motivates the detectives to mold the facts, recast Marie's testimony as manipulative, thereby isolating her socially and emotionally.

Once Detectives Pruitt and Parker intervened, they dismissed the case due to the lack of signs of forced entry, identifiable prints, and body fluids. However, bloodstains and hair were left behind the scene by the perpetrator, evidence that, if used appropriately, could have identified his DNA. The male detectives disregarded all that since there was no seminal fluid

found, even though seminal fluid may be absent if the perpetrator uses a condom, which Marie had stated before the medical examination. Despite that, all the found evidence was overlooked. Issues such as myths about rape, psychological trauma of the victim, and, in some cases, the investigator's feelings of discomfort in dealing with the victim must be addressed when investigating crimes of violence (Fisher 357). As seen in Marie's case, these failures converged, compromised procedures, and undermined the survivor's integrity.

3.3 Institutional Disbelief and the Cost of Expedience

Sexual harassment and violence are systemic problems that disproportionately affect women whose lived experiences are essential for understanding the roots of sexual abuse. A recurring barrier to justice in these cases is a pervasive culture of disbelief, which manifests through unwarranted doubts and institutional inaction. Harmer and Lewis contend that disbelief in the context of rape dismisses sexual violence altogether. Within this framework, the men perpetuating sexual abuse are portrayed reductively, as they are either mentally unstable, under the influence of drink or drugs, or simply criminals; thus, deflecting attention from broader sociocultural and institutional dynamics (12).

Philip N.S. Rumney, a former professor of Criminal Justice, emphasizes that this culture of disbelief is not merely anecdotal but reflects a patterned practice shared by a significant proportion of police officers[44] which negatively impacts decision-making. Notably, Rumney clarifies that this *culture* of disbelief is a mindset that does not necessarily represent the attitudes of the majority, but its presence even among a notable minority has systemic consequences (1). The effects of disbelief extend into both medical and judicial domains. In rape cases, physical signs of violence are frequently treated as key indicators of credibility. Thus, the higher the probative value assigned to medical findings, the more likely it is to help prove the existence of the abuse. This approach risks reducing complex experiences to clinical data points, often sidelining survivor testimonies, as witnessed in Marie's case. In fact, as Gill et al. state, "there is no clear evidence that false claims of rape are any more common than false claims of any other crime", especially considering that rape has higher standards of evidence than any other crime (57).

As Huda notes, the "medicalization of falsity" involves a "specific combination of power and knowledge", enabling science to speak on behalf of, or even against, the complainant, regardless of her narrative (3). In this light, medical reports are "allowed" to discredit testimony in the absence of physical injury. As Huda further elaborates, such

[44] This raises issues as to why these myths and stereotypes persist for some officers but not others.

interpretations by science, "the idea that science can be used to make a female body speak despite, or even to spite, her testimony"[45], further undermine the victim's credibility (Huda 3):

> [...] injuries in specific parts of the complainant's body are sought by doctors and judges as corroborative "signs of rape". If no "signs of rape" are found, this observation is then noted in the medical report and used to discredit the testimony of a rape complainant, by indicating that either the sexual intercourse was consensual or the rape accusation is false (Huda 1).

Inconsistencies are routinely interpreted as evidence of fabrication, even though consistency in such circumstances is quite unlikely considering the impact of trauma, the difficulties of taking and recording statements, inadequate questioning techniques by the police, and discrepancies about the level of detail survivors can reasonably provide (McMillan 7). Additional factors used to cast doubt on the falsity of complaints include perceived lack of detail, reluctance to engage in criminal justice procedures (such as undergoing the forensic medical examination), alcohol consumption at the time of the incident, and, in a few cases, a lack of injury on the complainant's body (McMillan 7).

Having explored the concept of intentional falsehood and the importance of corroborative evidence, let us return to the series and examine how these concepts are dramatized in the series. In one scene in Episode 1, Detective Pruitt confronts Marie with apparent contradictions in her testimony: "There are inconsistencies in your story. I mean, the dialling alone, we have four different versions: tied, untied, with your hands, with your toes". The rapid escalation of his skepticism underscored his reliance on a narrow understanding of credibility, one that overlooks the impact of trauma on memory and narrative coherence. The interrogation quickly shifts from investigative inquiry to accusatory confrontation, in which Marie is viewed as an obstruction to truth and justice. Detective Pruitt's subsequent monologue further exemplifies this shift:

> Let me explain something. Our job, mine and Detective Parker's, is to protect the public. That is it; that is the whole gig. Time in here with a witness is time that we could be out on the street, keeping people safe. Now, that is part of the job; it is fine. We are happy to do it, as long as the time here is valuable. If it is about something real. This is not a worthwhile use of our time. This is a waste of our time.[46]

[45] The purpose of such exclusive reliance on medical evidence is to "provide a purportedly 'objective' judgment as to whether or not the woman had made such resistance by examining her body for "signs" of the "true" rape" (Huda 3).
[46] Detective Pruitt to Marie, *Unbelievable*, Episode 1, 44:50- 45:20.

Detective Pruitt uses an assertive tone to reassess control and moral authority. Phrases like "Let me explain something" and "That is it, that is the whole gig" convey not only confidence but also an impatient approach to his work. By framing this interview as a "waste of our time", he implicitly frames Marie as untrustworthy of institutional resources and critiques her for being a burden on his time while further reinforcing his need for efficiency in the current situation. Considering the information provided by Marie as irrelevant, his impatience further grows as he only sees the lack of cooperation in her statements. In doing so, the series highlights how institutional neglect and impatience can re-traumatize complainant and discourage testimonies, especially when their narratives do not meet the normative expectations of coherence and clarity.

Detective Pruitt continues to appeal to Marie's sense of responsibility and guilt, subtly urging her to provide meaningful insight, although his dismissive tone has discouraged her from sharing. His approach reflects what Chancellor critiques as a problematic tendency among some detectives to interpret inconsistencies as evidence of deception, often accompanied by feelings of personal frustration. Chancellor counters this technique, arguing that such reactions are misplaced: "This is not true because detectives are paid to investigate reported crimes, and this is what they are doing. If they determine a crime was not committed or the victim has lied about the offense in question, then they have done their job" (*Investigating Sexual* 418). Rather than adopting suspicion or emotional reactivity, Chancellor contends that such reports should be treated as an opportunity to refine investigators' understanding of sexual assault dynamics, enhance their judgment, become better interviewers, and engage in evidence-based rather than emotionally driven inquiry (418).

This culture of disbelief becomes an oppressive, overwhelming presence in Marie's interrogation scene, when she finally decides to state that she only invented the story of her rape to get away from the re-traumatizing situation. Figure 13 reflects a moment when Marie becomes physically defeated, re-victimized not by the attacker but by the system meant to protect her. The frame freezes on her restrained plea, "Can I go now?", creating a sense of emotional suffocation and psychological exhaustion. Through a slightly lower than eye-level close-up camera shot that lingers closely on Marie's face, the viewer is drawn into her surrealistic experience perspective. The shot frames her face in the grey geometric cube of the interrogation room, creating a scene of entrapment. The use of muted, cold tones and flat lighting enhances the realism of the scene, mirroring Marie's emotional numbness, reinforcing the visual language of her trauma, and blurring the line between reality and fiction. Marie's face, quietly glistering with tears, suggests her quiet devastation, exhaustion,

and fear, not deceit. Her closed eyes may signify escapeism and renunciation, while her broken voice carries the weight of surrender, as the only desire she had in that moment was to escape the interrogation room.

Figure 13: Marie (Kaitlyn Dever) confessing she invented the story of sexual abuse at the police station, *Unbelievable*, Episode 1, Netflix, 2019.

Detective Pruitt's conduct exemplifies a failure to apply a trauma-informed approach. His interrogation lacks the foundational principles required for effective engagement with survivors of sexual abuse, namely sensitivity, empathy, and an understanding of how trauma affects memory, behavior, and communication. By prematurely dismissing her narrative as not "valuable", Pruitt undermines both her personal trust in authority and the investigative process altogether. In this way, *Unbelievable* highlights how systemic failures perpetuate harm, impede justice for those in need of emotional and institutional support, and gesture toward a justice system under strain, where the volume of sexual assault reports collides with limited institutional resources. In this light, skepticism and doubt become filtering mechanisms and are employed as functional strategies to manage overwhelming caseloads. Thus, *Unbelievable* offers a critique not merely of individual investigative failures, but of the structural pressures within the justice system that incentivize disbelief as a form of institutional expedience, often at the high cost of human suffering.

3.4 "She is Complicated": The Systemic Failure to Believe

Trust, as Govier argues, is an attitude based on beliefs and expectations about what others are likely to do. To trust is to assume that others will act with integrity, in helpful ways, or at least not be harmful to us. In this sense, trust establishes both vulnerability and interdependence, as there is always the element of risk in trust, "a chance that those whom we trust will not act as we expect" (Govier 17). Distrust invites suspicion and fear that others may act in immoral, manipulative, or deceitful ways (18). When systems are constructed on dominance rather than partnership, openness and mutual trust deteriorate both on the personal and institutional level (Govier 30).

Govier further distinguishes between trust in personal relationships and trust embedded in social roles. Relying on testimony, for instance, presupposes that the speaker is both honest and competent. Trust in authority, however, implies confidence not on the individual level but in the legitimacy of broader institutions, as "Trusting an expert presumes trust or confidence not only in present individuals but in past individuals and in those social institutions charged with cultivating, testing, and authorizing experts" (Govier 21). In cases of sexual assault, survivors have to rely on these institutions, starting from the police, social workers, and legal institutions, to be treated with dignity, not only to be believed. When this trust is breached, the consequences are deeply personal.

Unbelievable foregrounds this rupture in trust through the character of Marie. Her credibility was systematically dismantled by those supposed to protect her. By questioning Marie's reliability not only as a trustworthy protagonist of her story but also as the active recipient of the gaze, Detectives Pruitt and Parker frame Marie as the antagonist of the community around her. Pruitt, in particular, is visually framed as the embodiment of institutional cruelty. Close-up shots linger on his heavily scarred face (see Figure 12) to intentionally vilify and dehumanize him. His voice rises to a high pitch as he delivers the following: "This is not a worthwhile use of our time. This is a waste of our time" (Episode 1), after confronting her unreliable memories.

The show's framing of Marie's "unreliable" memories serves as an ethical critique of how institutions marginalise trust. However, as Turchiano notes in her article on the show, "reactions to trauma are as varied as people who experience trauma" (2019). It is normal for a trauma victim to have inconsistent memories; expecting consistency from someone in crisis ignores the psychological complexity of trauma. Marie's loss of institutional trust compromises the trust of the community around her. Becca, her foster care supervisor, enacts a disciplinary response toward her under the guise of rehabilitation:

Becca: [...] This whole thing has shaken people's trust in you. So, we need to address that. Make some changes to restore that trust.

Marie: Wh…what kind of changes?

Becca: We are going to cut back on some of your freedoms. Knock your curfew back an hour. Not forever, but for the time being. And we are going to do mandatory daily check-ins.

Marie: Why?

Becca: I think better communication will help you to stay on track.[47]

This exchange reflects the logic of mistrust. Rather than being supported, Marie is subjected to punishment through surveillance and restriction. Her previous experience as a foster child, disconnected and moving between foster homes, reflects the profound sense of abandonment she felt within the system. The response of Becca, as a representative of a system that prioritizes sheltering and emotional support for all abandoned children, aligns with Govier's assertion that distrust triggers judgment (17), since Marie's moral "failure" is treated as needing correction. The statement that the incident had shaken "people's trust" in her only exacerbated her emotions, creating a hostile and invalidating environment at a place where she hoped to find solace and support. Already grappling with internalized shame and external stigma, Marie is further burdened by the perception that she is at fault. The series critiques not only the breakdown of trust between survivor and institution, but also communicates the societal impulse to punish any form of deviation from normative victimhood. Mistrust is more than disbelief as it erodes Marie's autonomy and dignity.

By focusing primarily on Marie's perceived behavioral issues and overlooking all evidence, the residential facility mirrors the failures of the criminal justice system. Instead of acknowledging Marie's pain and trauma, the institution fails in its duty of care. The responsibility for the situation is unjustly placed on Marie rather than on the perpetrator, reinforcing a fragile sense of self and a harmful narrative where credibility is questioned based on personality assumptions.

This pattern of misjudgement is reinforced by her foster care mother, Judith, who describes Marie as a "complicated young woman", "with a look-at-me behaviour", and "overly sensitive and contrary". By sharing these judgements with Detective Parker, Judith contributes further to the institutional suspicion surrounding Marie. Her commentary frames Marie's personality as unreliable and emotional. As Dawtry et al. observe, individuals are

[47] Becca, counselor at the Oakdale Apartments for at-risk youth, and Marie, *Unbelievable*, Episode 2, 29:56-30:18.

often guided by pre-existing beliefs about the survivor, and may mistakenly deny or justify the perpetrator's actions by reconstructing false memories that support their tendencies toward victim-blaming (12). In this case, Judith's remarks are not neutral observations but active contributions to the erosion of Marie's credibility.

This harmful framing plays out directly in the interaction between Detective Parker and Marie:

> **Detective Parker:** Other people do not know what you told us about the rape...That is the truth.
> **Marie:** Who?
> **Detective Parker:** Well, Judith, for one.
> **Marie:** She said that?
> **Detective Parker:** And Connor's statement.
> **Marie:** What... what about it?
> **Detective Parker:** It is also inconsistent with yours. So, he knows the version you told him. And then he finds out it is not what you told us. *It makes it very hard for him to believe you too.*
> **Marie:** He said that he did not believe me? I do not... Wh... why would he do that? Why would he say that?
> **Detective Parker:** And then there is the crime scene. I mean, we could not find any physical evidence that there was anyone else in your apartment that night.
> **Marie:** But there was![48]

The exchange between the two demonstrates how institutional disbelief is constructed through the mobilization of external testimonies. The implication is clear: Marie's credibility is not compatible with the observation of others, thereby casting blame on her for the systemic failure. This betrayal by both legal and caregiver institutions, whose sole mission should be to protect and understand, deeply damages Marie's ability to trust, not only in her own voice but also in future relationships. By positioning Marie as a source of mistrust, the system isolates her emotionally and discourages her from opening up and seeking help. This failure compounds her trauma, leaving her unsupported when she needs compassion and reassurance the most. As a result, Marie attempts suicide right at the beginning of Episode 2, believing that everyone around her hated her (00:01:09). The cumulative effect of suspicion, doubt, isolation, and surveillance pushes her into complete despair.

