

The Apparent Lead and the Real Lead: An Analysis of Female Co-leads in Police Procedural Drama Series

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Abstract: Crime thrillers or police procedural drama series are considered one of the most popular genres in visual media, but the presence of women in those is one of contention. The female protagonists of Police procedural series have become less and less stereotypical, and yet they are not completely rid of the patriarchal overtures. The women detectives partnered with male leads in contemporary police procedural dramas are in reality camouflaged as non-stereotypical protagonists, whereas their real status in the series is that of a side-kick or second fiddle. This deceptive semblance makes the audience think that it has a woman in the lead role, while they are just another dispensable character in the life of the male protagonist. This kind of ruse is incorporated to increase the TRP rating, by spiking the interests of both female and male viewers. Redundant shows like “Lucifer,” “The Mentalist” and “Castle” have female co-leads moulded in this misleading manner.

Keywords: Police procedural drama series, Female detectives, sidekicks, female co-leads, stereotypes, self-sufficient female sleuths

The detective figure is a largely Western representation; a figure of authority featuring a “white male” figure, observant, aloof, superior in strength and intellect who is burdened with unravelling the mysteries of the human mind and actions. Historically, in American and British literature and films, such a figure is aided by another “white male” figure who is usually called the “sidekick.” The relationship between the central white male figure and the sidekick has been defined and redefined in various lights in various dimensions throughout literary history. Ron Buchanan says,

...the sidekick, while a lesser figure in the story, is crucial to the story’s development, being present to assist the central character and to act as a surrogate for the audience. As a

narrator or as a quasi-audience, the sidekick supplies information necessary for the reader, viewer, or listener to understand fully the character and plot nuances. In other situations, the sidekick marks a passage of time or a shift in setting and simultaneously provides unity by recounting these shifts. As a character, the sidekick sometimes is static, not changing in personality or function. On other occasions, the sidekick evolves into an essential figure, assuming a higher degree of relevance but still maintaining a subordinate position to the hero(ine). (15)

Through a harsher light of criticism, one can say that the sidekick still plays the role of an appendage, i.e., a person who stays in the side-line, one who can be killed, one who cannot act, one who almost always need saving, one who is slapped for comic effect, one who can be teased, this list goes on. These attributes of the sidekicks have never changed and by definition, such a character is expendable or replaceable. Due to various reasons, we can no longer expect the sidekick to be the usual ‘another white male figure’ who is the thread that connects the central figure to the rest of the society. Nowadays, prime time television shows and on-demand content in America and Britain have diverse characters aiding the hero, including women. With the rise of “On-Demand-Content” and OTT platforms, common people have more access to a wide range of contents from which they can choose their type of entertainment or their genus of characters. As a result of this rise of demand for diverse characters, even the detective genre too has undergone certain changes including the characteristic conception of the protagonist and the sidekick. Now more and more shows are being produced where the partner detective cannot be side-lined as a mere sidekick. Shows like “True Detective” had a woman and an Afro-American man as leads, in two different seasons. All the detectives in “True Detective” have been portrayed by famous Hollywood actors like Woody Harrelson, Mathew McConaughey (First Season), Colin Farrell, Rachael McAdams (Second Season), and Mahershala Ali (Third Season) and the plot gives the spectator no option to perceive one or the other as a side-kick. Still, it felt unfair to see that Racheal McAdams had less screen time than her co-lead Colin Farrell in the second season, bracketing the notion that a person of the margin cannot have all of it still. Women still struggle to be in the central light, and are side-lined easily even in this 21st century. In American and British series and television shows, women are more abundantly seen as central figures in dramas, soaps, and comedies. Whereas, when it comes to popular crime thrillers, women are still represented within the accepted cultural representational limits only, especially where she is a co-lead with a male partner.

There are many series where females are detectives in the lead role. If we consider the history of female detectives in series or television shows, some amazing characters have

stood the test of time, and yet are not as popular or as economically supported (production-wise) as their male counterparts. Some of the major women detective leads in shows are Detective Chief Inspector Jane Tennison played by **the effeminate Helen Mirren** in the show **“Prime Suspect,” which ran for 7 seasons from 1991 to 2006, “Cagney and Lacey”** where for the first time, two women were featured in the lead roles and were presented as equals, the 1930 rendition of Agatha Christie’s “Miss Marple”, “Stella Gibson” in the recently successful show titled “The Fall,” and so on. Unlike the contemporary superhero genre which does not have much to say about or to women, crime thriller shows are successful in creating early distinctive representations of women leads as detectives.

