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Trauma- Informed Detection: Gender, Knowledge and Justice in Contemporary Crime Narratives

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Abstract: *This paper explores the concept of trauma-informed detection in contemporary crime narratives, focusing on the intersections of gender, knowledge, and justice. Moving beyond conventional models of crime-solving that prioritize logic, evidence, and rational deduction, recent narratives foreground the role of trauma as a critical lens through which crimes are understood and interpreted. The study examines how female investigators, survivors, and marginalized voices contribute alternative forms of knowledge rooted in lived experience, emotional intelligence, and psychological insight.These narratives highlight how trauma reshapes memory, perception, and testimony, thereby complicating traditional notions of truth and reliability. At the same time, they offer more empathetic and inclusive models of detection, where healing, recognition, and ethical responsibility become central to the pursuit of justice. The paper concludes that trauma-informed detection not only redefines investigative practices within fiction but also reflects broader cultural shifts toward acknowledging gendered experiences and the need for restorative justice. Such narratives expand the scope of crime fiction by integrating psychological depth with social critique, making them relevant to contemporary discussions on law, gender, and human rights.*
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Detective fiction has always centred around male characters and has conventionally been seen as embodying masculine epistemology. It is characterised by a privileging of rationality, emotional detachment and authoritative interrogation as its methodology in solving crime. From Sherlock Holmes to the hard boiled detectives of the 20th century, detection has become synonymous with intellectual supremacy, domination and control. The detective is thus presented traditionally as a superior figure surveilling , correcting and passing judgement on lesser beings; someone who extracts truth through pressure and deductive brilliance. As Raymond Chandler says, “The detective in this kind of story must be such a man that he is not himself mean, that he is neither tarnished nor afraid… He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man.” (The Simple Art of Murder 16)

This model begins to crack in the case of crimes of sexual violence where truth does not present itself as coherent evidence and where testimony is shaped by trauma and fear. Historically women’s voices in the case of sexual crimes have been treated with an amount of suspicion and disbelief. Because of the trauma associated with such crimes, the survivor might not be able to meet the expectations of the legal institution in their testimony. They might not have sufficient clarity, emotional restraint or vocabulary that would help the agency to solve the crime. The failure of justice in such cases can be considered as epistemological rather than

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procedural. Detective fiction which banks mostly on the male way of knowing can in this case let down the victim by providing them with more trauma than with a solution.

> "The legal system is designed to protect men from the superior power of the state but not to protect women or children from the superior power of men. It therefore provides strong guarantees for the rights of the accused but essentially no guarantees for the rights of the victim. If one set out by design to devise a system for provoking intrusive post-traumatic symptoms, one could not do better than a court of law." (Herman 45)

Recent years have seen a number of television crime dramas trying to challenge this masculine epistemology by reimagining detection itself. Prominent among these are *Unbelievable* (2019) and *Broadchurch* (Season 3, 2017) . These series have foregrounded an alternate method of detection in dealing with victims of rape. Thus they offer a feminist counter-narrative to the masculine epistemological framework of investigation upheld in this genre. The focus of these narratives is not the brilliance of the detective figure or the spectacle of violence that it can possibly incorporate. Instead, these series turn their attention to the survivors, their trauma and determination and moreover to how policing itself can be gender conscious so that the victims get justice without going through further trials and tribulations. They also highlight the institutional failure that results from sticking on to the age-old method of masculine epistemology in trying to resolve sexual crimes. In other words, these series offer a gender conscious mode of detection or detection otherwise centred on empathy, listening and belief which offer a feminist counternarrative to masculine detection.

Here we find a movement away from detection as control, surveillance and extraction focusing on the brilliance of the detective genius. In its place is an epistemology of care brought about by a consciousness of gender. In Broadchurch Season 3, the investigation of rape is marked by restraint and understanding on the part of the investigators. The dignity of the victim is given due importance, her anonymity is upheld and there is no sensationalising the testimony of the survivor – cliche- breaking as far as crime dramas are concerned. Unbelievable on the other hand throws light on the violence embedded in institutional disbelief. It shows how a system which follows the usual policing methods is a failure as an institution as it only contributes towards re-traumatising the survivor.

