



# “NO MEANS NO”: SEXUAL ASSAULT REPRESENTATION IN US SHOWS ON OTT PLATFORMS, POST #MeTOO

AMBIKA RAJA

THE ENGLISH AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES UNIVERSITY  
HYDERABAD, INDIA

Based on the complaints of two female correspondents, Richard Steele, in "Letter 155" written for *The Spectator* (2012), brings readers' attention to the fact that women in public spheres in 18th century Britain are being constantly subjected to the licentious approaches and sexist remarks of vain and conceited. Building his argument around the "indecent license taken in discourse" (Steele 2012) by men who travel along with him in a coach or sit next to him in a public assembly, Steele substantiates his views by pointing out that women employed in these public spaces are judged on the basis of their appearances rather than their achievements and are expected to get accustomed to such improper sexual advancements made by male customers. Nevertheless, the issues pertaining to the safety of women that Steele discusses in "Letter 155" have stood the test of times, and nearly three centuries down the line, women and gender non-conforming individuals continue to be vexed by "improper discourses" (Steele 2012), casual sexism, physical abuse, and sexual molestation within their households, in public spheres, in the workplace and almost in every space that they occupy. As Nancy Fraser points out in her *Rethinking the Public Sphere*, such spaces are "the arena, the training ground and eventually, the power base of a stratum of bourgeois men who [are] coming to see themselves as a 'universal class' (1990, 60) indicating that such predators, while in public spaces, believe that they can easily get away with any degree of sexual misconduct. While women have been relentlessly fighting to create safer spaces for themselves over the decades, following the #MeToo movement and widespread sexual-allegations of abuse against Harvey Weinstein, many women have garnered more courage and support to speak openly about their molesters, share stories of their trauma, and demand justice for sexual assault victims.



Consequently, attempts have been made at a global level to make office spaces, work, and public places safer for women through the introduction of Committees against Sexual Harassment, strengthening of security measures, and faster redressal procedures. It is imperative to note that these changes have not only occurred in physical spaces but have also trickled down to digital environments wherein rape jokes, victim shaming, and callous treatment of sexual abuse used to be much more widespread in a pre #MeToo era. Post-2017, the portrayal of women in digital spaces, especially in short films, cinemas, web series, and music albums published on social media and shows distributed on over-the-top platforms (OTT) have also evolved for the better, with moviemakers responsibly carrying out a sensitive and sensible treatment of sexual assault victims. While studies pertaining to the sexual abuse of women in public and private spheres are already in existence, owing to the novelty of the #MeToo movement “that came into mediated prominence recently” (Nuraddin 2018, 13), there haven’t been many in-depth qualitative or quantitative researches conducted on the movement or its aftereffects. This research paper is an attempt to understand the ways in which sexual misconduct has been represented in Hollywood series published on digital spaces and how they have evolved over the years since the occurrence of the #MeToo global movement. Conceived by American activist Tarana Burke in 2006, the #MeToo movement originally aimed at emotionally supporting Black women and girls who had been victims of sexual violence, and helping them process their trauma and pain. Though the movement was less popular during its initial years, Burke continued her sustained efforts in urging survivors to tell their stories “for the purpose of their own healing and community building” (Froio 2021). Nearly a decade later, the movement gained immense traction after American actress Alyssa Milano tweeted the two words (#metoo) along with a message in the wake of sexual assault allegations against film producer Harvey Weinstein in 2017. This tweet soon went viral inspiring thousands of women across the world to share their own experiences of sexual violence, thus making #MeToo a massive global movement.

Subsequent to giving an overview of the general changes that have occurred in Hollywood movies and series with respect to sexual assault representation, the paper proceeds to provide an in-depth analysis of the US shows *Unbelievable* (2019), *Tuca and Bertie* (2019-Present), and *BoJack Horseman* (2014-Present). The shows have been studied based on three aspects: execution of power, capturing of trauma, and representation of closure. It is worth noting here that Lisa Hanawalt, the creator of the series *Tuca and Bertie* has also worked as a producer for the show *BoJack Horseman*. The presence of the same female artist in two shows that discuss sexual assault on women alludes to the fact that the voices of women have to be included while narrativising sexual violence on-screen. It also calls for a better and diverse representation within the media industry.