In many of the American and British crime thriller series, recent trends show a move towards female leads. Smart women are “taking over” and abandoning their former ancillary roles and as a result, the demographics of females on Western prime time television or on-demand content have transformed from mostly men to quite a few women in leading roles. Yet, male detective shows vastly outnumber the female detective shows, and it remains not-so-usual for a female detective to be the central character in one of these shows. Like Wonder Woman or Captain Marvel who broke this non-representation streak in superhero movies, there are only a very few female detective shows where they stand tall and equal to their male counterparts, by both popularity and characterisation. What is peculiar about these women detective portrayals is that they are not completely stereotypical and that they are representations culminating from the necessity of producing a deliberate image which deviates away from the common limited notions available in the society. Stella Gibson in the series “The Fall,” a character who understands the patriarchal world around her and protests against it using her intelligence, wants to bring justice to the families of the deceased women by finding the serial killer, is the most non-stereotypical of the detective characters. What makes her character distinct is her way of making each woman’s death a personal matter, and yet never placing her own personal baggage on the pedestal.

There are also shows with two female detective characters termed as co-leads. Unlike the white male sidekick, who serves a subservient position to the central character, female detectives portrayed as co-leads together are shown as much more equal. In “Cagney and Lacey”, Cagney’s attention was completely on her career, with Lacey balancing work and personal life as a working mother. The partners leaned on each other for support. In the obituary for the show’s co-creator **Barbara Avedon**, *The Independent* wrote, “The feminist and peace campaigner helped to break the mould of small-screen American police

series. For the first time, two women were featured in the lead roles and presented as equals” (Hayward). The extremely popular “Rizzoli and Isles” where the detective Rizzoli is aided by Medical Examiner Maura Isles, again features two equals who support each other in both personal and professional matters. The series creator Janet Tamaro described the detective partners as a “power couple.” The recent miniseries “Unbelievable,” a dramatization of the 2008–2011 Washington and Colorado Rape cases, follow Marie, a teenager who was charged with lying about having been raped, and then how two “women” detectives bring her the justice she deserves. The series has two focal points, one being Marie’s life after the rape incident, and how it is easy for the system (especially the men in it) to declare that the victim is lying and the other being two very dissimilar detectives joining forces to find a serial rapist. The show features Detective Karen Duvall and Detective Grace Rasmussen, who after a strained start decides to work their cases together, for the sake of rendering justice to the victims. The show emphasizes the necessity of having more women in police and intelligent forces, more than ever.

In shows like these the hegemony of deciding who the central character relies upon the cultural image and representation of that image and how each of these representations are welcomed or rejected by a specific national audience. One cannot say that these portrayals have encompassed only the non-stereotypical aspects of characterisation. For example, in “Cagney and Lacey”, one detective is portrayed within the stock characteristics of a feminist, and the other as a homemaker. This tendency repeats in most women “buddy dramas”, where the cultural image of these two accepted extremes are foregrounded, and the women in between are omitted for the sake of easy representation of women. But even within these stereotypical representations, one is relieved to see a shift in the narrative with the depiction of more women and women-centred shows. Even with the overbearing silhouette of the “accepted extremes,” one has to agree that Glenwood Irons comment, “Women detectives created in the past thirty years are outgoing, aggressive, and self-sufficient sleuths who have transcended generic codes and virtually rewritten the archetypal male detective from a female perspective” (Feminism in Women’s Detective Fiction, 1995) is still valid.

Maxine Kersten in her research paper “Women in Crime” analysed the portrayal of female leads in American dramas. In it, she categorises female detective leads according to these accepted cultural representations. According to her, women leads in crime thrillers can be categorised according to their love relationship, appearance, action and setting. She says, The relationships in the American series illustrate two different portrayals of the female lead. The first is a more modern perspective, depicting women as independent and

successful in their own right, rather than according to stereotypes in which females are married and oriented towards communal goals. (18)

Kersten analyzed one of the most successful crime thrillers in American history, television history, “Bones” and identified the co-lead character Temperance ‘Bones’ Brennan as the typical homemaker stereotype. Temperance Brennan is involved in a romantic relationship with Sealy Booth, the detective, and later gets married to him. Temperance Brennan’s character is independent and intelligent, and yet, the show’s creators made it obvious that a woman and a man partnered together, even in crime thrillers that are destined together as if in a fairy tale. The “culturally significant” relationship status of the woman lead must change from independent to mutually dependant status, by the end of a season. The Pilot episode was more focused on Brennan’s character and the anthropological side of the investigation with more screen time for Emily Deschanel than Sealy Booth (played by David Boreanaz), the FBI partner who is in need of her intelligence. However, by the second episode, the balance started shifting with equal or less screen time for Brennan’s character, along with the romantic gradient overwhelming the “thrill” in the crime thriller. Kersten’s second category pertains to the actions of these characters, where she detected that the female main characters are used for more delicate and less aggressive jobs within the police force. Many female leads in crime thrillers are more inclined to do analysis, forensic activities, laboratory work and reviews than actually participate in a live encounter. The third category is related to the female detective’s appearance. Usually, the female leading characters are consistently portrayed as very feminine by means of their appearance, notes Kersten. The fourth pattern Kersten identified was the setting. In crime thrillers, when it comes to a female lead’s setting, it is shown that “within the settings that mimic the environment of detectives or specialists, small details can be identified that add to the character of the female lead and evoke a certain image. These types of details in the setting consist of photographs, artwork, furniture, and media props,” which reiterates the homemaker image of the female lead (Kersten 24).