[48] Detective Parker while interrogating Marie, *Unbelievable*, Episode 1, 39:46- 40:25.

Through this Episode, the series underscores a critical truth: being treated sensitively, sympathetically, and being believed is vital to women's experience of reporting rape, as it influences the extent to which they cooperate further. The absence of such treatment, as *Unbelievable* demonstrates, re-traumatizes survivors and undermines access to justice and recovery.

3.5 "You Are Not Me": Why Empathy Matters

Empathy is deeply grounded in embodied experience, and it is this experience that enables one to directly recognize others not as bodies endowed with a mind but as *persons* (Gallagher 159). This recognition is immediate, governed by a social cognition that activates automatically during everyday encounters. While some theorists define empathy as a low-level, reflexive response, others emphasize its cognitive and imaginative dimensions, such as imagining oneself in the other's place, or "entering somebody's feelings" (Schliesser 3).

In contrast, sympathy is concerned with the affective resonance and tries to understand the mysterious bond within an individual's mind and body. It helps explain how emotions are accompanied by distinct bodily states, deployed to account for the deep bond between individuals (Schliesser 4). More than a passive reflection of feeling, sympathy functions as an active force, a vehicle for generating harmony among otherwise isolated individuals for them to fit into a larger whole, be it society or the universe. Often understood as an active principle, sympathy possesses causal power; it is not only utilized as an explanation but also generates new connections where only previously latent linkages existed (Schliesser 4).

This distinction between empathy and sympathy is made tangible in *Unbelievable*, particularly in the emotional interchange between Marie and her ex-boyfriend, Connor:

> **Connor:** Hey, talk to me. I am your friend, remember?
>
> **Marie:** Right. "I am your friend; I am here for you." But how are you actually here for me? While all this shit has been happening, what have you actually been doing to help?
>
> **Connor:** Are you serious right now?
>
> **Marie:** Get your hands off my bike.
>
> **Connor:** I am just asking you to tell me what…
>
> **Marie:** Get your hands off my bike!
>
> **Connor:** You are being totally unfair.

Marie: You do not know anything about unfair. You have had everything handed to you, everything easy.

Connor: Screw you![49]

This dialogue illustrates a rupture in what should be an empathetic interaction. This exchange is a raw and emotional reflection of the tension between someone who feels neglected and a person who may be offering surface-level support. Marie's demand, "How are you here for me?", reflects a desire for accountability and a longing for meaningful action. Her anger is palpable as she confronts feelings of being unheard and unsupported. Connor's offer of support is performative, lacking genuine attunement. His defensive response, "You are being totally unfair", reveals his inability to meet Marie's emotional needs, highlighting the asymmetry between their realities. Marie is not simply seeking sympathy; she wants her suffering to be acknowledged and for those around her to take genuine action to support her. Overall, this exchange intensifies the sense of isolation, anger, and the emotional weight of being in a situation where pain is dismissed and empathy is neglected.

The show draws a clear line between emotional expression and emotional understanding. Sympathy, as Schliesser argues, is a concept that may function as an innocent placeholder, a vague recognition of another's distress while one searches for underlying explanations for different kinds of causal processes (7). Thus, sympathy does not merely register distant action; it also involves mutual interaction, or at least co-affectability, where all the relata actively participate or engage (Schliesser 9). On the other hand, empathy[50], or as McRae defines it, "resonating with another", where this often involves role taking, inner imitation, and a projection of the self into the objects of perception (McRae 123-124). Compassion adds another level, bringing emotional resonance together with the desire to alleviate another's suffering (McRae 123).

McRae frames compassion as a complex moral virtue that arises from sensitivity to suffering and is motivated by a desire to help (125). As a moral skill, by contrast, empathy encompasses both perception and reasoning (McRae 125). Crucially, in *Unbelievable,* empathy is not exercised, neither by the detectives nor by the broader community. The failure to place oneself in Marie's place prevented the occurrence of a collective movement from indifference to a more virtuous emotional engagement. McRae's concept of "exchanging self and other" is particularly relevant here, as it refers to a core moral concept that utilizes empathetic imaginative projection to dismantle attachment to the self, and thus liberate one

[49] Marie and her ex-boyfriend, Connor, *Unbelievable*, Episode 5, 22:08- 22:44.

[50] The word empathy is of relatively recent coinage. It has appeared in the Western psychological literature in the early 20th century, that is why no word straightforwardly translates it.

from one's afflictive physical, mental, and emotional habits (126). In this empathetic process, the self does not disappear but softens the boundaries between self and other, removing oneself from an emotionally inferior stance and offering a safe space where trust and attention coexist without judgment. Yet, as McRae warns, completely losing oneself in another's suffering risks eroding one's agency, making the empathetic subject vulnerable to manipulation (127). This tension is reflected in the delicate balance that empathy requires: to ethically connect with the other without surrendering the boundaries of one's selfhood.

Unbelievable powerfully dramatizes the consequences of the last of empathy. Marie is not seen, not heard, not believed, not because she is unable to articulate her pain. As McRae states, practising empathy allows one to gain distance from oneself and radically question one's self-narratives (126). Let us now explore how empathy is activated towards Marie.

Exchanging the self entails not just emotional or psychological alignment with another, but a moral reorientation that corrects self-centered modes of judgment by opening spaces for the other's suffering to be acknowledged (McRae 127-128). This concept is reflected in an emotionally loaded moment with Marie's foster mom, Colleen, as they shop for new bedding:

> **Colleen**: Let us just choose some sheets and get out of here!
> **Marie**: I do not want these. I want my sheets.
> **Colleen**: After what happened on them? If I were you, I would never want to see those sheets again.
> **Marie**: Well, you are not me![51]

Colleen's response reveals a practical and perhaps well-intentioned perspective, but fails to honour Marie's emotional autonomy. Her statement, "If I were you, I would never want to see those sheets again," reflects Colleen's attempt to rationalize Marie's potential feelings. However, it fails to acknowledge her autonomy and emotional state. Marie's response, "Well, you are not me!", is a moment of self-assertion, reclaiming both her agency and her need for control over her choices. The choice to retain the same bedding suggests an effort to regain control over her environment by resisting the trauma that defines her.

Colleen's desire to erase visible traces of the assault (through replacement) reinforces a normative mode of recovery which favours avoidance over confrontation. However, Marie resists this narrative. The power struggle between the two mirrors the conflict between institutional control and the survivor's autonomy. Marie attempts to recover from trauma on

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[51] Marie and her foster mom, Colleen, *Unbelievable*, Episode 1, 24:08- 24:29.

her own terms, not through avoidance but through familiarity and a reclaiming of the space where the assault occurred. Familiar items provide comfort; hence, buying the same sheets as the ones where the incident happened reflects her efforts to regain a sense of normalcy and control. As a trauma survivor, Marie's efforts to assert control are misinterpreted.

This broader pattern of misrecognition recurs throughout the series. From the moment of the assault, Marie faces suspicion, emotional distance, and disbelief from police, friends, hospital staff, and even her foster mothers. The scene where Colleen and Judith discuss Marie's charges for false reporting reveals their biases:

> **Colleen**: Oh, my God. The police are charging her with false reporting. I mean, she could go to jail.
> **Judith**: Oh, my God.
> **Colleen**: Well, she got a lawyer. I do not know how. But, evidently, he is pretty confident that he can get her a deal. When I saw this report, I... I thought, "What if she was telling the truth?"
> **Judith**: Hang on. I just want to remind you that when you saw her that first day, your first reaction…
> **Colleen**: I know.
> **Judith**: [...] was that there was something off, and I mean, you know. You have been through it; we both have. We know how *it* feels.[52]

The dialogue reveals how prior trauma (experienced by both Judith and Colleen) does not necessarily yield empathy. In this scene, their expressions shift between concern and discomfort as the weight of the conversation builds. Their judgments are shaped by preconceived notions of how a "real" victim should behave. Marie's rush to move forward with her life becomes grounds for suspicion. This points to the deep misunderstanding that to be believed, one needs to be visually broken.

As McRae notes, "compassion and the exchange between self and other", essential for anyone requiring empathy (131), are absent in Marie's caregivers. Colleen and Judith's inability to process Marie's reaction as a valid response to trauma, "She seemed...I do not know...fine. Like nothing had happened. It was weird that I was even visiting her or something", reveals the pervasiveness of what Dawtry et al. identify as victim-blaming logic shaped by pre-existing beliefs (12).

[52] Judith and Colleen, Marie's foster moms, Episode 5, 11:57- 12:35.

Trust, as Nortvedt emphasizes, is fundamental to empathy. It creates space for care, attuned response, and moral proximity (277). Considering that trust was absent, it was challenging for Judith, Colleen, and those around Marie to emotionally connect with her, which in turn made it more difficult to express empathy towards her. Marie's failure to be believed turns into an ethical betrayal that compromises every future interaction. In an exchange with Judith, the erosion of trust emerges powerfully:

> **Judith**: Now, every time you say something, I am going to ask myself: Is she lying?
> **Marie**: I did not lie. I just did not mention it.
> **Judith**: Oh, do not give me that. It is the same thing.
> **Marie**: Not in my opinion.
> **Judith**: Okay, well, how about these charges they are filing against you? Was that another thing you just forgot to mention? Were you ever going to tell me about that?
> **Marie**: How did you hear about that?
> **Judith**: That is not the point. I tell you, Marie, if you were ever wondering what spinning out of control looks like... This... this is what it looks like.[53]

Judith frames Marie as responsible for her own downfall and treats her acts as intentional deception. Judith's statement that "maybe this could end up being a good thing" frames state punishment and mandatory counseling as rehabilitative, bypassing any recognition of institutional violence or truth in Marie's testimony.

In Episode 7, Marie finally articulates the cumulative toll of her experience to her therapist, Dara Kaplan:

> **Marie**: I have seen social workers, DCFS reps, and foster care placement officers. And they all say that they want to help me...but I do not need help. I just need bad things to stop happening.[54]

Her words underscore the erosion of trust resulting from prolonged institutional neglect. Years of being surveiled, managed, and misjudged have depleted her capacity to trust. As Dara attempts to reframe Marie's experience as a test of resilience, Marie responds with clarity:

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[53] Marie and Judith talk about trust issues, *Unbelievable*, Episode 6, 07:13- 08:28.
[54] Marie revealing her struggles to Dara Kaplan, the assigned therapist, *Unbelievable*, Episode 7, 04:24- 04:44.

> **Marie**: I know I am supposed to say, if I had it to do over, I would not lie. But the truth is... I would lie earlier...and better…[...]Because even with good people...even with people that you can kind of trust...if the truth is inconvenient...and if... if the truth does not, like, fit...they do not believe it. Even if they really care about you...they just...they just do not.[55]

In her dialogue with Dara, Marie expresses feelings of distrust and disappointment in others' commitment to care for her, suggesting what led to the lack of faith in her relationships. The repeated emphasis on lying underlies relational trauma and her unmet emotional needs while also highlighting that honesty has not served her well in the past, and she views deception as a survival strategy. There is an internal conflict in Marie's hesitations ("I...I...I") and contradictory statements. She acknowledges the moral wrong of lying but simultaneously justifies it as necessary. After copying lying as a defense mechanism, Marie struggles to reconcile her values. The emphasis on "figure it out on my own...by myself" points to a defensive stance against vulnerability. This reflects her ongoing disappointment and repeated betrayals, leading her to rely increasingly on self-reliance as a defense against future disappointment. Although neglect has instilled in Marie a profound sense of loneliness and mistrust, her emphasis on the justification ("even with good people…") indicates an unspoken hope for someone to prove her wrong.

Empathy fails when its conditions are not present. In Marie's case, empathy was not withheld; it was structurally foreclosed. Her story does not reveal a lack of individual compassion; it exposes the moral cost of a system that prioritizes procedural efficiency over human understanding, while implicating institutions of care in the re-victimization of those promised to protect.

3.6 Empathy and Intuition: Framing Feminist Solidarity

Years after Marie's rape, details of her story unexpectedly align with details uncovered by two female detectives from Colorado, Grace Rasmussen and Karen Duvall, who are investigating a series of similar sexual assaults. Their presence in the narrative reintroduces the possibility of institutional trust, modeling an investigative approach grounded in compassion, credibility, and trauma-informed practices. Unlike their male counterparts, Rasmussen and Duvall center their work on understanding and acknowledging the subjective realities of sexually abused women as important elements that give closure to the narrative. Their humanity is instrumental, not incidental. It reframes the investigative process as relational rather than

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[55] Marie and the therapist, *Unbelievable*, Episode 7, 47:38- 50:27.

procedural. At the same time, they raise awareness of the suffering of the Other as something to be alleviated and resolve the outer tension created between Marie and the male detectives.

Importantly, the detectives function not as narrative restorators but as ethical correctives; they restore dignity to the survivor's experiences and address the moral dissonance in Marie's treatment. Their empathetic engagement resolves the institutional dissociation and suspicion from survivor testimony, highlighting what had previously been missing: trust and empathy.

The representation of the detectives Rasmussen and Duvall is deliberately constructed around their identification with the victims' rape narratives as a "constant relation of the self to itself" (Doane 78). Unlike the male detectives, who operate from an interrogative stance, Duvall and Rasmussen avoid complications and refuse to establish outside narrative perspectives. In doing so, the series positions their femininity as a way of effectively engaging with suffering. The screening of femininity exceeds traditional frameworks, as Rasmussen and Duvall are agents of justice who redefine investigative integrity.

Figure 14: Detectives Rasmussen (Toni Collette) and Duvall (Merritt Wever), Episode 2, Netflix, 2019.