Feminism has long challenged the assumption that knowledge is universal or neutral. It posits instead that knowledge is socially situated and intertwined with power. In the case crimes related to sexual violence against women, this becomes all the more pertinent because here women's testimonies are looked through the lens of patriarchal knowledge. Their credibility and legitimacy is determined against patriarchal norms.This paper draws on feminist epistemology focusing on theories of testimonial justice, ethics of care and gendered knowledge production.

Miranda Fricker in her 2007 work, *Epistemic Injustice*, brings forth the concept of 'testimonial injustice' where the institution questions the credibility of the victim's testimony because of prejudices based on gender, race etc. In cases of sexual assault women are frequently subjected to epistemic injustice where their accounts are disbelieved as exaggerated, inaccurate or inconsistent. Here the male detective will emerge as the authority figure who is entrusted with the mission of digging up the truth with little or no help on the part of the distraught victim. Another related term is hermeneutical injustice where the institution fails to recognise as intelligible, the trauma and shame connected with sexual crimes that prevent women from expressing their experiences effectively. Both Unbelievable and Broadchurch realistically portray the survivors' struggle in articulating their experience under the scrutiny of a system

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that demands linearity and emotional restraint. Feminist epistemology looks at these as systemic failures and not as personal shortcomings.

Carol Gilligan's concept of 'ethics of care'emphasises relationality, attentiveness and responsibility instead of frameworks based on masculine coded methods which favour autonomy and rule-based reasoning. When placed within the framework of detective fiction, the qualities of empathy and patience can no longer be seen as weakness on the part of the investigator but rather become markers of ethical competence. Broadchurch Season 3 favours this approach by showing how the investigators uphold the privacy of the survivor by avoiding public exposure. Here the investigative procedure is aligned with feminist ethics in that it prioritises the victim's state of mind above everything else.

Unbelievable demonstrates how investigation as followed by the current institutions act as a product of masculine knowledge and control eventually proving to be a futile endeavour in bringing about justice. In the first episode we see the testimony of the survivor Marie Adler who reported being raped. She is made to repeat her experience to different investigation officers who are all too eager to show her their discomfort in her emotional inconsistency and apparent contradictions in the testimony. The questioning by the various male detectives is adversarial and distrustful. They follow a masculine epistemology where knowledge is something to be extracted under pressure and where sympathy is a weakness. As Marie struggles with her memory of the event, they fail to see it as a result of her trauma and are quick to question her credibility. Finally they come up with a version that fits with their idea of truth:

> A young woman. Been through a ton of bad stuff,on her own for the first time, just broke up with her boyfriend,feeling isolated, lonely,might.. On the spur of the moment, come up with something without thinking it through,that would get her the attention she needs. 'Cause you haven't gotten enough attention in your life. I can see that. You haven't been cared for or protected, and that's not your fault. So, Marie.. tell us. We need to know. It's our job. Is there really a rapist running around that we should be looking for? (Episode 1, 43:04 - 43:50)

Traumatised and ostracised, Marie has to admit that she made up the allegation and is in turn charged for false reporting.

This investigation is pitted against the approach of the women investigators, Grace Rasmussen and Karen Duvall. Their approach is based on understanding and trust. They allow the survivors to speak without the fear of being judged. In the second episode of the series we are shown how the handling of a similar rape case by Detective Karen Duvall is on a different plane altogether. When she meets the survivor her first instinct is to make her comfortable rather than to extort information out of her. Her non- judgemental attitude immediately earns the trust of the survivor who confides in her readily:

Karen Duvall : "Amber you don't have to explain yourself to me. Who you choose to tell, when you choose to tell them, that is entirely your decision." (Episode 2, 37:15)

They are not in a hurry to dig out the truth through confrontational questioning or pressurising the victims. They listen to their experiences – an active epistemological practice. It is the confidence and the trust that the survivors feel towards the investigators that eventually help them put their experiences into words. Truth emerges not through coercion but through relational engagement.