If one takes the above-said single lead women detective shows or co-female lead shows, it is apparent that those shows don’t include most of these patterns mentioned by Kersten. Helen Mirren’s portrayal of Jane Tennison was revolutionary in making with an unflinching female lead who was “refreshingly uninterested in male approval,” and didn’t much adhere to the patterns of the communal figure as listed out by Kersten. She was single and her relationship status never overpowered the essence of a crime thriller, she wore formal clothes almost all the time, and she was seen investigating war crimes and were out in the field without a second thought. Stelle Gibson of “The Call”, though joins the

investigation as a reviewer, she soon demands her chief to make her the detective of the case and is out in the field doing her work, even when it was clear that she has been identified by the killer as the lead officer. Amy Sullivan of *The Atlantic* calls “The Fall”, “The Most Feminist Show on Television”, and writes: “Refreshingly, none of the tropes we’ve been trained to expect in a story about a powerful woman play out. Nobody resents Gibson’s appearance on the scene or questions her authority. Her gender is a non-issue; subordinates hop to when she enters a room and they follow her commands without question. Gibson doesn’t try to submerge her femininity and stomp around barking out orders. In Anderson’s restrained yet compelling performance, Gibson is cool, calm, and always chic, with the most fabulous coat in detectivedom. In “unbelievable” Detective Karen Duvall is a working mother and yet, her personal life rarely comes into the frame. This is the shift that the representation of women’s image underwent due to the standardization of the new mediums like “On-Demand Content ” and more and more voices demanding diverse and non-stock characters.

One would expect that the contemporary show creators would be inclined to make more “Stella Gibson” or “Karen Duvall” kind of characters, due to this rising demand. If you search in google or any movie/television online database like IMDB or Rotten Tomatoes, with the parameters “Female detective as lead”, you will get a barrage of suggestions and lists. These lists and suggestions are usually tentative as they change according to contemporary popularity and votes by both critics and audience. In IMDB, or Rotten Tomatoes we may set the filter to “Female Detective” and currently the most popular movie with a female lead is “Enola Holmes,” a character developed as Sherlock Holmes’ 14-year-old sister, yet who doesn’t rely on Sherlock to find her true path as a detective. The top results according to popularity, features these shows with female detectives as leads, some of which have already been mentioned here. The next ten popular shows are these: 1. *Lucifer*, 2. *The Fall*, 3. *The Mentalist*, 4. *Person of Interest*, 5. *Murder, She Wrote*, 6. *Castle* 7. *Unbelievable*, 8. *Rizzoli and Isles* 9. *Orphan Black* 10. *Veronica Mars*. The question here is if the parameters of the female-oriented crime thrillers discussed earlier could be applied to the popular shows where a female detective is partnered with a male lead and if the female leads are indeed “leading” or mere side-kicks. Of the popular shows mentioned above, only three have male co-leads or protagonists - *Lucifer*, *The Mentalist* and *Castle*. Even though “The Fall” features second in the list, the vote disparity between the three shows mentioned here and “The Fall” is humungous. It simply means, “The Fall” though seen by only a few, has been rated high by almost all who have seen it, whereas the most popular show *Lucifer* with its redundant content and style has been viewed by more people.

This study is based on a qualitative analysis, with the corpus consisting of the three series within the genre of police procedural drama series with both female and male characters appearing as co-leads or protagonists. For the analysis, the characters of Detective Chloe Decker from “Lucifer”, Detective Kate Beckett from “Castle” and Theresa Lisbon of “The Mentalist” will be considered and analysed. The common facets of the female co-leads in these three shows are that they all are detectives, who at the start of the show is shown as somebody who is as independent as “Stella Gibson” or “Det. Grace Rasmussen”. They all are hailed as good detectives, they wear official clothes, follows all rules and regulations, and as the “white male” detective of the usual crime thrillers, they are “observant, aloof, superior in strength and intellect who is burdened with unravelling the mysteries of the human mind and actions.” But unlike the other detective female co-leads like Rizzoli, Isles, Duvall or Rasmussen, they are not the real protagonists of the story, or not even given the equal status. Why these shows have more viewers than “The Fall” is due to its boosting of the patriarchal image, through its primary advertisement features such as title, posters and description, where it clearly omits or side-lines the female detective characters. The title of each of these three shows are either eponymous or directly points to the detective’s partner, thus Lucifer Morningstar in “Lucifer”, Patrick Jane in “The Mentalist” and Richard Castle in “Castle” are promoted as the real heroes, even though none of them are the detectives in these supposedly “crime thriller” series.