In Figure 14, Detectives Duvall and Rasmussen are framed against a backdrop of lush greenery during a moment of reflection and collaboration. The rare use of natural light and open space in a series dominated by interiors, institutional settings, and dimly lit artificial spaces, imbues this scene with a sense of intimacy and openness. Their symbolic alignment with greenery and flowers may indicate that they are less driven by the abstract, lifeless, and

inhuman world of bureaucracy (as the male detectives are) and more by their knowledge of how to help living beings flourish. The lack of dramatic lighting manipulation enables a more ethically attuned portrayal, allowing viewers to read the characters' emotional investments without sensationalism. This visual choice stands in stark contrast to the sterile scene Marie occupied during her previously analysed interrogation. Here, visual composition resists the sexualisation of the female detectives, instead foregrounding their professionalism. Their practical clothing reinforces their dedication and seriousness to their work, signaling a commitment that eschews gender spectacle.

This moment also avoids the dichotomous portrayal of female characters as either hyper-emotional or hyper-rational. Instead, it presents Duvall and Rasmussen as multidimensional, emotionally intelligent professionals. Additionally, the lack of hierarchy in their roles symbolizes partnership and mutual respect, conveying an egalitarian dynamic: Duvall is emotionally burdened, in the role of the empath (the listener), while Rasmussen, methodical and emotionally attuned, leans forward with an energized intent.

The gendered dichotomy between male and female investigators is mirrored not only in the established relationship of Rasmussen and Duvall but also through contrasting techniques utilized when dealing with traumatized victims. In many of the scenes, Rasmussen and Duvall are consistently framed in the center of the shots and lit with soft, frontal lighting to soften their facial features, avoiding the dramatic side- or backlighting that creates shadows. These visual choices also highlight their difference from their male counterparts, who are frequently depicted with a lighting that obscures and distorts their facial expressions. The use of handheld cameras to follow the female detectives fosters a sense of subjectivity, inviting the viewer into the scene rather than observing from a distance. Grant's depiction purposely portrays these women as empathetic, not only through comic relief to ease the tension in some scenes, but also through the highly symmetrical designs used when framing Rasmussen and Duvall approaching rape survivors. As Gianetti notes, such an arrangement suggests stability and harmony (54), reinforcing the detectives' ability to create spaces of safety and trust.

Their partnership, born from cross-unit collaboration, symbolically resists the institutional fragmentation often associated with mishandled rape cases. It also signals their resistance to treating survivors' testimonies as peripheral or suspect. Their cooperation reflects a new investigative model that values both forensic inquiry and human experience.

In Episode 7, Detective Duvall confides in Rasmussen about a past case that continues to haunt her: "So, when I hear that little voice inside me saying, 'don't go home yet,' I pay attention". This moment of vulnerability offers a rare, introspective glimpse into the

emotional toll of being in law enforcement and working on cases involving victims of violence. Duvall's disclosure reflects an internalisation of professional guilt. By voicing this guilt, Duvall reveals the emotional weight of her work, which not only fosters solidarity with Rasmussen but also emphasizes the need for affective commitment in a profession often valorized for its detachment. By sharing that story, Duvall reminds the viewers that detectives often carry the burden of their perceived failures, which can deeply affect their personal and professional lives. Her emphasis on "the little voice" demonstrates a recognition that logic and protocol alone are not always enough; instincts can be crucial in preventing tragedies.

Through what may be termed a hermeneutics of trust, Detectives Duvall and Rasmussen succeed in identifying and apprehending the serial rapist, Christopher McCarthy. Rather than relying solely on medico-legal documentation, they build a bridge of communication with all the abused women by listening intently to their details, without judgment, and without confronting them with contradicting evidence. This approach rejects binary thinking and treats legal and medical evidence as separate from survivors' embodied subjectivities. Through the power of their ethical listening, they succeed in addressing systemic violence.

This ethical and visual framing of believability and embodied subjectivity in *Unbelievable* paves the way for a deeper interrogation of how consent is contested and narratively (re)manufactured, reimagined, and contested in the series *I May Destroy You* (2020).

Chapter 4: (Re)Manufacturing Consent on Screen, *I May Destroy You*

> "In this grey area, where nothing was quite clear, no one could be clear. We can't articulate. We fuddle our words. We couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was he did that we felt was so wrong. So, yeah, Bob thinks you're crazy," says Arabella Essiedu, a writer, in Episode 8 of *I May Destroy You*, speaking to a group of women.

"Bob" is the fictional name Arabella assigns to her rapist, allowing her to imagine a space for communication with him. This short passage captures the lingering mental negotiations survivors often endure, wondering what happened when the language of consent fails to capture the nuances of coercion and ambiguity.

I May Destroy You is a searing, semi-autoethnographic exploration of trauma, recovery, and the complexities of consent. Written, produced, and performed by Michalea Coel, the series centers on Arabella, a successful writer whose life is upended after being drugged and sexually abused during a night out. Yet the narrative resists the conventional singular focus on rape as a fixed traumatic event; instead, it exposes a continuum of sexual violence, from overt force to manipulative coercion, that troubles binary distinctions between consent and non-consent.

This chapter explores how *I May Destroy You* remaps the cultural landscape of sexual ethics through a multi-perspective narrative, emphasizing how trauma, agency, and consent are renegotiated across different characters. It is important to note that the central participants in the series (Arabella, Kwame, and Terry) are all Black. In this way, the show enhances the visibility of bodies of colour, which have been "subject to long histories of erotization and exocitization that is intimately connected with oppression" as Gill et al. observe (81). Drawing on Michal Bunchhandler-Raphael's framing of consent as "the touchstone of the criminal regulation of sexuality" (150), I examine how the series deconstructs normative assumptions about what constitutes sexual abuse. The show presents a spectrum of male behaviour, ranging from physically aggressive to manipulative deception[56] while foregrounding the emotional aftermath experienced by Arabella and her close friends Kwami and Terry. Each of their stories functions as a lens into the terrain of sexual abuse within contemporary urban life.

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[56] However, a more significance importance is given to the notion of consent to sex as the predicate for rape law reforms. This does not undermine the experience of rape as a violent physical act, which has been addressed in Chapters 2 and 3. Rather, it reconceptualizes rape as a nonconsensual act while shifting the focus away from force as the central criterion in order to promote social and legal change.

The trajectory of post-Weinstein productions reflects an increasing move toward narrative intimacy, where the boundaries between lived experience and cultural production become porous (as seen in *Broadchurch* and *Unbelievable*), and survivor-authored storytelling redefines how rape culture is represented on screen. Coel's series functions as a powerful illustration of Black feminist autoethnography. As Robyn Boylorn reflects, autoethnography enables writers "to own [their] experiences through stories and retrospection", allowing personal traumas to function as critiques and cultural intervention (381). In *I May Destroy You*, the autoethnographic dimension is not limited to content but embedded in its very form, in Coel's self-authorship, her performative vulnerability, and the show's visual grammar. The narrative moves critically between self and society, revealing how systems of justice, gendered norms, and cultural silences fail survivors.

The chapter also situates *I May Destroy You* within broader feminist debates around intoxication, blame, victimhood, and the opaque and untrustworthy nature of consent. Dianne Taylor notes that self-blame is intensified for victims who were incapacitated at the time of their assault, as in Trish's case, a phenomenon that intersects with cultural norms that stigmatize women's alcohol use (51). A study by Lyndon et al. confirms that perpetrators often exploit this cultural vulnerability, using alcohol or drugs to facilitate coercive encounters, particularly in casual or nightlife contexts (292-293). The series visualizes the intersection of vulnerability and social punishment with unflinching precision, challenging viewers to reckon with the instability of consent in such contexts.

Through its interwoven narrative arcs, *I May Destroy You* constructs a polyphonic and politically urgent portrait of sexual trauma and recovery. While Arabella's story is central, Terry's encounter with racial fetishization and Kwame's experience of male-on-male sexual violence expand the narrative beyond the heteronormative frame. These parallel narratives critique the ways in which gender and race, as inseparable intersectional identities, converge to shape judicial, social, and representational structures. These structures, in turn, influence how survivors internalize the violation and become further marginalized within those identity frameworks.

This chapter argues that *I May Destroy You* not only disrupts the televisual conventions of rape narratives but also mobilizes storytelling as a form of epistemic resistance. Coel's work interrogates the legal, emotional, and representational dimensions of consent, foregrounding the messiness of sexual experience while reclaiming narrative authority for survivors at the margins. In doing so, the series shifts the viewer's attention from legal binaries to ethical ambiguities: from "was it rape" to "what does it mean to live through it?"

4.1 Neoliberalism and the Illusion of Empowerment

Neoliberalism is a socio-economic philosophy ingrained unevenly in Euro-American life. In its media presentations, it expresses an inordinate confidence in the unique, self-regulating powers that link the freedom of the individual to the operations of free markets (Conolly 20). As David Harvey outlines, neoliberalism, as a political-economic project, seeks to advance human well-being by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms within institutional frameworks rooted in private property rights, free market, and free trade (2). Foundational neoliberal thinkers positioned human dignity and personal freedom as "the central values of civilization" (Harvey 5). However, as Hannah Arendt warns, no notion of individual freedom can withstand the weight of collective guilt: "behind the unwillingness to judge lurks the suspicion and the doubt that anyone is responsible or could be expected to answer for what he has done" (*Responsibility and Judgement* 18-19). When the moral environment is already biased, an individual's capacity for judgment becomes compromised.

Globally, neoliberal policy has eroded the ethics of solidarity, promoting instead the individualization of the social self (Türken et al. 3). It encourages individuals to retreat from communal ties and to heal through self-regulation and emotional distancing. The model presents a newly constructed subjectivity: the individual as an autonomous, self-managing unit of "human capital", whose well-being and success are solely their own responsibility (Türken et al. 3). In this view, each person becomes the bearer of the value, responsible for maximizing her own potential. As such, failure to meet personal or professional goals is framed as a moral and individual shortcoming. However, the strong ties between Arabella, Kwame, and Terry can be regarded as constitutive of an alternative to this model of neoliberal individualism. Their shared Ghanian heritage appears to reinforce mutual support in the urban British environment, particularly as they navigate similar experiences of abuse and objectification.

However, as Lizzie Ward argues, while self-care is often framed as a personal responsibility under neoliberalism, its transformative potential lies in collective action that fosters emotional care and challenges the unequal distribution of emotional and labor burdens (56). In line with this critique, the stories one tells about trauma and recovery are often flattened into narratives where tragedy and happiness are perceived as opposites. Yet, as Bochner and Ellis observe, happiness remains at stake even in autoethnographic stories of suffering (70). A traumatic event disrupts not just one's immediate experience, but their macro-level worldview, challenging assumptions about safety, meaning, and control, and prompting a search for new significance (Henson 347).

In *I May Destroy You*, both the seductions and the failures of neoliberalism are on display. Arabella embodies care and solidarity, yet her book editors personify a system that demands productivity above all else, even in the wake of her trauma. In Episode 7, after reading a deeply emotional confession of her sexual abuse, Arabella confronts the limits of a culture that instrumentalizes self-reliance: "Even if you get assaulted, people may lose money. Nobody is going to give you a break." Within this system, emotional "burdens" risk undermining professional performance, rendering the survivor both a liability and an object of suspicion.

Arabella's flashbacks, rendered through fragmented close-ups and disorienting timelines, capture the neurobiological dislocation caused by trauma (see Figure 15). These visual strategies underscore how neoliberal expectations of coherence and self-control are incompatible with the cognitive ruptures of post-traumatic memory. The visual composition of Figure 15 powerfully reflects Arabella's disoriented subjectivity in the immediate aftermath of the abuse. The frame captures her wide, dilated eyes, an overly animated expression, and an utmost manic smile that clashes jarringly with the context. The dissonance between her facial expression and the psychological reality signals a coping mechanism, a performative mask of normalcy by the neoliberal imperative to "keep going". The superficial mise-en-scène intensifies the emotional dissonance, rather than offering comfort. The visual palette (bright pink wig, turquoise wall) contributes to the uncanniness of this moment, highlighting how the surface-level aesthetic of positivity can obscure deep psychological rupture. The visible gash on her forehead disrupts the visual softness of the scene and anchors the trauma back into the body. Thus, this image of Arabella operates as a visual metaphor for the neoliberal subject: polished and smiling even while still fragmented and uncertain about what exactly has happened to her.

Arabella's autonomous and self-reliant nature is not solely the product of neoliberal conditioning but is also intimately shaped by her personal and cultural background. Having witnessed her father's infidelity as a child, a betrayal that fractured her intimate relationships, Arabella learned very early on to depend on herself and develop emotional independence as a form of self-protection. This internalized trauma arguably predisposes her to incorporate neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility.

Figure 15: Arabella (Michaela Coel) in front of her editors, still confused about what happened to her, *I May Destroy You,* Episode 1, BBC, 2020.

Despite neoliberalism's constraints on care, it paradoxically opens space for resistance and redefinition. As Ball and Olmedo argue, neoliberalism not only limits the discourse of self-care but also enables the formation of new "technologies of the self", wherein individuals reinterpret their value systems and self-perceptions (88-92). This "new" moral system mandates that individuals not only perform well but also assume responsibility for their own performance, and frequently for the performance of others.

Drawing on Foucault, Ball and Olmedo remind us that "subject" carries a dual meaning, both of which suggest a form of power. On the one hand, the subject relates to the state of subjection 'to someone else by control or dependence'; on the other hand, it refers to the self-configuration of an identity 'by conscience or self-knowledge' (87). The subject is unfixed; it is a malleable form continually shaped by dominant cultural narratives. Survivors of sexual violence, like Marie (*Unbelievable*), Trish (*Broadchurch*), and Arabella, are thus doubly constructed: by trauma itself, and by the social frameworks that define what wellbeing, healing, strength, and success look like.

