

CHANGING MASCULINITIES IN CRIME FICTION

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ABSTRACT--*Crime fiction has always been hailed for being accommodative of revisionist structures and as a powerful tool in combating gender stereotypes. Crime solving and sleuthing is popular on television dramas as well, some of these shows being on TV for more than a decade, for example, Criminal Minds on CBS or ITV's Agatha Christie's Poirot. With the abundance of content available on small screens, be it television, or through streaming platforms such as Netflix, it is safe to assume that there has never been a better time to study the impact of these on-screen portrayals of gender, its complexities and stereotypes as well. This paper examines the depiction of masculinity in some of the recent popular crime dramas. It considers if the feminist movement and its deconstruction of gendered identity had any impact on these onscreen portrayals of male detectives. As MacKinnon (2003) suggests the police and crime drama can be presumed as one of the most masculine of television genres because it tends to focus on the public sphere, professional roles and the male world of work. As masculinity itself is being re-defined to fit in a modern context, this paper investigates the ways in which these male centered narratives negotiate the struggles of their lead characters to fit on the spectrum and challenge the traditional masculine standards.*

Keywords-- *Television Studies, Crime Drama, Masculinity, Popular Culture*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since its introduction to the mainstream reading public, crime fiction has continued to occupy the readers with its innovative narrative techniques and leaps of imagination. So, it is no wonder that when television replaced books, magazines and even cinema as popular mode of entertainment, crime dramas still retained their popularity. This paper is an attempt to understand how crime dramas portray masculinities and if they aid in increasing the acceptability of alternative masculinities or offer the viewers a rigid definition of masculinity. This paper will eschew the use of terms like mystery or detective dramas because these generic terms might cause confusion. Many critics argue that the moniker crime drama is more suitable because it is the crime that is of utmost importance, and the characterization, narration and investigative methods will all be of varying significance (Scaggs, 2005, p. 1). In its attempt to trace and analyze how the definition of masculinity has changed over the years and how those changes are represented on small screen, this paper will be focus on British dramas, largely because most of them still follow the classical detective tradition of crime and justice. The classical detective format is very formulaic, and it will be interesting to recognize how these shows conceptualize and broadcast sexualities. Do they highlight the accepted male identities, or do they challenge and subvert the power of such 'commonsensical' understandings? *Luther* and *Sherlock*, the two British crime dramas released in 2010 and broadcasted in BBC One, will be used as

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case studies to investigate the disparate examples of masculinities that exist in recent crime television shows. *Sherlock* is an irreverent and contemporary take on Arthur Conan Doyle's Victorian detective. Similarly, *Luther* follows the crime show rules perfectly, but escapes being cliched and outdated because DCI Luther, played by Idris Elba, is a Black British detective which in itself is a rarity as there exist few successful television shows (let alone crime dramas) headlined by a person of color. Idris Elba's portrayal deviated from the sure and sophisticated detectives that the viewers were familiar with. Luther was empathetic, constantly introspective, fallible despite being exceptionally intelligent. The brooding and flawed detectives will be familiar to Scandinavian noir aficionados, and have become a repetitive trope by now, but back in the early 2000s, the unsure and lost men were still uncommon characters on television shows and Luther had few predecessors in that turf (except maybe the BBC production of *Wallander*, which saw Kenneth Branagh playing Swedish writer Henning Mankell's detective, Kurt Wallander).

A crime itself is a deviation in an ordered society, and the pattern that crime fiction follows is that the crime is solved, then the criminal is punished, and order is re-established. But an interest in crime and its sordid details cannot be considered as natural, which explains why many of the detectives are often placed at the border between the organized society and the chaotic criminal world. This position of not fully belonging has been utilized in countless clever ways by the writers of crime fiction, which in turn led to the gender-bending of stereotypes. For example, it is impossible that a lady of Miss Jane Marple's age and stature will be allowed anywhere near a dead body. But she is right there in every murder scene that seems to happen with an alarming regularity in the quaint village of St. Mary Mead. A cursory glance through the numerous titles available under the umbrella of crime fiction will inform the reader that there are no commonalities amongst the detectives or crime-fighters other than the desire to right the wrong. Television crime dramas are no different. Despite their standardized framework, they do show variations in the characterizations and approaches to crimes and criminals. Feasey (2008) argues that crime dramas can be considered as the most masculine of the television genres (p. 80) largely because many of them focus on the police procedurals or crime fighting units within the police force and this was a profession that was (and still is) populated by men.