## PROMINENT CHANGES IN HOLLYWOOD MOVIES AND SERIES

Noting the differences that have taken place since the emergence of the #MeToo movement Jill Sergeant argues that nearly four years into #MeToo US shows and movies distributed on streaming platforms are exploring the wider aspects of sexual harassment and misconduct, “where men are not always portrayed as monsters and women are more than traumatized victims” (2020). To begin with the general and most striking shifts that have transpired, rape and sexual assault are no longer being portrayed as isolated incidents that occur only to women or gender non-conforming persons, but rather as violence that could be perpetrated on any individual at any time, irrespective of their gender, class, age or locale. White women have ceased to be the main victims of sexual assault depicted in US movies and TV shows (see *The Birth of a Nation* 1915; *Last Tango in Paris* 1972; *Cora* 2016), and have been replaced, not completely but to an extent, by Black/Asian women, cisgender men, transgendered people, and other members of the LGBTQIA+ community (*A Teacher*; *13 Reasons Why*; *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*; *Rectify*). This substantiates the idea that making experience visible precludes critical examination of its categories of representation, such as man/woman, black/white, homosexual/heterosexual as identities that are unassailable, as well as the premise of what these categories mean, how they operate, the notion of subjects, origin, and cause (Scott 1991, 24).

While until the early 1930s, a majority of the movies had explicit references to rape and detailed on-screen depictions of the attack, the number of films that discussed the subject declined in the mid-1930s. Post-1960s, there has been a surge in the overt depiction of rape and sexual assault in movies (Projansky 2001, 63). The #MeToo movement has also brought about a cultural shift in the way rape and sexual assault are being defined across the globe. What was not regarded as an instance of sexual assault in the preceding era is now being recognized accordingly. For instance, when the sexual assault allegations against American comedian Louis C.K. initially surfaced in 2002, the accusers faced severe backlash for stating that the celebrity had stripped naked and masturbated right in front of them and thus had sexually abused them (Framke 2017). However, subsequent to the #MeToo movement, the allegations against Louis C.K. became loud and clear as episodes of sexual assault, resulting in the comedian facing repercussions in his personal and professional life. Likewise, consider the scene from the classic 1939 movie *Gone with the Wind* where a drunk Rhett Butler forcibly carries his estranged wife Scarlett O’Hara up the stairs, rapes her and the next morning she wakes up feeling extremely happy; the episode, though was regarded as romantic once upon the release of the movie and even several years after that, is now being called out as a glorification of rape. Several episodes from recent shows such as *Game of Thrones* are also being currently censured for glorifying sexual misconduct. According to the US Department of Justice rape is the crime of forcibly engaging in



sexual intercourse with a person who has not consented while sexual assault includes a wide range of victimizations, distinct from rape or attempted rape. In the US, the legal framework surrounding sexual misconduct has over the years undergone transformations to increasingly protect the rights of the victim. The rape shield laws, which were initiated in the US in the 1970s, have restricted the defendant's rights to cross-examine the rape complainant of their sexual history, thus ensuring greater protection to the victim. Additionally, the Survivors' Bill of Rights Act of 2016 ensures that sexual assault survivors are not prevented from receiving a forensic medical examination and have access to a sexual assault evidence kit.