Rape provokes the construction of a new identity in the victim/survivor, a re-invention of the self within the image of everyday experiences. No victim/survivor can resist rape's power in reshaping their subjectivity. In this journey of transformation, the subject is governed not only by external circumstances (the abuse) and dominant narratives, but also by the survivor as the governor and entrepreneur of the self. Arabella's post-assault journey is

one of constant redefinition. The series portrays her not as a static victim but as a subject in flux, both disrupted by trauma and empowered through narrative reclamation. Several symbolic elements in the series, such as Arabella's hair transformations, hidden evidence stored under her bed, doors left open, and the recurring motif of water as both destruction and rebirth, create a rich visual tapestry that portrays the complex and contradictory nature of trauma and recovery. As Coel shared at the Edinburgh TV Festival, the writing process was "therapeutic", a way to "twist the narrative of pain into one of hope and even humour" (48:02-48:22). Through this process, Arabella becomes a figure who defies neoliberal expectations of silent recovery and instead demands the public articulation of pain. Yet, Arabella is also rendered "homeless" within a system that presumes a rational, self-managing individual who, through mental discipline, can secure a good life (Türken et al. 6). She misfits this mold by moving toward pain, sharing her experience, connecting with others, and seeking collective healing. As she describes herself:

> The misfit does not climb in pursuit of profit or safety. She climbs to tell stories. She gets off the ladder and onto the swings. Swinging back and forth, sometimes aggressively, something standing up on the swing, back and forth in pursuit of only transparency, observing the changes, but wondering if these changes are taking place within a faulty system. How can we help each other fix a faulty system? Surely, we can help each other fix a faulty house (Coel 50:05-50:44).

Contrary to Türken et al.'s framing of the neoliberal subject as an emotionally autonomous and self-regulating figure, Arabella resists isolation and "fragmentation of the social fabric", taking the fact that relationality supplies "the unbreakable link that characterizes what is human" (Donati 259). Most of the dialogues in the series occur between Arabella and her two close friends, often composed together in intimate spaces where they sit close together, holding hands or sitting shoulder to shoulder. Thus, Arabella transforms suffering through relationality by forming bonds with herself and others. In doing so, Arabella manages to destabilize the neoliberal imperative to "get over it" quietly and alone, instead embracing her vulnerabilities and daily tough dilemmas that neoliberal ideology seeks to render invisible (Adams 344).

Nevertheless, the system extracts a cost. As Arabella becomes an online figurehead for survivors, she is increasingly consumed by the pain of others. In Episode 9, her friend, Terry, captures this paradox:

Terry: Doc, I think my friend is stressed. Do you confirm?

Doctor: Yes.

Terry: And the rape is stressful, do you confirm?

Doctor: Yes.

Terry: And other stressed people asking her to defend them and expose rapists, abusers, and paedos, and she does this day and night, via phone screen. Stressful, do you confirm?

Doctor: Yes.

Terry: So why would we tell her to stop vaping if it doesn't take a professional to see that the stress from the phone will kill her faster than any puff of nicotine ever will?[57]

The neoliberal discourse of self-development demands constant reinvention, including emotional regulation and adaptability, as if the psyche were a product to be optimized (Türken et al. 8-9). In the series, the viewer initially witnesses Arabella turn into an online sensation by opening up, sharing her experience of abuse, and connecting with other survivors of sexual violence. This digital engagement might appear, on the surface, as a form of empowerment within a neoliberal framework that valorizes visibility, productivity, and self-branding. However, as the narrative progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that Arabella's presence on Instagram serves as an escapist coping mechanism rather than a form of genuine engagement. Her constant engagement with others' trauma through social media becomes emotionally depleting, reinforcing the neoliberal illusion that healing and justice are achievable through constant exposure and performance. Crucially, her path toward healing only begins when she deletes her social media accounts, a symbolic rejection of the self-optimization demanded by neoliberal digital culture. This pivotal act does not represent a success within the system, but rather a critique of its false promises; it marks Arabella's refusal to conform to expectations of productivity, resilience, and visibility, and gestures toward quieter politics of self-care.

4.2 Opacity and the Ethics of Consent: The Body in Question

In biomedical ethics, the notion of informed consent is a claim that "legitimizes action which would otherwise be unacceptable" (Manson and O'Neill 1). The Nuremberg Code stands as the first authoritative statement emphasizing the importance of voluntary consent from human subjects, while the Helsinki Declaration extends this principle specifically to clinical practice. Crucially, "the Code forbids research that is based on overwhelming or undermining the will,

[57] Terry, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 9, 04:16- 04:42.

or on forcing the body" (Manson and O'Neill 4). Hannah Arendt's assertion also highlights the theoretical ideal of autonomy: "the will is free as the faculty of choosing [...] Only the will is entirely my own. By willing I decide. And this is the faculty of freedom" (281). Yet, in practice, informed consent often falls short of ensuring true autonomous decision-making over one's embodied self.

Arabella's rape while drugged and then stealthing during intercourse complicates simplistic notions of consent. As Popova argues, consent is notably absent from sex advice literature, particularly those aimed at men, which may instead reinforce coercive and non-consensual behaviours (68). Popular culture frequently replaces explicit consent with implied consent derived from default sexual scripts (69). Meg Barker further emphasizes that "consent needs to be an ongoing negotiation rather than a one-off moment after which it can be assumed" (904), underscoring the continuous, dynamic nature of consent.

Figure 16: Arabella (Michaela Coel) undergoes a medical checkup, with explicit images of her abused body on display, *I May Destroy You,* Episode 2, BBC, 2020.

Figure 16 presents a raw and intimate view of Arabella's bruised body during a medical examination, where her injuries are placed under institutional scrutiny. The close-up composition, focusing solely on the trauma without revealing her face, transforms her body into a clinical object, and the viewers witness a visual critique of how institutionalized consent can render survivors passive objects. The contrast between the "vibrantly coloured" bruises and the sterile, patterned hospital gown signifies the tension between her embodied pain and institutional authority and detachment. Arabella's hand, hesitantly pulling the gown

aside, gestures her vulnerability and fragile assertion of bodily autonomy amid the objectification.

Manson and O'Neill further refine consent as a propositional attitude encompassing cognitive states such as knowing, believing, hoping, and desiring (12), rendering consent "opaque" due to interpretive variability (13). They emphasize that demands for specific consent are unattainable, as any act description can always be augmented with further details (15-16). Accordingly, consent in practice relies on a mutually agreed level of specificity tailored to particular transactions (Manson and O'Neill 15-16). The Nuremberg Code's insistence on the absence of force, fraud, or coercion as prerequisites for valid consent (17) foregrounds sexual coercion as a form of male misconduct utilizing non-physical tactics to bypass genuine consent (DeGue and DiLillo 673). Manson and O'Neill ultimately position communication as foundational to ethical norms of informed consent, which represents "a minimal form of individual autonomy" (185).

A sex-positive culture situates consent as the baseline for acceptable social encounters, while encouraging the exploration of power and control (Friedman and Valenti 113). It emphasizes the right to bodily autonomy alongside openness and creativity necessary for personal and political change (113). This perspective is instrumental in dismantling rape culture and educating across genders about the contours of consent and the importance of honest communication (Blanco 243). Importantly, seeking pleasure is framed as legitimate, countering societal narratives that prioritize safety over women's pleasure and perpetuate gendered double standards (Blanco 315; Clough 3).

Kink practices exemplify responsible consent through explicit negotiation of boundaries before sexual activity, fostering safer sex dynamics and challenging dominant sexual scripts premised on uncontrollable impulses (Friedman and Valenti 113). The trust inherent in dom/sub power exchange transcends reductive "woman as object" paradigms and rape culture mentalities (121).

Despite these advances, consent responsibility remains individualized and primarily sexualized, often neglecting broader relational dynamics where non-consensual aspects may persist unchallenged. While enthusiastic sexual consent aims to bolster women's sexual subjectivities, it also raises critical questions about intersecting power relations and how consent functions within different contexts.

4.3 Victim Status and the Grey Area of Consent

The recognition of who qualifies as a "victim" is not a neutral or universal process; it is mediated by cultural, political, and social frameworks that shape who is deemed "worthy" of

attention, protection, and care. As Susan Berger has argued, the framing of victimhood often depends not solely on the fact of abuse but on whether the survivor conforms to the "offered representation of acceptability", moral rectitude, powerlessness, and self-sufficiency (202-213). Building on this, Lindy Meyers distinguishes between the "morally tainted" victim, unworthy of our moral response, and the heroic victim, who embodies dignity, integrity, and courage (255-260). In visual culture, these distinctions become heightened, as audiences and institutions filter narratives through hierarchies of visibility.

This hierarchy is evident in *I May Destroy You*. Arabella, whose drink was spiked and who was subsequently raped by an unknown assailant, more rigidly aligns with the archetype of the "ideal victim": she appears powerless in the moment, yet resilient and courageous afterwards. By contrast, Kwame and Terry's experiences are minimized as they resist easy categorization. Kwame's prior consent to intimacy with a male partner is used to deny his later claim to victimhood, while Terry's shame silences her disclosure. Both are relegated to what Susan D. Moeller has termed the "victims of our indifference" (8). The series highlights how institutions, communities, and even friends fail to extend recognition to victims who do not conform to the expected moral script.

Figure 17: Arabella (Michaela Coel) asking Zain (Karan Gill) to throw the condom in the bin and him confessing that he took it off, *I May Destroy You,* Episode 4, BBC, 2020.

Yet the boundaries of recognition are further destabilised by the "gey zone" violations, where the neat distinctions between consensual and non-consensual encounters collapse. Academic engagement on the practice of nonconsensual condom removal has always been

treated with a lot of sensitivity due to the deeply personal nature of the topic.[58] The blurring boundary between consensual and non-consensual sexual engagement highlights the importance of communication before and during the sexual encounter.

In *I May Destroy You*, Coel persistently explores the fragility of both personal and psychological boundaries. In an interview for *GQ*, the co-director reveals her fascination with the vulnerability that private spaces contain; hence, the symbolic toilet scenes in the series:

> I am curious to see what happens in private spaces and what happens when you leave the door open and people enter that space with you. I am quite fascinated with boundaries, doors, and safety (Coel 04:26-04:58).

This preoccupation with boundaries resonates throughout the series, as Arabella continuously navigates the thresholds of her own and others' private spaces, metaphorically mirroring the violation she endured, given that rape, as Plaxton notes, involves "the crossing of physical boundaries" (98). In Episode 8, "Line Spectrum Border", Arabella impulsively boards a plane to Italy and enters the apartment of Biagio, her casual boyfriend, without his consent, prompting an aggressive response. Her constant attempts, as a relational subject, to return to the familiarity of personal relationships and to reconstruct her "personal identity through these relationships" (Donati 258), impose a form of control over others' environment. These efforts to reclaim agency reflect how trauma has fractured her sense of personal safety and, by extension, disrupted the quality of her social relations, highlighting that self-worth is not constituted in isolation, as Donati further implies (258).

To overcome the drug-facilitated abuse and regain her bodily autonomy and control, Arabella starts being sexually active with Zain, a writer working in the field of advertising. He is introduced to the viewers as a well-educated man, coming from a privileged background with a degree from Oxford University, yet he is the one who commits stealthing, the practice of a man "nonconsensually and covertly removing a condom, after his partner explicitly expressed that intercourse is subject only to use of a condom" (Ebrahim 1). In *Episode 4*, Arabella is in bed with Zain (see Figure 17), a moment that reflects their prior sexual encounter. Their dialogue is crucial, as it reflects Arabella's deception in plain light, as well as a violation of her trust and consent:

> **Arabella**: Uh, there is a bin in the one across the hallway.

[58] Naming the practice has allowed women to publicly speak out, whereas prior to that they did not know how to even name or address the phenomenon.

Zain: What?

Arabella: A bin for the condom. There is a... Where did you put the condom?

Zain: I...I took it off…I thought you…

Arabella: Oh, shit. Um…

Zain: Yeah. It got uncomfortable, so…

Arabella: You are joking.

Zain: No. No. Look, here, see...There. I thought you knew. Uh, couldn't you feel it?

Arabella: No, I couldn't fucking feel it.

Zain: I am sorry. I am so sorry.

Arabella: Um, Zain…

Zain: Um, I, uh...I... I didn't wanna stop, 'cause it was…

Arabella: Um…

Zain: I don't know. Maybe that is *normal* for you, but that was pretty insane for me.

Arabella: Yeah, no. But, Zain, I have... I have to get the pill, for fuck's sake.

Zain: I know. I am sorry.[59]

Initially engaging in consensual sex, Arabella later learns that Zain secretly removed the condom without her knowledge. This moment visually foregrounds the shift from apparent consent to violated autonomy. Arabella's repeated questioning reflects the refusal of stealthing to fit into categories of violation, while Zain's deflections ("What do you mean?"), and casual admission, followed by attempts to normalize his act ("couldn't you feel it?"), operate as linguistic strategies of minimisation.

The visuality of Figure 17 encodes the ethical and emotional complexity of the dynamics of deception and violated trust. Arabella, positioned near the bed, conveys unease and vulnerability through her body language, while Zain, occupying the right side of the frame, raises his hand in a gesture that oscillates between embarrassment and defensiveness. The lighting, warm yet unsettling, casts shadows across both bodies, suggesting the awkward distance that the betrayal has created between them. Arabella's confusion and disorientation reflect the broader cultural and legal difficulty of naming stealthing as assault. This is the performative "grey zone": consent has been breached, yet the language available to Arabella does not categorize the incident as *rape*, underscoring how stealthing destabilizes established scripts of victimhood. Zain not only manipulates Arabella but also exemplifies the ways perpetrators seek to displace responsibility through minimisation and gaslighting.

[59] Arabella and Zain, *I May Destroy You,* Episode 4, 24:35- 25:33.

The "defective" consent in communicative transactions of stealthing filches the agency of women. In addition to dehumanizing their female partners, men who are stealth are stimulated by the act and believe they have a sense of ownership or entitlement over women's bodies (Ebrahim 8). In addition, women who are stealthed experience a sense of violation and fear of sexually transmitted diseases (6). Defining the sexual experience as "normal" for Arabella and "insane" for himself, Zain is actively deceiving her. Stealthing complicates the very grounds on which victim status is conferred. While Arabella had consented to sex, she had not consented to the circumstances under which it took place. As scholars note (Ebrahim; Metz et al.; and Blanco), stealthing transforms a consensual encounter into a deceptive one, thereby stripping the survivor of agency. Yet because the practice operates in the "grey zone" of sexual harm (between coercion, manipulation, and fraud), it often eludes recognition, both socially and legally. Arabella's belated understanding, triggered by a podcast recounting similar experiences, reflects the difficulty survivors face in naming such violations as assault.