II. HEGEMONIC MASCULINITIES AND CRIME DRAMAS

The term masculinity refers to a set of qualities or attributes that are associated with the male sex. Kimmel (2001) points out that these gender roles, that is, femininities and masculinities are attributed by the society and should not be confused with biological sex (p. 9318). Kimmel (2001) also notes that these gender categories "must be understood to be plural as there is no single definition for all men and all women" (p. 9318). These gender identities differ across cultures, countries, races, class et cetera and are constantly evolving. Some of these attributes are used as a yardstick to measure how 'masculine' or 'feminine' someone is, and these attributes together constitute what sociologist R. W. Connell (1995) termed as hegemonic masculinity (p.184). Hegemony is a term introduced by the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci while discussing the capitalist modes of production. The term hegemony means to dominate and was originally used in ancient Greek to denote the dominance of one city state over others in political conflicts. Gramsci extended its meaning and discussed how the dominant class' ideas are propagated and accepted as the sensible benchmarks and any deviation or alternative

concepts are rejected (Mouffe, 1979, p. 186). Through societal consensus, certain ideas gain traction over others and are accepted as standard. R. W. Connell (1995) suggests that in all societies there will be a dominant form of masculinity to which all men must adhere (p. 187). This dominant masculinity will be made distinguishable through constant reinforcing by media and popular consumption. But as noted earlier, there cannot be a single manifestation of gendered identities; hence there will be constant pressure for all those who are different from the dominant aggressive masculinity to conform to its demands or be considered as different or lesser. This results in anxiety and self-doubt in men and they may resort to aggression to gain social acceptance. Therefore, the relation between these multiple masculinities is uneasy and the cycle of subjugation and victimization continues. Whenever there is a discussion on gender, there is a tendency to assume that it will be about women, but male identities are also gendered. The rigorous questioning that is applied to the construction of femininities was not usually applied to the construction of the ideal masculinity. Specific traits become associated in the public perception with what makes a man “man” and mass media plays a significant role in disseminating this idealized masculinity.

It must be kept in mind that the reception and spectatorship changes according to the medium. For instance, the cognition level of the target audience for the print media will be different from that of the target audience of a movie. Thus, the variations in personal objective reasoning that the spectators create for themselves must be accounted in any study that investigates the creation and consumption of popular imagery. In the case of television, other factors including the smaller size of the screen and the impossibility of an uninterrupted viewing, either due to commercials or household duties must also be considered. Television studies is an offshoot of various academic branches including Sociology, Politics and Cultural Studies. As representation is a major concern of academia, particularly those engaged in studies related to feminisms, LGBTQ+ representation etc., the portrayal of women and other marginalized communities on small screens is a well-researched domain, and much work is still ongoing. Of late, the portrayal of men has also attracted the attention of academics as they correctly believe that some of these representation results in the perpetration of stereotypes that are harmful for men and by extension to the society.

Crime dramas are usually male centered (Mittell, 2015, p.253) and often follow the pattern of crime, investigation and punishment of the guilty (O'Donnell, 2013, p.90) but instead of resulting in repetitive tropes and characterizations, they have managed to highlight alternative masculinities and probe the hierarchies that exist within these masculinities. MacKinnon (2003) argues that cop shows are the best example for masculine genre of narratives (p. 69) as they are concerned with “the public, the outdoors, toughness” (MacKinnon, 2003, p. 69). But the narratives will change as the definition of masculinity changes in the society. The following discussion on the refashioning of hegemonic masculinity in crime dramas over the years with a closer look at the two BBC shows mentioned, *Luther* and *Sherlock*, will provide the reader an understanding of how these shows address questions surrounding men and masculinity.