Though films/series in the pre #MeToo period had rendered weightage merely to the shock impact of sexual trauma, the recently popular shows have examined and explored the multiple repercussions of these devastating incidents. Specifically, the psychological consequences of such violations including anxiety, depression, and stress while providing more screen space to the victims of sexual assault rather than to the predator or to the assault visual itself. Simultaneously, the large amount of visual scenes that do represent sexual assault but are not labelled as such is being questioned. The representations in "popular shows *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, give us a narrow view of what is and what is not considered rape" (Halffield 2017, 38). The horizons are however currently broadening with directors probing into the multi-faceted nuances of sexual misconduct. The number of films and series touching upon the issue of sexual misconduct has also surged since 2017, with well-known productions including *Unbelievable* (2019), *Bombshell* (2019), *The Assistant* (2019), and *A Teacher* (2020) taking an innovative approach in dealing with the topic and traversing beyond the one-dimensional victim (Dockterman 2020). In contrast to shows such as *General Hospital* (1963-Present), *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012) or *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) that have glamourized and romanticized sexual assault, the aforementioned films and shows depict the reality and gruesome impact of molestation. The notable factor is that sexual assault is not only being depicted through regular shows or movies but even through animated productions where the sensitive issue is discussed responsibly, ensuring that the general comic elements of the animation do not seep into scenes wherein the subject is being discussed (*Tuca and Bertie*; *BoJack Horseman*). At a time when there are innumerable sources for people to get their content from, the shows thus distributed on streaming platforms can also assist in generating a higher engagement on debates surrounding sexual misconduct.

## PORTRAYAL OF POWER AND DIVERSE EXPERIENCES

Although heavily censured both for his remark equating rape to a punch in the face, as well as his insights into the functioning of the Power structure, which according to several critics subverts the liberal objectives of Feminism, Foucault's analysis of the operation of power, body, and sexuality, especially at the micro-levels, offers a



meticulous and strong foundation while examining the representation of sexual violence on screen. The understanding that Power operates “from innumerable points” (Foucault 1978, 94) and can be wielded by anyone, according to the philosopher, demands for micro-level scrutiny as opposed to macro-level analyses. On these grounds, it can be concluded that the OTT shows this research analyses mirror the micro-level exercise of power by anyone and everyone on their sexual targets. In the reality-based mini-series *Unbelievable* the exercise of power occurs through a serial rapist whose targets include women of all age groups and girl children. The power over the body of the victims is projected by tying them up, taking their naked pictures, and forcefully collecting their garments. The rapist’s modus operandi also includes making his victims take a shower so that they do not leave any traces behind. Employing dialogues where the victims repeatedly point out to the police that the attacker had been gentle with them before and after the rape, *Unbelievable* breaks away from merely depicting the physical power exerted by a rapist and includes into its spectrum the psychological methods adopted by the attackers to manipulate their targets. Throughout the series, the discourse shifts from the experiences of a single woman (as usually represented in pre #MeToo productions) to that of multiple women, including a teenager, several young adults, and middle-aged women, as well as an elderly woman who assists in broadening the narrative around a sexual attack by indicating that it could happen to any individual irrespective of their age. While this true-crime show depicts the operation of power by a stranger, shows such as *Tuca and Bertie* and *BoJack Horseman* portray what it means to be attacked by a person familiar to the victim. In *BoJack Horseman*, the victim Gina is sexually assaulted and choked by BoJack who happens to be her boyfriend and partner; an instance that depicts how the perpetrator believes he can easily exercise his power upon the victim as she is his girlfriend. More importantly, it is also connected to the power dynamic of them acting together as BoJack is more famous than Gina, so she has to endure the assault and its after-effects in order to ensure her career and life are not at stake. The power-play is evident later as she feels forced to go along with the excuse that they were acting. Gina feels that if she does complain or denounce what truly happened, she would become “the girl that was strangled by BoJack Horseman” (Bob-Waksberg 2019) and would not be known for her talents. Such a powerplay in the context of acting and fame is very closely connected to #MeToo Hollywood cases wherein victims have been dissuaded from speaking against their attackers who are more famous and powerful than them, as the perpetrators and their defenders use the victims’ fear for their career and/or life being destroyed in their favour.