The female detectives in the show, though presented as integral to the show, are replaceable, as is evidenced by the show descriptions. In IMDB, the basic description of “Lucifer” is given as “Lucifer Morningstar has decided he's had enough of being the dutiful servant in Hell and decides to spend some time on Earth to better understand humanity. He settles in Los Angeles - the City of Angels.” The entire plot description of “The Mentalist” in its Wikipedia page features its detective lead Theresa Lisbon only once along with the other detectives in the team. The IMDB description of “Castle” goes like this, “After a serial killer imitates the plots of his novels, successful mystery novelist Richard “Rick” Castle receives permission from the Mayor of New York City to tag along with an NYPD homicide investigation team for research purposes.” Crime thriller shows are still considered more in tune with the male audience, and it is natural for the advertisers to give descriptions omitting the female lead altogether, for increasing the TRP rating. The description of “Bones” in IMDB will help one understand the dereliction shown towards the female leads in these three shows. The description of “Bones” reads, “Forensic anthropologist Dr Temperance “Bones” Brennan and cocky F.B.I. Special Agent Seeley Booth build a team to investigate murders...” where both leads are given the subject position, never making the audience question the position of the female lead or the

detective. It becomes apparent, with this description that neither Dr Brennan nor Sealy Booth are considered dispensable.

Like Dr Brennan, the male co-leads help the female detectives close the homicide cases with their special skills, positioning themselves as consultants. Unlike Brennan, their skills are not based on scientific data though. Each of these protagonists tag along with these very independent and intelligent women, for their own requirements. Richard Castle needs a muse, Jane, the mentalist needs to find a serial killer who murdered his family and Lucifer is merely fascinated by the disapproval and rejection of his charm by Chloe Decker, the detective. All three show's detectives object vehemently, at first, to having these people tagging along in the crime scenes, fearing probably distraction and interference in their work. But they are forced to tolerate them due to orders from higher authorities, or some other work pressure. The posters of these shows also signal the same confusions regarding the image of the female detective. In two of these shows, the detectives don't even feature in the posters, whereas in "Castle," Detective Kate Beckett stands side by side with the consultant in the first season, and is seen way back in the shot in the second season poster, definitely emphasising the side-kick relevance of the character. Sophia Mcdougall, in her article "I Hate Strong Female Character", talks about this deliberate confusion created by show creators through posters. Mcdougall says, "On the posters, they're posed way in the back of the shot behind the men, in the trailers they may pout or smile or kick things, but they remain silent. Their strength lets them, briefly, dominate bystanders but never dominate the plot. It's an anodyne, a sop, a Trojan Horse - it's there to distract and confuse you, so you forget to ask for more" (2013).

As Mcdougall says, the female characters are there to stop people from asking for more female leads. All three shows are repetitive in style and the central plot remains the adventure of the male protagonist into the world of crimes. But the series characters are disguised by inversion of characteristics in such a way that nobody would ask for more representation of female leads. These three female detectives have the characteristics of the protagonist and yet, they are not the protagonists of the show. Like Sherlock in "Sherlock" or Detective Alec Hardy in "Broadchurch," the three detectives are presented as brooding, lacking in social skills, aloof, intelligent and so on, whereas the protagonists are presented as Peter Pan-like, with their socially immature outlook which often hinders the detective in her investigation. The three detectives often seem to roll their eyes or scold these protagonists for their juvenile behaviour, frequently, and still find solace from their companionship. The detectives wear professional clothes and are presented as least bothered about their style sense, while the protagonists take immense pride in their choice

of clothes and accessories. All three female detectives never back-out from live and dangerous encounters, whereas the civilian protagonists are asked to stay back. These characteristics apparently implicate the inversion of protagonist-sidekick features to confuse the common spectator, especially the demanding voices for diverse characters.

Though these shows continue to be focused on finding the culprit, a good share of the shows' time is taken for developing the romantic slant between the protagonist and the detective. Eventually, the detectives do fall in love with the protagonists, and gets married or are romantically involved openly. For Peter Pan-like protagonists, the detectives are like a blend of Tinkerbell and Wendy. These characters become less effective as time goes by, and becomes less complex and more stereotypical by the end of the story. Their co-lead position becomes ostensible when the character is found very much dispensable. They are a sham, involving deceptive subversion and makes the audience think that it has a woman in the lead role, whereas the actuality is they are mere sidekicks. Shows like these showcase women as leads, but in reality, they are there only to help the protagonists ascend the throne of the hero, thus ensuring the survival of the patriarchal image.

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