The police officers in the early British shows dealt with minor crimes that occur within a small society, where the residents are all familiar with each other and the policeman occupied a respectable position as guardian of law and order. The crimes that were investigated included petty theft, neighborly squabbles, and an occasional poison pen. These officers were honest and industrious and adhered to traditions. Even though the 1950s was a period of relative prosperity, the hardships of the war were not forgotten, but the society was eager to rebuild itself and hence the ideals represented in these shows made clear distinction between the good men and the bad men. But this

changed during the politically turbulent period of the 1970s which was followed by the Conservative government helmed by Margaret Thatcher. It became clear that the community policing of the pre-war era could no longer control the increasingly sophisticated crimes, and the lovable neighborhood policeman was replaced by highly trained and specialized policemen who carried around military grade weapons to control unruly crowds. Though the public friendly image of the police officer remained on small screens for a while, but it became clear that these portrayals were outdated. Even when the narratives shifted to tougher policemen and bigger crimes, the law enforcers were still considered to be righteous men fighting the good fight.

Feasey (2008) notes that “It was not until the 1990s that the police and crime drama was seen to challenge the moral certainty of the police force and question the clear divisions between good and evil” (p. 83) and from then on crime dramas shift their position from “heroic assurance to one of hazardous anxiety”(Feasey, 2008, p. 83). Chivalrous heroism is replaced by disorder and troubled heroes; some of them are unsavory characters, rude and often violent. The police detectives are shown to be breaking the law and pursuing unethical tactics, all in the name of serving justice. This pattern did not change much in the first decade of the new millennium, and the two BBC shows that are discussed here i.e. *Sherlock* and *Luther* have the titular heroes who are both arrogant and are not above playing mind games even with their loved ones.

III. NURTURING NEW MAN AND NARCISSISTIC BEHAVIORS IN BBC’S

SHERLOCK

Sherlock is a reimagining of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s famous Victorian detective. The stories have been adapted multiple times into television and film and this version was helmed by Stephen Moffat and Mark Gatiss. The show aired from 2010 to 2017, with thirteen episodes in three seasons. The plot loosely follows the original story line. In the first episode, “A Study in Pink”, Dr. John Watson is an Afghan war veteran who is looking for a flat mate and so is Sherlock Holmes a “high functioning sociopath” (Moffat & McGuigan, 2010) and they meet through a mutual acquaintance and thus begin their tryst with the underbelly of London crime. Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes was a perfect specimen of Victorian masculinity, someone who was rational, but polite, loyal and above all patriotic. But the same cannot be said of the twenty-first century Sherlock Holmes, played by the British actor Benedict Cumberbatch whose physical appearance has been dubbed “alien-like” in some corners of the internet. In a complete contrast to the original depiction, Sherlock is portrayed as someone who is brilliant but socially inept. There are many scenes throughout the series where John Watson must rein in the quips and quibbles of Sherlock. The characterization of Dr John Watson continues to be that of an everyman foil to the intelligence of Sherlock. But nowhere in the Arthur Canon Doyle canon one finds the attributes of Dr Watson overshadowing that of Sherlock Holmes’ whereas in the BBC adaptation this happens often, and the viewer appreciates the loyalty and selfless courage of Dr Watson, played by Martin Freeman.

The creators Mark Gatiss and Stephen Moffat navigate the narrative without completely dismissing the eponymous hero. Sherlock is empathetic and caring and there are many instances when he goes out of his way to help his loved ones including Watson, Irene Adler and later Mary Morston, wife of Dr Watson. But he is still not a big believer in sentimentality, claiming he keeps himself distant from others and divorces himself from feelings. He calls emotions “grit on the lens and the fly in the ointment” (Gatiss & McGuigan, 2012). He is almost childlike