Likewise, in *Tuca and Bertie*, the songbird Bertie is represented as a victim of two sexual assaults; one by her trusted lifeguard during her childhood and the other by her boss Pastry Pete. In both instances, the power is wielded by individuals who believe they can control the victim either due to their age difference as in the case of



the lifeguard or due to the hierarchy at work, as in the case of Pastry Pete. These three examples showcase the multiple ways in which power can be exercised by perpetrators and amplify the idea that the victims should not blame themselves or feel guilty for having been attacked. A dialogue from the popular British series *Sex Education* sums up this idea when the protagonist Meave suggests that “Maybe it’s a power thing” (Nunn 2020) with regard to why she and her peers would have undergone sexual abuse, her friend Aimee who had been attacked while traveling on a bus, responds “I think the man on the bus liked that I was afraid” (Nunn 2020).

## CAPTURING TRAUMA ON-SCREEN

Building further on Foucault’s argument that the “deployments of power are directly connected to the body, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures” (Foucault 1978, 147) leads to the observation that the exercise of power on a subject through sexual assault impacts the victim in a myriad of psychological, emotional, and social ways alongside the obvious physical effects. As previously mentioned, while a majority of the movies and series that have been released prior to the #MeToo movement merely brush through the surface of the psychological aftermath of sexual assault, the series that have been selected for this research plunge into the trauma of the victim, delineating how molestations influence even the daily routine of the sufferer. In both the adult-animated shows *Tuca and Bertie* and *BoJack Horseman*, the victims (Bertie and Gina respectively) are depicted as struggling with certain memories and locations connected to their assault and assaulter even years after the occurrence of these incidents. Bertie, the songbird resists in vain visiting Jelly Lakes where she had been molested as a child by her swimming coach and further refrains from taking a swim though she has been trained for it all through the summer. While her peers wonder at her stranger behaviour, it takes Bertie several attempts to finally share her experience with her close-aid Tuca, prior to which she states that she wishes to protect her friends “from the world of men” (Hanawalt 2019) indicating the feeling that no one else should undergo what she has been through. When Bertie recounts the tale of her assault, the flashback is filled with images that resemble cut-outs and neither the face of the attacker nor the attack itself is shown, thus creating a stronger narrative that gives prominence to the aftermath of the attack and the subsequent trauma that the victim endures. Likewise, Season 6 of *BoJack Horseman*, reveals Gina Cazador, who had been previously assaulted by BoJack while on the set of the movie, unable to completely process the trauma, which in turn begins to affect her career. For instance, while shooting a new movie, Gina is portrayed as having altered her demeanour from the carefree, jovial person she used to be to a celebrity who is constantly vexed, agitated, and unable to cope with even a slight or sudden change. The trauma is specifically captured in the visuals wherein her co-actor unwittingly slides his hands on the back of her neck while performing a dance sequence, which



reminds Gina of her previous encounter and results in her getting furious at having changed the choreography without her consent. The scene highlights how sexual assault trauma seeps into even the minute aspects of a victim's life, turning the person into an emotional wreck and urging him, her, or them to be cautious while performing each and every act.