The ambivalence is compounded by the cultural stereotypes that mark certain women, particularly Black women, as perpetually available or "always willing" (Friedman and Valenti 158). In her interaction with Zain, Arabella is implicitly positioned within this trope, as his apology is entangled with flattery and self-victimisation. Such dynamics expose how victimhood is not simply about the occurrence of harm but about the discursive and cultural frames that determine whether that harm is legible as victimisation.

Stealthing has often been framed in terms of male dominance and sexual entitlement. Perpetrators describe the practice as one that enhances their pleasure, provides the thrill of transgression, and asserts control over their partners, sometimes with misogynistic undertones such as women "getting what they deserve" (Ebrahim 6). Online subcommunities exacerbate this dynamic, with forums that normalize and encourage stealthing as a form of sexual conquest (3). While initially documented as a practice within gay communities, stealthing has increasingly been identified within heterosexual contexts (Blanco 221).

Psychological research highlights patterns among those who engage in sexually coercive behaviours. DeGue and DiLilli identify higher levels of promiscuity, delinquency, psychopathic traits, and empathy deficits, often accompanied by histories of childhood abuse (673). Similarly, Lyndon et al. link coercive behaviour to narcissistic and antisocial tendencies: perpetrators rely on manipulation and exploitation rather than overt threats (293). Thus, stealthing undermines reproductive autonomy while evading the immediate markers of force.

The tension between "worth" and "unworthy" victims extends into the domain of consent itself. Although Arabella's rape is legible within dominant scripts of sexual violence,

her experience of stealthing initially resists such categorisation. Her eventual public denunciation of Zain as a rapist in Episode 5, ("He is a rapist. Not "rape-adjacent", or "a bit rapey", he is a rapist, under UK law. If you were in the States, he is "rape-adjacent". In Australia, he is "a bit rapey"), represents her refusal to remain confined within the grey zone, reassuring her autonomy by naming the violation despite its contested legal status. This act contrasts sharply with Kwame and Terry's silences, underscoring how personal, social, and institutional conditions mediate the capacity to claim victimhood.

What emerges, as a result, is not a binary between consensual or non-consensual, worthy and unworthy, but a spectrum of experiences filtered through shifting cultural narratives and legal frameworks. *I May Destroy You* demonstrates that obtaining victim status is crucial for the victim's recovery process, as stated previously, because that would automatically increase the chances of receiving "trauma assistance" from the surrounding community. The ideal and perfect victims would be the ones involved in *neutral* spaces, where no one would have to look for reasons why the victims "deserved" what happened to them. This way, the victim status would be granted without a doubt, yet there are no neutral spaces.

Consent needs to be regulated. Its focus needs to shift from the individual to a relational dialogue between the participants. Clough points out that there needs to be clear differences between two states of affairs, those who regret consenting the next day as to spur-of-the-moment emotions which were, in retrospect, regrettable, and those who would not have consented in the first instance had the facts of the situation been disclosed to them (4). Arabella falls in the second category. She was manipulated by something she, at first, did not fully understand. However, during a conversation about Zain with Soin at The Writing Summit, Soin confesses that "it is impossible to protect yourself from his nature".[60] Soin further implies that she knows quite a few women who could not avoid the same fate, insinuating that Zain had gotten away with stealthing before. After concluding that her sexual autonomy and integrity had been compromised, Arabella was filled with anger, betrayal, and disrespect from the violation. Pundik explains that a victim of deception "is likely to form and express negative reactive attitudes once they find out the truth, but during the event, these attitudes are not yet formed and expressed, therefore they cannot be responded to" (111).

Although the consequences that result from stealthing mirror those from rape,[61] criminalizing stealthing is a challenge because in the process women might end up

[60] Soin and Arabella, *I May Destroy You,* Episode 5, 20:25- 20:32.
[61] Both negate the victim's autonomy and include feelings of shame, violation and loss of dignity (Blanco 223).

disenfranchised due to the difficulty of proving that stealthing has occurred.[62] Considering that the status of stealthing as a crime has not been firmly established in all Western countries, it is legally complex to declare that non-consensual condom removal is akin to rape (Ebrahim 9). Blanco further argues that there is a balance needed; otherwise, stealthing risks being categorized as an over-criminalization of sexual conduct (217). For this reason, legislatures should refrain from classifying stealthing as rape.[63]

4.4 The Challenge of Calling Rape by Its Real Name

When you are taught that the lack of consent is measured only in active, physical resistance, then "it becomes difficult to call rape by its real name" (Friedman and Valenti 165). This cultural framing silences many survivors, particularly those whose experiences do not conform to the most extreme or stereotypical paradigms of sexual abuse. In *I May Destroy You*, the assault on Kwame illustrates how such dynamics unfold, exposing the complexities of consent when boundaries are clearly articulated but ultimately disregarded.

Upon entering Malik's flat in Episode 4, Kwame initially offers what Pundik describes as "general consent", meaning that "the exact nature [of the act] would be determined in the future, according to the circumstances" (101). This exchange sets the stage:

> **Malik**: What you into?
> **Kwame**: I am into everything.
> **Malik**: Is that right? Tell me that again.
> **Kwame**: I said I am into *everything*.[64]

At this point, Kwame's consent is provisional, not unlimited. Soon after, Malik attempts to initiate unprotected sex, to which Kwame instantly refuses:

> **Kwame**: Uh, no, no. I don't do that.
> **Malik**: I thought you were into everything.
> **Kwame**: Yeah. *Not that!*[65]

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[62] Currently, stealthing is only criminalized in the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Canada, Sweden, and certain states in the United States (Ebrahim 9).
[63] Additionally, a common consensus among stealthing victims is that the experience does not justify the severe punishments associated with a rape conviction (Blanco 234).
[64] Kwami and Malik, *I May Destroy You,* Episode 4, 19:12- 19:26.
[65] Kwame and Malik, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 4, 21:10- 21:17.

Here, Kwame communicates a highly specific agreement in temporal terms with Malik. He consents to sexual activity *only under protection* and explicitly withdraws consent when Malik proposes otherwise. By affirming his limit, Kwame establishes the boundary of his sexual autonomy. Yet Malik manipulates the situation, pretending to accept Kwame's refusal while coercively escalating the encounter.

> **Kwame**: No, look, I have to go.
> **Malik**: Playing. I am just playing. Just go to bed.
> **Kwame**: Why?
> **Malik**: Go to bed.
> **Kwame**: Yo, yo, no. We are not having sex again.
> **Malik**: It is *not* sex.
> **Kwame**: What the fuck, man? Can you... Can you… Can you stop that? Can you just get off me? Get...Get the fuck off me!
> **Malik**: What can I say, I am a bad boy.[66]

Malik deliberately distorts Kwame's refusal, rebranding the assault as "not sex" to deny Kwame's capacity to name the violence he is experiencing. The scene dramatizes how perpetrators exploit the ambiguity between expressed consent and cultural expectations of endurance or passivity. Although Kwame had granted initial consent to "everything", that consent was clearly *revoked* the moment Malik pursued bareback sex. Malik's refusal to honor this boundary transforms the encounter into rape. The verbal exchange between Malik and Kwame at this specific moment is crucial, as it marks the first uncensored depiction of sexual abuse in the series (see Figure 18). Malik embodies the predatory side of male behaviour in the show; his line, "I am a bad boy", asserts dominance and control over Kwame, and reinforces oppressive narratives of sexual abuse within gay communities. As Gill et al. note, "sexual assault is treated as a crime of power, rather than desire, and the perpetrator's position of authority is highlighted" (57). By allowing viewers to witness Kwame's refusal in real time, the show dismantles rape myths that equate rape only with physical violence and sheds a different light on same-sex sexual abuse. It emphasizes that violation occurs through the denial of articulated boundaries, revealing how coercion can operate through distortion and manipulation.

[66] Kwame refers to barebacking, *I May Destroy You,* Episode 4, 26:03- 27:13.

Figure 18: Kwame (Paapa Essiedu) during the sexual abuse, *I May Destroy You,* Episode 4, BBC, 2020.

By visually staging Kwame's verbal resistance alongside Malik's manipulative resistance, the series forces its viewers to confront why assaults like this often remain unnamed as rape. The close-up in Figure 18 isolates Kwame's face at the moment of physical violation, with the framing generating a palpable sense of claustrophobia that pulls the viewer into his embodied distress. The diagonal alignment of Malik and Kwame's heads introduces visual imbalance and tension, symbolizing the rupture of boundaries and the violence of the encounter. In contrast, the low, muted lighting imbues the scene with the semblance of domestic intimacy, a visual register typically associated with safety, which here becomes grotesquely inverted into betrayal and the perversion of intimacy. The abuser is partially depersonalized as his face is obscured in this shot, while Kwame's face remains exposed, compelling the audience to confront his vulnerability. His resistance, powerlessness, pain, and fear are visually portrayed through his squinted eyes, tight mouth, and furrowed eyebrows. This scene underscores that consent cannot be reduced to a singular moment of agreement but must be understood as an ongoing negotiation in which withdrawal remains ever-present.

Plaxton distinguishes between advance consent and implied consent:

> [A]n individual who gives advance consent agrees to be touched in a certain way at a certain time by a certain person. Implied consent, by contrast, involves acceptance of

a set of norms according to which certain broad kinds of touching are permissible and legitimate (20).

Although Kwame impliedly consented to sex with Malik, he explicitly rejected the specific act Malik suggested: "Uh, no, no. I don't do that" (referring to barebacking). As DeGue and DeLillo note, coercive incidents are often reported as less severe than overtly aggressive ones, yet they nevertheless constitute a profound societal problem (674). Pundik defines the coercer as "a perpetrator who engages in sexual relations with a victim who is in a state of actual refusal to the sexual relations as they are presented to the victim" (108). Malik exemplifies this figure by cruelly disregarding Kwame's refusal, unmoved by his suffering, as he rapes him. The coercer's failure to *respond* to the victim's request to stop the act signifies "a failure to treat the victim as a human being" (Pundik 111), a violation of Kwame's personhood and rights.

Figure 19: Kwame (Paapa Essiedu) in the aftermath of the assault, left in a state of shock and disbelief, *I May Destroy You,* Episode 4, BBC, 2020.

Figure 19 captures Kwame in the aftermath of the assault, immobilized in shock and disbelief. The use of a subjective camera lens during this sequence positions the viewer within Kwame's perspective, forcing the audience to absorb the weight of his trauma through intimate close-ups. Sam Miller and Michaela Coel, who co-directed the series, deliberately employed portable single cameras to achieve this effect, privileging proximity and emotional

intensity. As Hanmakyugh argues, eye-level close-ups encourage spectators to "see eye-to-eye with that person", producing a mode of identification in which the viewer feels "part of the scene" itself (106).

The scene moves from the intimacy of Kwame to expose the systemic disbelief embedded within the criminal justice system. Gill et al. argue that although rape disproportionately affects cis, trans, and LGB people, it has a very low conviction rate (56). At the police station, Kwame struggles to provide the officer with identifying information about his attacker, whose anonymity is protected by the dating application. Similarly to Officer Curran in *Unbelievable*, the police officer represents the systemic hesitation and disbelief encountered by survivors of sexual abuse within the criminal justice system.

This dynamic is compounded in Kwame's case, as a member of the gay community, where sexual double-standards are frequently employed to evoke that "sex was consensual even when one of the involved parties resisted the encounter" (Gill et al. 57). The officer's dismissive questioning renders the crime legally invisible. The failure to prosecute Malik echoes the systemic skepticism dramatized in the series. As Eaglestone contends, trauma's pathology lies not simply in the originating event but in the structure of its reception (14). A meaningful response, he argues, requires not only the recognition of how atrocities violate one's ethical frameworks, but also an examination of how such events destabilize the understanding of those ethical processes (Eaglestone 19).

The broader cultural discourse compounds this failure by embedding responsibility within the victim. Adam demonstrates that within gay male sexual cultures, seroconversion is almost always narrated through discourses of personal culpability, with men blaming themselves for having "done so" (337). This moral reasoning constructs individuals as rational actors in a marketplace of risks, compelling them to manage their own exposure and internalize responsibility for failure (Adam 340). Kwame thus fails to satisfy the culturally policed parameters of the "innocent victim", in which innocence depends on the perception that "nothing you have done could reasonably be construed to imply consent to the harsh treatment you have endured" (Meyers 260). Instead, he blames himself, as is common among victims of coercion who, Pundik notes, often fault themselves either for entering a dangerous situation or for not doing enough to stop the coercion once it started (115). When he later confides in Terry, Kwame admits that his experience at the police station was so invalidating that it "was enough to put me off ever mentioning it to anyone ever again".[67] His silence crystallizes the layered violence of sexual trauma: the initial violation, its institutional misrecognition, and the eventual self-erasure of the survivor.

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[67] Kwame and Terry, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 7, 25:36- 25:46.

In Kwame's case, both racial and cultural expectations contribute to the silencing of sexual trauma, particularly after witnessing the hostility of police. His reluctance to continue engaging with the legal system, after encountering the judgment of a Black male police officer, reflects a broader anxiety of gay Black men about exposing intimate experiences to state scrutiny. As Kimberlé Crenshaw observes in her foundational work on intersectionality:

> There is also a more generalized community ethic against public intervention, the product of a desire to create a private world free from the diverse assaults on the public lives of racially subordinated people. The home is not simply a man's castle in the patriarchal sense, but may also function as a haven from the indignities of life in a racist society (1257).

While nearly three decades have passed since Crenshaw's article, and Black women like Arabella are depicted as receiving more institutional recognition and support in *I May Destroy You*, Black male survivors like Kwame remain marginalized. Kwame is denied the full legitimacy and legal protection typically afforded to those who report sexual violence. His narrative closes without meaningful institutional accountability, signaling the continued erasure of Black male victimhood within both the criminal justice system and dominant cultural discourse.