in his enthusiasm for new cases and in his petulance, which is manifested in his many interactions with his brother Mycroft Holmes. The brothers squabble many times and their conversations provide the comic relief in an otherwise tensed narrative. In yet another departure from the canon, the creators of the show suggest that the emotional development of Holmes is stunted, and it is Watson who helps him to navigate the world of human emotions. There is even a suggestion that Holmes might have Asperger's syndrome (Gatiss & McGuigan, 2012), a developmental disorder which causes limited social interaction skills. This inability becomes even more marked when he fails to understand innuendo or any sexual teasing from potential partners. For instance, he reads the conversation of both Molly Hooper and Irene Adler wrong. Even when he remains non-committal about his relationship status, he cares about the women and acknowledges their importance in his life. In "A Scandal in Belgravia", he goes on to save Irene Adler from terrorists in Karachi (Moffat & McGuigan, 2012) and his continued friendship with Molly Hooper best exemplifies this. The depiction of the relationship between Sherlock and John Watson in the series has been accused of queer baiting, because the creators seem intent on exploring the different aspects of male friendship but stops short of portraying a sexual relationship between the two men. The pair are often wrongly identified as a couple, much to the dismay of Watson while Holmes remains unbothered by the assumptions. In fact, he seems to be devoid of sexual desire while capable of loving dearly. Thus, it is safe to surmise that Sherlock Holmes is what John Beynon (2002) calls a new man (p. 98), the term can be both: an opprobrium (signifying a new and improved version of masculinity cleared of some, if not all, of the less endearing attributes of the traditional, patriarchal masculinity) and one of jocular dismissal and humour (in which some of the alleged features of the new man, such as connecting with his inner self, are mercilessly lampooned). (Beynon, 2002, p.59).

Beynon (2002) identifies two strands of the new man, viz nurturer and narcissist (p. 99). Gatiss' and Moffat's Sherlock can be considered as a nurturer. He is asexual; instead of gravitas, there is a sense of levity surrounding Sherlock, and he often displays traits that are traditionally viewed as feminine.

Another brilliant touch by the creators is the tweaking of the original villain James Moriarty. In the books Moriarty is mentioned briefly, that too in broad strokes. The reader is informed that Professor Moriarty's intellect matches that of Sherlock Holmes, but Moriarty is on the other side of the law. That makes him terrifying for the readers, that there is a possibility that this person who is purely evil might overpower Sherlock Holmes and all will be lost with the world. Professor Moriarty never actually appears in any of the stories, the reader is presented to the idea of Professor Moriarty through the words of Sherlock Holmes. Even John Watson only get a glimpse of a tall gentleman who is furiously pushing through the crowd (Conan Doyle, 1893) and Professor Moriarty of the Sherlock Holmes canon becomes a caricature. But not so in the new BBC series. The debonair villain is immaculately dressed and the face-offs between the world's only consulting detective and world's only consulting criminal (Thompson & Haynes, 2012) are indubitably the best scenes in the entire series. It is worth noting that there is no mention of the academic credentials of James Moriarty in *Sherlock*. He is no Professor Moriarty, but his earlier cruelty and sadism are constantly referred to, and so is his psychopathic nature.

It can be easily surmised that both Conan Doyle and the creators of *Sherlock* envisaged the hero-villain duo as yin and yang. Moriarty is not that different from his antagonist Sherlock Holmes who describes himself as a "high functioning sociopath" (Moffat & McGuigan, 2010). But Sherlock's indifference is often feigned; he goes out of his way to save his loved ones, be it Inspector Lestrade, John Watson and even his brother Mycroft, with

whom he bickers constantly. In the episode “The Reichenbach Fall” Moriarty opines that he is an “old fashioned villain” and Sherlock is “on the side of the angels” (Thompson & Haynes, 2012). If Sherlock is an example for the new man as nurturer (Beynon 2002), Moriarty is the narcissist masculinity (Beynon 2002) represented on screen. Beynon (2002) suggests that the feminist movement influenced some men to “reject macho behavior” (p. 101) because they “believed in the justice of the increased equality between the sexes” (Beynon, 2001, p. 101) while the increased commercialization of masculinity in the 1980s (Beynon, 2001, p. 102) led to the creation of a narcissistic masculinity that indulged in all hitherto “feminine aspects of commercialization” (Beynon, 2001, p. 102). The class-based masculinities of the 1950s (Beynon, 2001, p. 102) were replaced by a more label based one. While this is not an entirely new phenomenon, as there always existed a few dandies throughout various historical epochs, they were fringe elements who were often ignored or ridiculed. But the rapacious consumerism that ushered in a world that shed its socialist attitudes and embraced neo-liberal policies made it easy for targeted advertisements to assure men that chiseled bodies, dapper clothes and grooming were essentially masculine in nature. And like the mythical Narcissus, modern men also became prisoners of their body and the restrictions that were till then placed on female bodies came to be applied on male bodies too. *Sherlock’s* James Moriarty can be viewed as what Beynon (2002) called the second strand of the New Man, i.e., the narcissist (p.102). Moriarty’s ruthlessness combined with his flashiness, his desire to rule the world and nix any opposition, and his cold aloofness makes him a perfect example for the narcissist masculinity. The show gives the viewers into a glimpse into the two contrasting masculinities along with the gentler, conventional masculinities of the characters John Watson and Inspector Lestrade.