Shows such as *I May Destroy You* and *Sex Education* depict how the legal and justice systems can support the victims of sexual assault. However, what happens if the entire justice system fails to stand by the side of the victim? *Unbelievable* attempts to portray the added trauma that a sexual assault victim endures when police officials, who are the supposed saviours, turn into foes. Immediately after being assaulted by a stranger, the lead character and a foster teenager Marie Adler is cross-questioned by multiple police personnel and further directed to undergo medical examination, although she insists that she is tired and weak. As she recounts her sexual assault experience during her first interview with the police officials in her apartment, Marie appears distraught, yet her replies to the questions are in an impassive voice with minimal eye contact, indicating that she is trying to process the incidents that have occurred the previous night. "Flashes of her experience — a masked face in the grey, pre-dawn light; the sudden gleam of a knife's edge; the sound of a bag being unzipped over heavy breaths; blinds clacking against each other by the sliding door — stand in at times for narration" (Fontoura 2019). Like Arabella in *I May Destroy You*, Marie keeps having flashing images of the assault in her mind; she is unable to translate it into words owing to the suffering and the unsympathetic situation around her. The trauma here is captured through Marie's inability to recount her story in the proper order of events. This trauma of the assault coupled with the stress of the probe leads Marie to unintentionally lie about a few aspects of the rape, which eventually results in the officers claiming that she has fabricated the entire story of the assault. During a subsequent interrogation scene at the police station, when the authorities blame her for cooking up the entire event, Marie can be found being restless, continuously tapping her foot, and trying to process the news that her friends and foster family also think she is lying. Realizing that there is no point in trying to speak the truth, Marie agrees to the police's version of the story. This scene is extremely vital because, in most real-life sexual assault cases, the lack of support and trust from closed ones can lead to added trauma for the victim. As her family and friends turn against her, Marie is shown having suicidal tendencies and she tries to keep herself away from everyone. The series further captures the collective trauma that victims of the serial rapist have undergone following the months of the attack, through the final courtroom scene where one after the other they say that "I am scared all of the time. Every minute of every day... I'm in pain. I've lost weight. I've lost work. I've lost money. I have violent thoughts... I don't water my lawn anymore. I don't read by the window" (Grant 2019). The dialogue delivery is enhanced by the slow yet powerful background score and the



devastated yet stern expressions of the characters, who represent their unparalleled yearning to return to the life they had cherished prior to the assault.

## THE ASPECT OF CLOSURE

Over the years, a majority of the films and series portraying sexual assault have been feeding viewers with the idea that closure can happen to the victim only by inflicting pain and taking revenge upon the predators. Movies and series including *Straw Dogs* (1971), *Rape Squad* (1974), *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), *Irreversible* (2002), and *Revenge* (2017) have glorified the notion of revenge and have emphasized that seeking vengeance through violence is a prerequisite for a rape victim to attain closure. “Rape-revenge implies a basic, casual, and even primal narrative format. In the standard heterosexual pattern, a woman is raped by a man or men, a horrific crime that spurs an act of vengeance carried out by a cast of characters that most often includes the victim’s family, the victim’s allies, or the victim herself” (Andrews 2014). Of late, there has been a welcoming shift from the representation of rape-revenge in Hollywood series and movies to a more realistic portrayal of the aftermath of a sexual assault, indicating that closure can be obtained through several means, and on certain occasions, the victim might not receive closure at all. For Marie in *Unbelievable* closure comes when she realizes that there are people out there who are willing to believe her story of rape and help her out. In the final episode of the show where Marie realizes that her attacker has been nabbed, she is shown Googling for the latest news on the arrest. As soon as she sees the image of the person in one of the articles, Marie hurriedly shuts her laptop and begins to have flashes of her assault memory. Subsequently, she calls Karen Duvall, one of the lead detectives in the investigation, and thanks her for capturing her assaulter, adding that they have restored her faith in humanity. “More than anything else, more than him getting locked up, more than the money I got, it was hearing that, about you guys, that changed things completely. I wake up now and I can imagine good things happening” (Grant 2019), says Marie. The episode highlights the reality that for a rape victim, getting closure is an extremely slow process. It might not necessarily happen in the form of revenge, and as in the case of Marie, it could occur through the support and help of people around. While Gina in *BoJack Horseman* does not receive closure as she continues to grapple with the trauma of the incident even in the subsequent season of the show, Bertie in *Tuca and Bertie* is relieved when her predator’s act is revealed to the world. In all three cases, the directors have taken caution that justice is not served in the form of vengeance or violence, but rather through arrest (*Unbelievable*) or ostracization by the individual or society (*BoJack Horseman* and *Tuca and Bertie*).