4.5 The Cost of Deception: Emotional and Sexual Manipulation

Terry's experience of deception centers on her belief that she consented to a spontaneous sexual encounter with two strangers in Italy, Giovanni and Luigi. Unbeknownst to her, the men were not strangers but acquaintances, and the encounter had been premeditated—undermining the conditions under which she gave her consent. Although minor deceptions may often be rationalised as part of sexual persuasion, Clough argues that "the harms caused by breaking the boundaries of any consent given to a sexual act are an abuse of trust which proves to be disempowering and demeaning to the victim" (3). One's autonomy is denied when the person is treated as vulnerable, an instrument for one's ends, an inert object, and often as someone whose subjective feelings are seen as manipulable and therefore unworthy of respect (Plaxton 105-107).

Pundik defines the deceiver as "a perpetrator who engages in sexual relations with a victim who is in a state of actual consent to these relations as they are misrepresented to the victim by the perpetrator and who is in a state of counterfactual refusal to these relations as they are" (108). Through deception, the perpetrator obtains the victim's consent without ever

confronting the reality of the harm they cause (Pundik 110). Metz et al. similarly note that "men use rape baiting – or strategies to increase their probability of having sex – to identify women with whom they can easily talk into having sex" (4).

Overwhelmed by the emotional fallout of Arabella's and Kwami's lives, Terry loses a sense of self-direction, embodying what Ahmed refers to as "giving oneself to something that is not one's own" in her conceptualization of care (*The Promise* 186). Toward the end of the series, Terry finally comes to the realisation that her threesome did not occur in the way she had portrayed it and that she was exploited sexually by the men she thought she met coincidentally that summer night in Italy (see Figure 20):

> **Kai:** They weren't strangers.
> **Terry:** What do you mean?
> **Kai:** Sounds like they made a plan and waited for someone to take the bait.
> **Terry:** You think they were pretending to be strangers?
> **Kai:** I could be wrong.
> **Terry:** There was something about the way they left. They left together.
> **Kai:** They headed off together? Yeah. Pre-arranged, probably. It happens.
> **Terry:** It is a while ago.
> **Kai:** Still burns like it was yesterday, huh?[68]

This exchange between Terry and Kai marks the moment when she finally starts to reconstruct the narrative and realises that what she thought was consensual might have been orchestrated. Her uncertainty ("It's a while ago") highlights her delayed realisation. The casual tone of Kai's response, – "It happens" and "Still hurts like it was yesterday", – reflects the pervasive normalisation of such coercive behaviours within heteronormative sexual encounters. While Judith Butler notes that "the array of perversion and fetishism that populates regular human sexuality testifies to the failure of the symbolic law fully to order our sexual lives" (*Undoing Gender* 158), this symbolic failure is not evenly distributed. Terry's identity as a Black woman reframes the encounter through the lens of racial fetishization, where "heteronormative and capitalist systems of power pathologize black women's sexual desire and pleasure" (Gill et al. 149). Th whiteness of Giovanni and Luigi is not incidental; it contributes to how power, coercion, and racialised desire operate in that scene. As Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, "intersectional subordination is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another

[68] Terry and Kai, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 11, 21:00-21:36.

dimension of disempowerment" (1249). Kai's statement, rather than being dismissive, conveys a resigned acknowledgement that such manipulation is embedded within everyday sexual politics of urban British lives.

Figure 20: Terry (Weruche Opia) appears suspicious after observing the two men she believed she had encountered by chance, leaving together. *I May Destroy You*, Episode 3, BBC, 2020.

This dimly lit image of Terry (Figure 20) captures an important moment of emotional isolation and ambiguity. Her face visually encodes this shift, as she begins to register the possibility that the encounter might have been premeditated. The play between light and shadow portrays Terry's uncertainty between knowing and not knowing, clarity and denial. Her widened eyes suggest her internal rupture, as she tries to process a memory now tainted by a new understanding. The muted and cold color palette further heightens the emotional dissonance of a moment, which again does not reflect suspicion, but rather her disturbance.

Plaxton describes the instrumentalization of sexual desire as "an attitude that one human being can use the body of another simply for the sake of a pleasurable sensation culminating in orgasm" (108). This attitude reduces the other to a collection of body parts, an object devoid of subjectivity, and implies interchangeability—not only with other human beings but also with rubber dolls, animals, sex toys, and anything else capable of penetrating or being penetrated (Plaxton 108). In their study of coercers, DeGue and DiLillo observe that sexual coercers tend to exhibit higher levels of promiscuity, earlier sexual debut, and a greater likelihood of expressing intent to rape if assured they would not get caught (682). These

behaviour patterns reflect a calculated willingness to violate consent under the assumption of impunity.

Throughout the series, Terry suppresses her doubts about the sexual encounter by convincing herself that nothing wrong happened. Her reluctance to identify as a victim leads her to repress the memory entirely, echoing Nira's response in *Broadchurch*. Like Nira, she opts for silence over potential judgment, an effort "to propel conformity out of fear of exclusion" (Mahoney 607). However, as Mahoney argues, such conformity entails the degradation and suppression of one's truth (608). Terry's silence, then, is not an empowered choice but a pathological defense mechanism, a "defeat rather than an active choice and an ingredient in resistance" (Mahoney 611).

In Friedman and Valenti's analysis, silence born from humiliation is especially dangerous, as it enables what they term the "not-rape" epidemic to persist unchallenged:

> Women of all backgrounds are affected by these kinds of acts, regardless of race, ethnicity, or social class. So many of us carry the scars of the past with us in our daily lives. Most of us have pushed these stories to the back of our minds, trying to have some semblance of a normal life that includes romantic and sexual relationships (Friedman and Valenti 216).

Terry's eventual articulation of regret, surfacing only after Kai confirms his suspicion, becomes a turning point in her understanding of the seriousness of the coercion she experienced. Her sexual regret is not rooted in moral conflict but in the awareness that the consent she gave was based on false pretences. As Pundik explains, "Sexual regret is formed after the event took place, disapproving of the consent that the agent formed at the time of the event and desiring that they had not formed that consent" (106). Had Terry known that Giovanni and Luiggi had premeditated the encounter, her consent would not have been given.

Empirical studies reinforce the emotional aftermath of such deceptive encounters. DeGue and DiLillo found that college-aged women who had experienced sexual coercion reported significantly lower self-esteem, increased social isolation, depression, anxiety, and lasting feelings of betrayal, exploitation, and shame (674). Terry's own words reflect these sentiments: "I was thinking...back to Italy...and...remember that threesome I had? I think they tricked me. They tricked me. And I feel a bit mugged off. I might pop into Theodora's group. 'Cause that thing was not kosher".[69] This moment of realisation marks not only an emotional reckoning but also the beginning of her resistance. As Mahoney argues, the anger that arises

[69] Terry and Arabella, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, 24:25- 25:01.

from a failure of communication can act as a motivational force, "a failure of communication that motivates a subjective sense of agency and resistance" (614). Terry's initial shame, fuelled by the belief that she had somehow exploited herself, gives way to a reclaiming of power through narrative.

Although there may be difficulties obtaining testimonial evidence for nonconsensual sexual encounters, it is crucial that new standards of consent, such as conditional consent, are adopted by government officials. This would allow acts like stealthing, barebacking, and sexual deception and manipulation to be prosecuted under certain sexual assault laws (Blanco 240). As Pundik notes, actual consent refers to the agent's mental state at the time of the event itself (105), which renders any deception used to obtain it ethically, and potentially legally, invalid.

I May Destroy You appears more preoccupied with actively exploring black women's sexuality, challenging its historical absence in feminist theory. The series foregrounds Arabella's and Terry's unapologetic expressions of sexuality, acknowledging both "the history of violence and trauma against black women's bodies but also [enabling] an understanding of black women's experiences of pleasure and desire" (Gill et al. 149).

Friedman and Valenti advocate for clearer standards: "Demanding clear, ongoing, explicit verbal consent is incredibly effective at restoring body sovereignty" (176). Even if conventional consent laws do not yield immediate conviction rates, their adoption would signal a cultural shift, redefining societal expectations of sexual ethics, communication, and mutual respect (Blanco 240).

4.6 Transformation through Manipulation: Kwame's Struggle for Control

After becoming a victim of nonconsensual sexual activity, Kwame seeks to reassert control over his sexual agency through a heteronormative encounter with a woman he meets online, Nilufer. He does so without disclosing that he is gay. This act of concealment mirrors a deeper struggle for identity construction in the aftermath of trauma. His decision to engage with Nilufer under false pretences is not simply deceptive but emblematic of a deeper crisis of masculinity and vulnerability.

Kwame's behaviour reflects the cultural pressures on Black men to conform to narrow ideals of masculinity, often rooted in dominance and emotional repression. As bell hooks argues, these ideals are promoted "as the most esteemed version of manhood" (*Black Looks*, 88). After surviving rape by another man, Kwame's adoption of this new "idealised", rigid version of masculinity becomes both a coping mechanism and a means of erasure: he attempts to overwrite his vulnerability by performing a version of masculinity that marginalizes his

queer identity. The psychological cost of this encounter becomes evident in the emotionally detached and joyless sexual interaction with Nilufer, followed by his abrupt confession:

> **Kwame**: I am gay.
> **Nilufer**: You are joking, right?
> **Kwame**: No.
> **Nilufer**: You are gay?
> **Kwame**: I am gay.
> **Nilufer**: Well, if you are gay, why are you on a dating app looking for...What the fuck?
> **Kwame**: No, the thing... the thing is sexuality is a spectrum. And I...I wanted...I wanted to explore, like…
> **Nilufer**: You are gay. Why would you not say that you were gay? Because we...We shared a lot. I mean, like, a lot. And you just sort of kept that bit back.[70]

Nilufer's shock and sense of betrayal reveal the ethical breach at the core of Kwame's actions. Just as Zain deceives Arabella and the two Italian men deceive Terry, Kwame objectifies Nilufer, reducing her to a vehicle for his psychological repair. As Plaxton contends, the violation of sexual integrity involves asking whether someone has been "wrongfully used as a sexual object" (22). In this encounter, Nilufer becomes an instrument for Kwame's self-gratification, stripped of subjectivity and discarded through silence.

The extent of this violation is made clear in Arabella's blunt confrontation with Kwame in Episode 9. Having grown into a figure of unflinching moral clarity, Arabella resists excusing Kwame's behavior on the grounds of his sexual trauma:

> **Arabella**: He is a man concealing his identity, following a woman into her home. He is making someone vulnerable. If he felt good about that, I would be fucking horrified.
> **Terry**: I am saying he has got his own...
> **Arabella**: He is vulnerable. Yeah. Being vulnerable doesn't mean you can make other people vulnerable. It doesn't mean you can put other people through pain, it doesn't mean you can penetrate peop...
> **Kwame**: Seriously, she literally pushed me into it.
> **Arabella**: Mm. No. It sounds like you are blaming her. Are you blaming her?
> **Kwame**: I am not... I am not...Of course, I would not do that.
> **Terry**: You shouldn't have told her.

[70] Kwame and Nilufer, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 8, 24:56-26:13.

> **Arabella**: Hey, you know, T, I agree, because it would be, like, telling the truth, and it is much better to just hide that under the surface and never acknowledge that you are hiding something from a woman who has let you into her bedroom. Fix your brain.
> **Terry**: Are you fucking insane? He made a mistake.
> **Arabella**: A mis...Yeah. Yes, yes, he made a mistake, sure. Nobody gives a fuck that it is a mistake, Terry. We all make those. Do we make deceitful, destructive, narcissistic, sick, inconsiderate mistakes?[71]

Arabella's refusal to excuse Kwame's actions reflects a broader thematic concern in *I May Destroy You*: accountability and the victim-perpetrator binary. Kwame, though himself a survivor, reproduces patterns of domination and deception. As Orenstein observes, such behaviour reflects a cultural script where sex becomes "something men do to women rather than with women" (37). Thus, Kwame temporarily assumes the same predatory posture that harmed him, reaffirming how unresolved trauma can mutate into further harm.

This narrative challenges "unilateral sexism", the assumption that men are the oppressors and women are the oppressed. As Friedman and Valenti argue, rape culture creates "double binds" that uphold a "predator/prey mindset", denying the possibility of male vulnerability (227-228). As a victim who becomes complicit in harming another, Kwame occupies a morally ambiguous space that resists binary classification.

Nilufer, meanwhile, is framed as a woman confidently embracing her sexuality, seeking empowerment and autonomy through intimacy. Her disclosure of personal grief to Kwame, including the loss of her father, highlights the emotional depth of the connection she felt with him. Her disappointment, "You just sort of kept that bit back", reveals not only Nilufer's sense of betrayal but the broader emotional cost of being treated as disposable. Attempting to restore power through dominance, Kwame replicates the instrumentalization he once suffered.

The distortion of empathy is another side effect of trauma Kwame endures. His deception underscores the most unsettling insight of this episode: the line between victim and perpetrator is not always fixed, and transformation through manipulation is not the path to healing.

4.7 Intimacy Coordinators in *I May Destroy You*

In recent years, shifts within the television industry, such as the rise of intimacy coordination, trauma-informed production practices, and audience sensitivity to sexual abuse on screen,

[71] Terry and Arabella, *I May Destroy You,* Episode 9, 11:09- 12:08.

have shaped how narratives of rape and recovery are told. In an article from *The Conversation*, it is argued that within the UK entertainment industry, intimacy coordinators play an essential role in broader efforts to combat sexually predatory and gendered abuse of power in film and TV (2021). Although this dissertation mainly analyzes the representations of sexual violence in the three television series, it also examines their production contexts to provide a better understanding of these series as complex sociocultural products. *The Conversation* further identifies several films released between the 1970s and 2000s, in the pre-intimacy coordination world, in which actresses have retrospectively spoken of being treated as objects both on and off screen, particularly during sex scenes. These include accounts of being coerced into performing naked auditions and being filmed without their approval. One notable example, also referenced in the Introduction of this dissertation, is *Last Tango in Paris* (1972). Regarding the anal rape scene, actress Maris Schneider later stated that she felt "a little raped" by both director Bernardo Bertolucci and actor Marlon Brando, as the scene was filmed without her prior knowledge or consent (*The Conversation*). This logic of minimization is directly challenged in *I May Destroy You*. In Episode 5, Arabella critiques the language often used to describe abusive or coercive encounters, rejecting terms such as "rape-adjacent" or "a bit rapey". Her statement highlights how qualifiers like "a bit" or "little" are commonly employed by survivors to shield themselves from the shame abuse inflicts, especially when consent appears uncertain or compromised, underscoring the grey area that appears both in discourse and experience.