IV. THE CONFUSED MASCULINITY IN LUTHER

As noted earlier in the paper, the show *Luther* challenges the available models on masculinity on television by introducing a Black British detective. In his role as DCI Luther, Idris Elba is foreboding and tough. British author and screenplay writer Neil Cross has created a hero who is preoccupied with revenging the wrongdoings in the city of London, a man who is described as “nitroglycerin” (Cross & Kirk, 2010) by his colleagues. His methods are unusual and often violent. His sidekick is Alice Morgan, a psychotic murderer with whom Luther gets acquainted while investigating her parents’ deaths, which Luther suspects were committed by Alice Morgan, but he lets her go due to lack of evidence. Alice is intrigued by Luther and stalks him. Although Luther doesn’t reciprocate her romantic feelings, the pair develops an unusual friendship. The show departs from several canonical rules of crime fiction (and TV shows), but these departures are not unusual in Scandinavian Noir, the most famous example being the relationship between Mikael Blomkvist and Lisbeth Salander in Stieg Larsson’s *Millennium* series. The boundaries between hero, heroine and anti-hero are quickly blurred and there are no set patterns that clearly define the relationship between the two. Both Luther and Alice are protective of each other. At times, they have a mentor-mentee relation, where the roles are always interchangeable, and Alice’s romantic interest in Luther doesn’t diminish even when she realizes that there will be no woman in Luther’s life other than his estranged wife Zoe. The show follows the usual police procedurals, where the detective and his team are under constant pressure solving some of the most heinous crimes. The detective will be engrossed in his work that there is no time left for family. But duty always came first for such officers however much they regretted it in their brief moments of

solitude. Sacrificing the “private sphere for the good of the public sphere appears to be a structuring theme in the crime genre” (Feasey, 2001, p. 84) and Luther follows the same pattern. In the third episode on the first series, Alice Morgan asks Zoe what compelled Luther to go on and excel in his workplace while simultaneously destroying every personal relationship, and Zoe replies that Luther considered the one who steals life as the worst kind of criminal. They both agree that if only he was a little less obsessed, life would have been easier for everyone concerned (Cross & Kirk, 2010). Again, Neil Cross aligns Luther more with his Scandinavian counterparts than American crime show heroes whose patriotic fervor replaces every other personal aspect. Luther recognizes that his absorption in his job has cost him his personal happiness. He is repentant and keeps trying to win back his wife, Zoe.

If Gatiss’ and Moffat’s Sherlock is led by a childish impulsiveness, Luther is introspective. Sherlock’s friendship with John Watson is non problematic except for the occasional queries regarding the nature of their relationship. John Watson is Sherlock’s long suffering and loyal friend, and all the indignities that he had to face doesn’t waver his belief in the genius of Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock’s attempts to seek Watson’s admiration and approval makes him at once likeable and relatable. Luther, on the other hand is only too human and his friendship with Alice Morgan is anything but healthy. The only time we see Sherlock floundering is when he is not with John Watson, and Luther is unsure even in his triumphs. Luther’s destructive nature that is occasionally visible in the earlier episodes is justified by his hatred towards killers, but as the story progresses, the viewer sees a man who is overpowered by the evil in him. In his classification of mythopoeic masculinities, Robert Bly (1990) talks about the wounded savage man who does great harm to the society (p. ix) and one wonders if Luther is a savage. Even when his actions result in the greater good of the society, everyone who is associated with him die horrible deaths, be it his family, friends or even associates. The guilt-ridden Luther goes to extreme lengths to avenge their deaths, even bypassing the police force. Every time a tragedy occurred in Luther’s life; he responds by being even more absorbed in his work. The work/public space becomes more important to him than the personal space. Even when he tries to get away and lead a quiet life, he cannot or does not want to escape his life as a cop. One must reflect on the possibility of the job shaping his identity in such a way that he feels incomplete or lost otherwise.