By creating space for diverse voices speak and be heard, and by delving into the genuine realities of a sexual assault as opposed to the fantasized versions that various productions have been delivering to the audience, the above-mentioned examples of



OTT shows have undeniably created a language of their own. It would be interesting to note in the upcoming years how this greater awareness would trickle down to web series, TV shows, and movies belonging to other genres, as well as to those being created in other parts of the globe.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Andrews, David. 2014. "Reconsidering the Body Genre: Rape-Revenge and Postfeminist Softcore as Biocultural Phenomena." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 7: 57-58. <https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.7.04>.
- BoJack Horseman*. 2014. Created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg. Produced by Raphael Bob-Waksberg, Noel Bright, Steven A. Cohen, Blair Fetter, Jane Wiseman, Will Arnett, Aaron Paul, Andy Weil.
- Dockterman, Eliana. 2020. "Pop Culture Reckoned With #MeToo in Radical New Ways in 2020— Even as It Receded from Headlines." *Time*, December 22, 2020. <https://time.com/5924015/sexual-misconduct-movies-tv-me-too/>
- Fontoura, Marie. 2019. "Inside the Trauma and Triumph of Netflix's 'Unbelievable'." *Rolling Stone*, September 18, 2019. <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-features/inside-netflix-unbelievable-cast-creators-interview-883592/>.
- Foucault, Michal. 1978. *The History of Sexuality*. Translated by Robert Hurley. Pantheon Books.
- Framke, Caroline. 2017. "The Sexual Harassment Allegations against Louis C.K., Explained." *Vox*, November 10, 2017. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/11/9/16629400/louis-ck-allegations-masturbation>.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1990. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text*, no: 25/26: 56-80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>.
- Froio, Nicole. 2021. "Tarana Burke's "Unbound" Brings #MeToo Back to its Roots." *Bitchmedia*, September 22, 2021. <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/tarana-burke-memoir-interview-me-too>.
- Gordon, Harriet. 2018. "A Foucauldian-Feminist Understanding of Patterns of Sexual Violence in Conflict". *Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence*." *Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence*, no. 2(1): 23–40. <https://doi.org/10.22618/tp.pjcv.20182.1.171002>.
- Halffield, Claire. 2017. "'She brought it on herself': A Discourse Analysis of Sexual Assault in Teen Comedy Film." PhD diss., DePauw University.
- Nuraddin, Nabila. 2018. "The Representation of the #MeToo Movement in Mainstream International Media." Masters Diss., Jonkoping University.



- Projansky, Sarah. 2001. "The Elusive/Ubiquitous Representation of Rape: A Historical Survey of Rape in U.S. Film, 1903–1972." *Cinema Journal*, 41(1): 63–90. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2001.0023>.
- Scott, Joan W. 1991. "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry*, 17(4): 773-797. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343743>.
- Serjeant, Jill. 2020. "After Weinstein, #MeToo themes in film, TV reflect wider cultural reckoning." Reuters, March 12, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-people-harvey-weinstein-culture-idUSKBN20Z1AG>.
- Sex Education*. 2019-Present. Created by Laurie Nunn. Produced by Jamie Campbell, Ben Taylor and Laurie Nunn. Netflix.
- Steele, Richard. 2012. "Letter 155". *The Spectator, Volume 1 Eighteenth-Century Periodical Essays*. A Public Domain Book. Kindle.
- Tuca and Bertie*. 2019-Present. Created by Lisa Hanawalt. Produced by Lisa Hanawalt, Raphael Bob-Waksberg, Noel Bright, Steven A. Cohen, Tiffany Haddish and Ali Wong. Netflix.
- Unbelievable*. 2019. Created by Susannah Grant, Ayelet Waldman and Michael Chabon. Produced by Susannah Grant, Sarah Timberman, Carl Beverly, Lisa Cholodenko, Ayelet Waldman, Michael Chabon, Katie Couric, Richard Tofel, Neil Barsky, Robyn Semien, Marie Adler. CBS Television Studios.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Raja, Ambika. 2022. "“No Means No’: Sexual Assault Representation in US Shows on OTT Platforms, Post #MeToo." *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published February 18.