In her article for *Feminist Media Studies*, Sørensen notes that HBO mandated the presence of an Intimacy Coordinator[72] on all productions with scenes of physical intimacy to establish safety practices on set beginning in 2018 (1). Several post-Weinstein productions have employed intimacy coordinators during the filming of sex scenes, such as *The Deuce* (2017-2019), *Sex Education* (2019-2023), *Euphoria* (2019-2022), and *Carnival Row* (2019-2023) (Nizalowski). However, not all productions adopted this practice, including *Unbelievable* and *Broadchurch* Season 3.

The absence of precise definitions for "intimate scenes" introduces ambiguity as it gives more space for abuse or inconsideration and also legitimizes coercive control, as Sørensen highlights (6). This lack of clarity and institutional sexism in the screen industry has persisted for decades, with cast and crew members often feeling compromised and exploited at work. It was the #MeToo movement in 2017 that kindled attention on the issue because it:

[72] Sørensen further refers to this new role as a catalyst for changes on set as it offers the screen industry a way of redressing and negotiating contemporary and cultural concerns regarding sexual harassment in the industry (2).

> [h]ighlighted the prevalence and extent of historic and current abuse, harassment, and discrimination in the screen industries. This reignited debates around equality in the screen industries as well as health and safety and production practices on and off set in relation to the depiction, direction, and discussion of sex, intimacy, and nudity (Sørensen 3).

Within this evolving framework, *I May Destroy You* emerges as a paradigmatic text as it reignites discussions on production protocols and the presence of intimacy coordinators, contrary to *Unbelievable* and *Broadchurch*. *I May Destroy You* distinguishes itself from the two other television series by transcending the mere narration of self to emerge with cultural, social, and political critiques and interpretation through the lens of personal experiences, a key feature of autoethnography (Beattie 10-11). At the 2021 Bafta Awards, Michaela Coel dedicated her award for Leading Actress to the series' Intimacy Coordinator, Ita O'Brien, drawing attention to the critical role she played in maintaining the safe physical, emotional, and professional boundaries on set without being exploited in the process:

> "I know what it is like to shoot without an intimacy director, the messy, embarrassing feeling for the crew, the internal devastation for the actor…your direction was essential to my show, and I believe essential for every production company that wants to make work exploring themes of consent" (Coel 02:45- 03:37).

The role of the intimacy coordinator is more than logistical, as it provides ethical and creative boundaries. As Lizzy Talbot explains in an interview for *Focus Features* (2022), her responsibilities as an intimacy coordinator include "establishing cast boundaries and ensuring these are protected before, during, and after filming", with the use of Nudity Riders and Closed Set Protocols.

The role also includes carefully choreographing scripted intimate scenes to fulfill the director's creative vision while maintaining cast boundaries and autonomy. Thus, an Intimacy Coordinator negotiates the parameters for closed sets, coordinating with camera and lighting departments to determine the angles, and ensuring the availability of intimacy garments (Sørensen 5). The presence of an Intimacy Coordinator ensures that there are no power imbalances and that the safety and dignity of the actors involved are non-negotiable. Their role is instrumental in shifting power dynamics on set while ameliorating, mitigating, and eliminating coercive contexts that enable abuse and harassment (Sørensen 9). Although intimacy coordinators can establish clear guidelines around what is and is not acceptable,

"they are not the sole answer to fixing structural inequalities" (*The Conversation*), embedded in production cultures and institutional practices.

The industry and production companies hold considerable power in the construction of meaning, state Gray and Lotz (103), therefore, when women are concentrated in lower-paid and lower-status roles within the screen industry, they are significantly less likely to influence the representations that reach audiences through television (Casey et al. 302). Consequently, television companies, rather than challenging entrenched gender biases, tend to reproduce them.

The production companies behind *Unbelievable* include Katie Couric Media (KCM), Escapist Fare, and Sage Lane Productions, with the primary production undertaken by Timberman/Beverly Productions and CBS Television Studios. To better understand how *Unbelievable* navigates Marie's narrative around sexual violence, it is necessary to examine the leadership of the companies that facilitated its creation. While Escapist Fare and Sage Lane Productions lack clear public information regarding ownership or affiliation, Katie Couric Media—founded in 2017 by journalist Katie Couric and her husband John Molner—positions itself as a platform aimed at helping brands "amplify their values and cultivate an engaged and diverse audience through authentic storytelling," according to the company's website (*About Katie*). Timberman/Beverly Productions is co-founded and co-led by Sarah Timberman and Carl Beverly, while CBS Television Studios is overseen by President David Stapf. Notably, several of these companies feature shared male and female leadership, suggesting at least a surface-level gender diversity in production authority.

I May Destroy You was produced by Falkna Productions and Various Artists Ltd. While there is no publicly available data regarding the leadership of Falkna Productions, Various Artists Ltd. is directed by a diverse team of both male and female figures, including Jesse Armstrong (co-founder and writer), Sam Bain (co-founder and producer), Philip Clarke (head of comedy), Roberto Troni (commissioning editor), Gregory Allon (COO), and Marilyn Bennett (Director of Production) (*Various Artists*).

Similarly, *Broadchurch* was produced by Kudos and Imaginary Friends Productions. Kudos is jointly led by Karen Wilson and Martin Haines (*Kudos CEO*), whereas Imaginary Friends is directed by Chris Chibnall and Madeline Joinson (Imaginary Friends).

While a correlation between increased female leadership and progressive storytelling may be tempting to assert, it would be reductive to assume that greater representation of women (or any historically marginalised group) automatically leads to substantive shifts in narrative content. As Casey et al. point out, multiple factors influence the shape of television programming, including genre conventions, market demands, and the collaborative nature of

television production (303). Therefore, while changes in leadership demographics are meaningful, they are not always directly translatable into representational transformation.

While some measurable shifts in representation have occurred, particularly in programming that centres women in more complex roles (Casey et al. 304), structural inequalities remain entrenched. As Gray and Lotz note, most of the dynamic work on race and television currently stems from minority-written and minority-produced programming, which offers new opportunities both in content and production possibilities (73). Nevertheless, institutional and cultural barriers remain, especially in the form of masculine hegemony, which legitimizes unequal gender relations not only between men and women, or masculinities and femininities, but also among competing forms of masculinity (Messerschmidt ix). Although women now occupy authoritative roles in the television industry, the underlying power structures continue to favour male dominance, both economically and ideologically.

Conclusion

> "How do you write violence authentically without making it exploitative?" asks Roxane Gay, a question that encapsulates a central ethical tension explored throughout this dissertation.

This question serves as the conceptual backbone of this study, framing a core concern: whether ethical, non-exploitative representations of sexual violence are possible, and, if so, through what narrative means. In response, this dissertation offers visual and textual analysis of three post-Weinstein television series—*Broadchurch*, *Unbelievable*, and *I May Destroy You*—to explore and answer the above question. The concepts of trust, consent, and shame in the aftermath of trauma provide the critical framework for examining the cultural contexts and narrative strategies employed across these visual texts.

The starting point of this dissertation lies in the transformation of audiovisual representations of sexual abuse after Harvey Weinstein's public trial in 2017, and the global spread of the #MeToo movement as a result. These events disrupted the silence surrounding sexual violence, exposed the complicity of institutions that had long shielded perpetrators, and demanded a new way of thinking about gendered power and trauma. Additionally, they changed how sexual violence was represented in media, particularly on television, where survivor-centered narratives gained unprecedented visibility.

Before this moment, rape narratives in popular culture often reinforced harmful stereotypes and rape myths. Television and cinema repeatedly depicted sexual assault as a device for plot sensationalism, focusing on the crime, the perpetrator, or the investigation rather than the survivor's lived experience. The female body was aestheticized as an instrument of violence, while survivors' voices were sidelined and doubted. Such portrayals normalized disbelief, perpetuated rape myths, and trivialized the psychological and social realities of trauma. Hence, television not only reflected but also normalized and sustained a culture of silence.

The Weinstein scandal, followed by the global wave of testimonies catalyzed by #MeToo, made the systemic nature of sexual violence and its representation on scrcreen impossible to ignore. These events explored how the traditional media had long failed to create ethical, empowering spaces for testimony. Post-2017, creators began to experiment with new forms of storytelling that foregrounded survivor perspectives. This shift redirected attention from the female body as spectacle to processes of recovery, from institutional

complicity to individual experience, and from silence to empowerment. This transformation alone underscores one of the central arguments of this dissertation.

Feminist media scholarship has long critiqued the objectification of women's suffering and the persistence of patriarchal myths within screen culture, as articulated by scholars such as Roxane Gay, Sarah Projansky, Linda Alcoff, and Laura Gray, to name a few. In parallel, trauma studies emphasize the difficulty of representing experiences that resist narrative closure, while ethical theories of care and witnessing stress the responsibility of both creators and audiences when engaging with stories of violence. These traditions converge in the post-Weinstein era, where television serves as a site for survivor-centered narratives that are both ethically attentive and culturally impactful.

The serial structure of the television mirrors the fragmented and recursive nature of trauma, aligning form with content in a way that cultivates empathy in the viewer, encourages reflection, and enables a deeper engagement with characters and their long-term recovery processes. As a result, television has become a powerful space for cultural debates on consent, shame, credibility, and justice.

The objectives of this dissertation emerge directly from these antecedents. The first objective is to examine how post-Weinstein television reconfigures representations of rape by centering the survivor's subjectivity. Instead of reducing survivors to victims or narrative catalysts, these series grant them agency, voice, and complexity. A second objective is to analyze how survivor-centered narratives reshape the ethics of spectatorship. By employing techniques such as subjective lighting, close-ups, and fragmented temporality to disrupt the narrative's chronological flow, these screen texts invite audiences to become co-witnesses rather than distant consumers. They demand recognition and empathy, transforming viewing into an ethical act of responsiveness.

A third objective is to analyze the methodological innovations within such narratives, particularly in the context of autoethnographic storytelling. Predominantly, Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You* demonstrates how creators can integrate personal experience with cultural critique, collapsing the divide between author and subject, creating a grey area between fiction and reality, and positioning survivor testimony as a form of resistance. Post-Weinstein storytelling does not simply reflect social change; it contributes to it by reshaping public discourse around trauma, justice, and recovery. The overarching objective is to evaluate television's potential as a transformative medium.

The methodological framework of this dissertation is grounded in an interdisciplinary approach that brings together feminist media studies, trauma theory, ethics of care, and close textual and visual analysis. Feminist media studies provide the primary critical framework for

this dissertation. The representation of sexual violence is inextricably tied to questions of gender, power, and agency, and feminist theory offers the tools to interrogate these dynamics. This approach examines how survivors are positioned within televisual narratives, whether their voices are marginalized or amplified, and how cultural myths about rape are challenged or reinforced. Feminist media criticism foregrounds the importance of subjectivity and agency, highlighting how post-Weinstein television disrupts traditional portrayals by centering survivors in their own narratives. It also draws attention to the politics of production (intimacy coordination), authorship, and reception.

The second methodological pillar of this dissertation is trauma studies. Trauma, by definition, resists conventional forms of representation, as it disrupts memory, language, and narrative coherence. Theories of trauma developed by scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, and Shoshana Felman emphasize the difficulty of testifying to experiences that exceed symbolic articulation. In the context of television, these challenges manifest in aesthetic and narrative strategies that attempt to represent the unrepresentable. Trauma studies thus provide the conceptual vocabulary to analyze how shame, memory, and silence function in survivor narratives. They also foreground the importance of listening to testimony with trust, acknowledging the contested nature of memory while affirming the survivor's voice.

A third methodological dimension derives from the ethics of care and witnessing. Post-Weinstein television places ethical demands not only on creators but also on audiences. The act of viewing is reconceptualized as a form of witnessing that entails moral responsibility. The ethics of care, as developed by scholars such as Lizzie Ward, Fiona Robinson, and Sarah Clark Miller, further stress the importance of empathy, solidarity, and relational responsibility. Together, these frameworks provide a foundation for analyzing how television cultivates ethical spectatorship. Survivor-centered narratives compel viewers to acknowledge trauma in ways that resist voyeurism and foster radical empathy.

Finally, the dissertation uses close textual analysis to explore the aesthetic strategies that shape survivor-centered narratives. This method involves detailed attention to mise-en-scène, cinematography, sound, dialogue, and narrative structure. Close analysis also illustrates how aesthetic choices align with ethical commitments: camera work that resists objectification, while narrative pacing that dwells on aftermath rather than spectacle shifts focus from the act of violence to the process of recovery. This methodological focus highlights the importance of form in shaping meaning, and reinforces the dissertation's argument that representation is never politically neutral.

The integration of these methods ensures an intersectional approach. Feminist media studies provide the political lens, trauma theory supplies the psychological and narrative

framework, ethics of care highlights the moral stakes, and close textual analysis grounds the study in concrete aesthetic practices. By combining these methods, the dissertation avoids reductionism and essentialism, while recognizing the complex, layered nature of representing sexual violence.

The dissertation demonstrates that post-Weinstein television represents a break from earlier traditions of portraying sexual violence primarily as spectacle. Historically, rape scenes were often shown explicitly, with the camera lingering on the act itself rather than its aftermath. In contrast, survivor-centered narratives reorient the gaze away from violence and toward the subjective experiences of survivors. This shift privileges interiority, aftermath, and reduces sensationalism. By repositioning the survivor as the interpretive center, such narratives constitute a new cultural model of representation, one that prioritizes subjectivity, selfhood, and ethical responsibility. The analysis highlights that shame (*Broadchurch*), distrust (*Unbelievable*), and consent (*I May Destroy You*) emerge as the three central categories shaping survivor narratives in the post-Weinstein era. These categories are not only narrative devices but also reflections of wider cultural debates.