In *Broadchurch* Season 3, a similar reorientation can be seen. The series, unlike many other crime dramas, is more restrained and doesn't sensationalise sexual violence. It refuses spectacle. The survivor's anonymity is upheld and she is not forced to make repeated public

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testimony. Even the scenes portraying her interrogation are muted or framed through silence and pauses. So here we find a refusal to equate justice with exposure. Crucial to this investigative approach is the character of Detective Ellie Miller, who makes detection look like a labour of love through her willingness to listen without interrupting. There is no immediacy in her approach that pressurises the survivor to relive her trauma so that the officers could wind up the case for good. Thus the survivor recognises herself as a subject whose well being matters and not just as a source of information.

As critics have noted, *Broadchurch* explicitly avoids sensationalising sexual violence, choosing instead to "focus entirely on the aftermath" and confront viewers with the lived experience of its survivor, Trish Winterman. DI Hardy's reassuring line — "you don't have anything to be sorry about" — and DS Miller's emphasis that "everyone responds differently" highlight the show's intention to counter victim-blaming narratives. (The Guardian). In contrast, *Unbelievable* underscores both the complexity of trauma and the consequences of institutional disbelief: as the original reporting on the series states, "An 18-year old said she was attacked at knifepoint. Then she said she made it up. That's where our story begins," illustrating how misplaced skepticism can compound harm. (Rosenbaum et al.)

Both series also foreground listening as an effective method of detection, especially in sexual crimes. They highlight how trauma can sometimes disrupt linear timelines, something the traditional detection would find as suspicious. In episode 1 of Unbelievable Marie is doubted by the officers because she cannot remember the events following the rape with any clarity , her memory returns in fragments and her speech is uneven. Reading this along with her traumatic past in a foster home, the detectives are only too eager to question her credibility. Trish, in Broadchurch, on the other hand gets a supportive environment where she can take her time to think through what happened. She is believed from the very beginning and this makes all the difference.Detection otherwise is patient, iterative, and open to revision —- a mode of knowing that aligns closely with feminist critiques of linear, mastery driven epistemologies.

By replacing interrogation with listening, both these series redefine investigative work. Detection is thus no longer a performance of authority. The genre's traditional power hierarchies are destabilised and shows how gendered assumptions are underlying within the system.Listening emerges as an epistemological method capable of bringing out truth precisely because it refuses coercion. By foregrounding this methodological transformation, these series function as feminist counter-narratives to the traditional methods of investigation based on male knowledge systems.

These series also make it clear that the problem also lies with gendered institutional structures which privilege male epistemological methods based on authority, procedural rigidity etc. detection otherwise is a critique of the institutions that shape justice. Marie's recantation in Unbelievable is the result of systemic pressure. A close analysis of her interrogation by two senior officials will reveal how they apply coercion subtly by letting her know that nobody, including her ex-boyfriend, believes her. Here they penalise her vulnerability and ensure that justice is not served. Her testimony is evaluated against its conformity with their knowledge system. Similarly, although Broadchurch Season 3 adopts a more survivor-centric approach, we can see subtle workings of gendered institutional power in it. The series widens the scope beyond the police station to everyday social structures where women are harassed and doubted. It shows how micro-institutions like schools, workplaces or online spaces normalise harassment with a total disregard for women's discomfort. Both series

also highlight the gendered assumptions related to credibility that look at women's testimony as exaggerated, unstable or vindictive.

The alternative investigative models provided in both these series are interestingly , not presented as the norm but as the exception. Rasmussen and Duvall's empathetic investigative methods become successful but they are shown as exceptional and not normative. *Broadchurch* similarly points to the fragility of reform and doesn't claim that the whole patriarchal investigative structure is dismantled. Trauma- informed detection thus functions as a form of resistance against systems of masculine authority.

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