Neil Cross’ Luther is a mix of various male detective prototypes including Sherlock Holmes, Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe and perhaps Kurt Wallander, the fictional Swedish detective. In the creation of Luther, the rationality of Holmes is combined with the hard masculinity of hard-boiled detective fiction and the disorientation of Swedish noir. While the show doesn’t mention Luther being proud of his body, or working to perfect his body, the numerous shots of Luther’s frame looming over the villains confirms that the show extensively utilizes the body proportions of Idris Elba. The ‘dark side’ of Luther is clearly hinted from the beginning, when the viewers are informed that he almost murdered the serial killer Henry Madsen. The comatose Madsen is later murdered by Alice Morgan. Alice Morgan, unlike a traditional sidekick, seems to be a manifestation of the repressed violence in Luther. Every time Luther is constrained by his inability to act on his desire for violent retribution, Alice Morgan intervenes and does the work for him. She is the one who smothers Henry Madsen, beats up Luther’s ex-wife Zoe’s boyfriend, kills his former crime fighting partner Ian Reed and joins Luther in the intimidation of criminals. Thus, Alice Morgan can be considered as the shadow self (Jung, 1959/2014, p. 270) of Luther. Carl Jung (1959/2014) explained the shadow as that part of self that we would rather repress. Shadow self is where resentments fester due to its inability to free itself as it is contradictory to the personas that we often wear

in the public sphere (Jung, 1959/2014, p. 262). Thus, Luther's initial rejection of Alice Morgan could be his reluctance to admit the negative aspects of his personality. As Alice Morgan reminded Luther, they were not that different from each other ("Episode#1.2") and the more Luther started to accept that he was as evil as the criminals he hunted, his onscreen persona became less disoriented and he finally resigned from the police force and lived a quiet life with Alice Morgan. Neil Cross' suggestion for the troubled millennial men appears to be accepting the objectionable elements of the self and that acceptance might help them to reshape their identities. It is noteworthy that Neil Cross manages to convey this contemporary argument within the rigid framework of crime drama. When Luther leaves the police force, the masculine crime drama tradition of placing public good over personal life is subverted.

V. CONCLUSION

If gender identities reflect the necessities of any given age, Luther's maleness can be read as an example of the anxieties regarding masculinities in the new millennium. For long, feminism has questioned the binaries and provided detailed analysis on how the constructed feminine essentialism should be rejected. Though men understood their privilege, many of them were reluctant to let go of the advantages. But the general socio-economic instability of the twenty first century has resulted in the necessity to refashion gender and sexual identities and there is a lot of confusion regarding what is to be accepted as the normative masculine attributes. This absence of a decisive model of masculinity has resulted in the emergence of those masculinities that were once rejected which in turn has caused conflicts and confusions regarding male identity. One of the advantages of crime dramas is that they play around with the rules and see how far the story can be taken forward without falling into absurdities, and in the process it can incorporate new rules, new identities, and new methods of deduction for the principal rule of crime drama is simple, crime and punishment. In *Sherlock* we see the aloof but sensitive detective, and the narcissistic villain alongside a supporting cast of complementing masculinities. *Luther* presents a new age version of the Byronic hero to its viewers. If the Byronic hero was a victim of his own wickedness, Luther is haunted by his guilt and initial reluctance to accept his villainy. It must be noted that these two dramas evade some of the pressing concerns of the time including homosexuality and male anxieties regarding the public space and private relationships, but it could be due to the structural flaws of the medium and genre. If we view gendered identities as creations necessitated and/or influenced by cultural conflicts, one can surmise that contemporary crime dramas are moving in the right direction, for they represent those men who are at once aspirational and relatable in their struggle to navigate a world of confused identities.

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