Together, these categories chart a cultural shift from simplistic portrayals of rape toward nuanced explorations of survivor selfhood. A significant finding of the dissertation is the role of autoethnography in survivor-centered storytelling, which positions survivor testimony as a mode of resistance that defies the silencing mechanisms of oppression. This methodological innovation also redefines the relationship between creator and audience, as viewers are invited into an intimate dialogue with the survivor’s lived reality. Thus, autoethnographic storytelling becomes both an artistic strategy and a political intervention, reshaping the epistemological terrain of trauma representation directly.

The dissertation identifies radical empathy as a key aesthetic in post-Weinstein television. Unlike voyeuristic portrayals that distance viewers from survivors, radical empathy aims to forge embodied connections between audience and character. These aesthetic strategies demand patience and attentiveness from viewers, cultivating empathy that is active and repositions spectators as co-witnesses, responsible for acknowledging survivors’ truths and reflecting on the broader cultural implications of sexual violence. The dissertation argues that survivor-centered television fundamentally redefines the ethics of witnessing.

Traditional spectatorship often allowed audiences to consume sexual violence narratives with detachment or even fascination. This dynamic is disrupted in the post-Weinstein series by compelling audiences to recognize their role in sustaining or dismantling rape culture. This ethical repositioning suggests that viewing is never a neutral act: it carries moral obligations to respond, believe, and act in solidarity.

The dissertation finds that post-Weinstein television serves as a critical lens on institutional failures, particularly the systemic disbelief of survivors. This institutional critique extends beyond the justice system, implicating communities, workplaces, and media industries that perpetuate shame and a culture of silence. Additionally, the research emphasizes that survivor-centered storytelling must be understood through the lens of intersectionality. Post-Weinstein television demonstrates that intersectional storytelling not only reflects diverse survivor experiences but also challenges hegemonic narratives that universalize trauma. This result highlights the need for more inclusive and nuanced representations that honor the diversity of survivors' realities. Seriality thus emerges as more than a formal feature; it is a cultural strategy that deepens the ethical and emotional impact of survivor narratives.

The delimitation of this research reflects both the scope of the research questions and the specific cultural moment in which the inquiry takes place. The dissertation investigates the representation of sexual violence in Anglophone television following the Weinstein revelations and the emergence of the #MeToo movement in 2017. By narrowing its focus to this specific temporal, cultural, and media context, the study ensures both depth of analysis and clarity of argument. The temporal delimitation is particularly significant. The year 2017 represents a cultural rupture in the global conversation about sexual violence, power, and gendered injustice. While rape narratives have long been a feature of both cinema and television, it was only after the Weinstein case and the mass mobilization of survivors through #MeToo that a widespread reevaluation of such narratives occurred.

By focusing on the period from 2017 to the present, the dissertation situates itself within a transformative moment in media history, when creators, audiences, and critics alike began to demand more ethical, survivor-centered storytelling. A second delimitation concerns the medium of study. The dissertation focuses exclusively on television rather than cinema or other forms of media. This decision is grounded in both practical and theoretical considerations. Practically, the proliferation of streaming platforms such as Netflix and HBO has elevated television to a central cultural form, capable of reaching vast and diverse audiences. Theoretically, television offers unique narrative opportunities that distinguish it from film. Its episodic structure, extended character arcs, and capacity for serial storytelling allow for a deeper and more sustained exploration of trauma and recovery. Unlike cinema, which often shortens narratives into a two-hour format, television can engage viewers across weeks or months, fostering what may be described as long-term empathy.

A third delimitation lies in the cultural and linguistic scope of the study. The dissertation focuses on Anglophone television series, specifically those produced in the

United Kingdom and the United States. This choice is guided by the recognition that these contexts played a particularly central role in the Weinstein revelations and the subsequent development of the #MeToo movement. Moreover, the Anglophone media industry has historically set the terms for global cultural debates, shaping how narratives of gendered violence circulate across borders. While non-Anglophone contexts undoubtedly offer rich sites for analysis, their exclusion in this dissertation allows for a focused examination of the cultural industries most directly implicated in the Weinstein scandal.

The dissertation also delimits its object of study to three case studies: *Broadchurch* (ITV, 2017), *Unbelievable* (Netflix, 2019), and *I May Destroy You* (HBO, 2020). These series were selected for their explicit engagement with sexual violence, their critical acclaim, and their cultural impact. *Broadchurch* represents an early instance of post-Weinstein storytelling, foregrounding the theme of shame in the aftermath of rape. *Unbelievable* dramatizes the systemic disbelief that survivors encounter, revealing the institutional failures that compound trauma. *I May Destroy You*, created by Michaela Coel, exemplifies the innovative use of autoethnography, exploring consent, memory, and healing through a deeply personal yet culturally resonant narrative.

By focusing on these three series, the dissertation engages in close textual analysis while situating each work within broader cultural and theoretical debates. Other series that may also address sexual violence are excluded from the main body of analysis, not because they lack relevance but because the selected case studies provide sufficient scope for the dissertation's research questions. Equally important is the exclusion of certain types of narratives. Male-centered rape stories, for instance, are present but are not part of the dissertation's focus. While such narratives exist and are worthy of scholarly attention, the emphasis here is on female survivors and the reconfiguration of female subjectivity in post-Weinstein television.

Chapter 2 examines *Broadchurch* Season 3 as an ethically significant intervention in the televisual representation of sexual violence by foregrounding shame as a systemic, relational force rather than an individualized burden. One of the series' most notable achievements lies in its refusal to reproduce myths of rape or to sensationalize female pain; instead, it frames Trish Winterman and other survivors as complex subjects, embedding their trauma within broader cultural dynamics of community and institutional response, and gendered power relations. Through consulting with survivors, crisis centres, and law enforcement, the production of *Broadchurch* embeds research-led authenticity into its narrative, translating qualitative social insight into televisual form.

Visually, the show redefines the politics of looking. Through sustained close-ups on the face, strategic avoidance of exploitative imagery, and a melancholic acoustic atmosphere, it highlights ethical witnessing. Shame is represented not as a static emotion but as affectively contagious—moving between bodies, communities, and institutions. In doing so, the series destabilizes dichotomies between victimhood and agency, silence and speech, humiliation and dignity. It also complicates cultural scripts surrounding aging and female sexuality, exposing how patriarchal discourses devalue women's bodies while simultaneously enabling resistance to these frameworks.

The most remarkable achievement of *Broadchurch* is its capacity to transform shame into a site of reflection and communal accountability. By situating shame as both destructive and generative, the series dramatizes the ethical possibilities of care and recognition while highlighting the role of shame in producing new identities. It demonstrates that televisual crime drama can mobilize feminist media ethics, confront entrenched stereotypes, and contribute to public discourse on survivorship. The final season of *Broadchurch* ultimately illustrates that cultural texts, when crafted with attentiveness and responsibility, can intervene in the politics of representation, fostering collective awareness and opening space for the restoration of survivors' dignity and agency.

Chapter 3 has demonstrated that *Unbelievable* (2019) offers a searing critique of the systemic institutional failures underpinning a culture of disbelief. Through its survivor-centered storytelling and ethics of representation, the series exposes how institutions—police, medical, and foster care—collapse under the weight of proceduralism and patriarchal assumptions, often retraumatizing those they are designed to protect. The most significant achievement of this analysis lies in revealing how disbelief is not a marginal or isolated failure of judgment but as a structural, cultural, and gendered mechanism that governs the treatment of survivors.

A key contribution of this chapter is its illumination of how disbelief operates across multiple domains: the coercive police interrogation that reconfigures Marie from survivor into suspect; the clinical detachment of medical protocols that prioritize evidence over empathy; and the disciplinary practices of foster care that punish rather than protect. These intersecting failures produce a devastating cycle of institutional neglect, one that erodes trust and displaces responsibility onto the victim herself.

Equally significant is the chapter's emphasis on empathy and feminist solidarity as corrective forces. By foregrounding the methodological differences between male and female investigators, *Unbelievable* advances an alternative investigative ethic—one rooted in trust, care, and narrative accountability. Detectives Rasmussen and Duvall embody this

hermeneutics of empathy, restoring dignity to survivor testimony and demonstrating that justice can only be achieved when institutions prioritize human experience alongside forensic evidence. By situating *Unbelievable* within feminist media theory and trauma studies, the analysis underscores the urgency of dismantling entrenched disbelief and replacing it with structures of empathy, credibility, and justice. In doing so, it positions the series as both a cultural critique and a call to reimagine survivor-centered justice in a post-Weinstein world.

Chapter 4 has demonstrated that *I May Destroy You* is a landmark in the televisual representation of sexual violence, consent, and recovery, precisely because of how it destabilizes entrenched binaries and reclaims narrative authority for survivors. Among its most notable contributions is its refusal to flatten trauma into a singular, identifiable event. Instead, through Arabella's assault, Kwame's coercion, and Terry's deception, the show constructs a spectrum of violations that disrupt the rigid categories of "rape" and "consensual sex." This capacious framing not only challenges juridical definitions but also foregrounds the lived ambiguities of survivors navigating the grey zones of coercion, manipulation, and betrayal.

Of equal weight is the series's embedding of Black bodies and voices at the center of its narrative. By situating Arabella, Kwame, and Terry as protagonists, Coel disrupts dominant televisual paradigms that have historically silenced or stereotyped people of colour. Their stories collectively expose how racialized and gendered identities intersect to shape the recognition—or erasure—of victimhood, revealing systemic inequities within legal, cultural, and social frameworks. Formally, *I May Destroy You* achieves what this chapter identifies as a feminist autoethnographic mode. Coel's authorship, her visual strategies, and the incorporation of fragmented timelines render trauma not only as content but as aesthetic form. In doing so, the show exemplifies storytelling as a reclamation of voice, authority, and interpretive power from systems that have historically silenced survivors.

Finally, the chapter situates the show within broader post-Weinstein transformations in television, particularly the rise of intimacy coordination and trauma-informed production. Here, *I May Destroy You* emerges as not only narratively groundbreaking but also structurally transformative, advocating safer modes of creative practice. Collectively, these achievements affirm the series's status as both cultural interventions and theoretical texts that exemplarily articulate survival and resistance.

While cinematic depictions of rape, including those produced before 2017, are referenced in the theoretical framework, they are not the central object of analysis. Such films provide valuable conceptual background; however, the core focus of this research remains on post-2017 Anglophone television. In summary, the dissertation is delimited by its temporal

scope (post-2017), its medium (television), its cultural focus (Anglophone contexts), its case studies (*Broadchurch, Unbelievable,* and *I May Destroy You*), and its thematic emphasis on female survivor narratives. By establishing these boundaries, the dissertation situates itself within a specific cultural and academic terrain, one that is both historically significant and theoretically rich.

Broadchurch, *Unbelievable*, and *I May Destroy You* are significant works not only for their thematic content but also for their intersectional approach to representing sexual trauma. Each series foregrounds female survivors of sexual violence from diverse social, economic, generational, and racial backgrounds, offering multifaceted perspectives on trauma and recovery. They engage with grounded, everyday moralities and the lived experiences of sexual violence. Although they are products of Western neoliberal contexts, the healing journeys of Trish, Marie, and Arabella differ significantly due to the distinct cultural and social forces that shape them.

Trish, a woman in her fifties, must confront the systemic shame imposed by a small, tight-knit community, as well as internalised shame stemming from the perceived failure to conform to normative ideals of female desirability. “Of all the women at that party, why would someone rape you?” asks Cath in Episode 3, a question that exposes the violent assumptions embedded in victim-blaming discourse.

Marie, an 18-year-old teenager, shaped by instability, embodies the vulnerability of youth compounded by institutional neglect. Her transitional experience, moving between foster homes, struggling with isolation and self-worth, is exacerbated by the institutional disbelief and the repeated failure of legal, criminal justice, and healthcare systems to uphold their duty of care.

Arabella, a young urban British woman, more daring and unbound by traditional norms, advocates for clear communication around sexual agency. She confronts the ambiguity of consent within a racialised context. As a Black protagonist with Ghanian heritage, she navigates the commodification of Black female identity, exploring manipulation, consent, autonomy, and self-transformation in ways that foreground racialised experiences often rendered invisible, such as the sexual abuse of Kwame, or the sexual manipulation of Arabella and Terry.

Notably, all three series employ a subjective lens that positions these women as central, credible subjects. Through empathetic cinematography and carefully constructed intimate scenes, the shows consciously avoid voyerism and exploitative portrayals. Nudity is eschewed in favour of emotional depth. In these post-Weinstein media productions, the camera becomes a mirror, a critical apparatus for reconstructing female subjectivity, beauty,

and foregrounding empowerment; however, it remains unclear how future filmmakers will adopt these methods of representation.

There exists no single universal language for representing sexual violence on screen. While this dissertation focuses primarily on the approach of Western neoliberal societies, future research should explore how non-Western, narrative-based perspectives construct or resist sexual abuse. Such inquiry is vital for understanding alternative perspectives of representation, particularly in rural or underrepresented settings shaped by historical, cultural, and geographical conditions. Although many ethical practices—such as the use of intimacy coordinators—have been embraced by production companies, writers, and creators, the degree to which these practices will become standard across the industry in promoting global empathy remain uncertain. Future research, particularly within reception studies and queer perspectives on sexual trauma, should critically assess the implications, effects, and emotional impact on viewers, who, as this dissertation has shown, are not passive consumers but co-participants in meaning-making.

From Weinstein to Epstein and Combs (Diddy), the media continues to document high-profile reckonings that expose systemic abuses of power. Yet whether these moments signal lasting structural change or isolated ruptures remains an urgent question, one that scholars and audiences alike must continue to examine critically.

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I May Destroy You. Created by Michaela Coel, Falkna Productions, Various Artists Limited, 2020.

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