

Gender Dynamics in TV Series *The Fall*: Whose fall is it?

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Abstract

*This paper examines gender dynamics in the contemporary TV series *The Fall* (BBC 2013 - 2016). This TV series, through its genre of crime fiction, represents yet another way of introducing a strong female character in today's postfeminist culture. Gillian Anderson's Stella Gibson, a Brit and a woman, finds herself in the men's world of the Police Service in Belfast, where the long shadow of the Troubles is still present. The paper proposes that the answer to the raised question - who the eponymous fall (implied in the name of the series) should be attributed to - might not be that obvious, while also discussing *The Fall's* take on feminism embodied in its female lead.*

*Keywords: female detectives, *The Fall*, TV crime drama, postfeminism*

Introduction

Troubled history is often considered to be the reason for Northern Ireland being described as a nation of borderlines - not only obvious physical ones but also imagined. This stems from the conflict that has been described most commonly in terms of identities - based on culture, religion, and even geography. The conflict that has not yet been completely forgotten as the long shadow of the Troubles (local name, internationally known as the Northern Ireland conflict) is still present in the area. Nolan and Hughes (2017) describe Northern Ireland as "living apart together" separated by physical barriers. These locally called peace walls had to be erected to separate and, at the same time, protect the communities. The segregation has left the two communities leading "separate but parallel lives", in which they still do not "stand together to sing the same anthem or salute the same flag" and therefore remain "without a common identity to unite them" (Nolan and Hughes 2017). This notion augments the general global perception of Northern Ireland as a divided society.

When it comes to British broadcasting and the question of how the local divisions of Northern Ireland should be presented on the screen, one may interpret a certain reluctance to explore it. TV drama, however, occasionally took on the subject. A particular case is presented by contemporary Belfast TV drama *The Fall* (BBC 2013 - 2016), which, through its genre of crime fiction, presents yet another way of 'getting the elephant' into the UK living rooms.

Nevertheless, it is without question that it does much more than that. *The Fall* goes beyond local divisions in Northern Ireland, as these constitute a background to a global phenomenon of the power struggle between genders. Detective Superintendent Stella Gibson (Gillian Anderson), a senior Metropolitan Police officer, is assigned to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) in Belfast to review an unsolved case and consequently finds herself in pursuit of a serial killer. Coming from London and therefore being an outsider, she is on various occasions confronted with the reality of divisions in Belfast, well known to the locals but unexpected for her. However, it is not Stella's nationality that makes her stand out; it is her gender. She is the one being a woman in a male-dominated world of the police force, a portrayal of a strong female detective character that has earned the TV show an undeniable place in the postfeminist culture of the 21st century.

Falling in line with female detectives

Before anything else, it is necessary to acknowledge that the character of a female detective is not a new phenomenon in the crime genre (both literary and televised). Understandably it first appeared in the literary genre, and Kestner in his book *Sherlock's Sisters: The British Female Detective* (2016) dates the appearance of a female detective in English fiction to 19th century Victorian Britain. The evolution from amateur sleuths, such as Lois Cayley (1899), Hilda Wade (1900) or Agatha Christie's Miss Marple (1926), to independent professional detectives such as DCI Jane Tennison (Helen Mirren) in the 1990s or Stella Gibson (Gillian Anderson) in the new millennium, has been rather lengthy yet unique.

TV crime drama, a genre that is typically plagued with deaths of women (often nameless female victims), gives rise to prominent female protagonists - female detectives. Lawrence (2018) reminds that the appearance of female TV detectives is "a relatively recent phenomenon" and relates it to the presence of women in the police force in real life. He accredits the rise of British TV female police protagonists to Margaret Thatcher who, with her premiership, "normalized the notion of women in power" in the UK. A real gamechanger comes with DCI Jane Tennison (Helen Mirren) in 1991. *Prime Suspect* (ITV 1991-2006), both produced and written by a woman, paves the way for the next to come in line by the portrayal of "an exhilarating spectacle of female assertiveness and protest, and of its bitter personal cost" (Gerrard 2014). Needless to say, *Prime Suspect* brings about the new reality for the TV landscape, and Jane Tennison establishes a template of a senior female police officer.

Since the advance of the new millennium, the audience has been introduced to an array of tough female investigators² who navigate the working environment where androcentric culture still prevails. Postmillennial accelerated globalization and media accessibility (primarily through streaming services) have blurred the borders between local and global which resulted in local (national) TV series going global. Scandinavian TV detectives Sarah Lund (Sofie Gråbøl) in *The Killing* (Danish production) and Saga Noren (Sofia Helin) in *The Bridge* (Danish/Swedish co-production) constitute a quintessential example. Both are representatives of a Nordic noir TV heroine, each unique in her way of being socially awkward. Yet, they both reached the audience beyond Scandinavia, and by crossing borders became global phenomena in the worldwide genre of TV crime drama. Lund and Noren became feminist heroines and shaped the norms of female detectives' representation on the small screen as the postmillennial broadening of (post)feminist discourse enabled 'bring[ing] forth a female investigator who challenges beliefs and attitudes toward representing the feminine in terms of (in)equalities and (in)justice but also the body, both social and corporeal' (McCabe 2015: 31). Lund challenged the norms by not being there for her son, letting down her boyfriend, being curt, making mistakes and not apologizing, and not being womanly, yet being immensely focused on her work. All attributes traditionally not associated with the representation of feminine but rather masculine gender.

Similarly, Noren (who appears to have Asperger's syndrome, yet is never officially diagnosed), never spares the feelings of others, always tells the truth (even though it puts her colleague and friend in prison) and does not conform to social norms, i.e., when she walks into a bar and asks a stranger if he wants sex; all while being a brilliant detective. Lund's and Noren's gender is not questioned on the professional level, and unlike Tennison, they do not fight sexism in the workplace. Therefore, they are entirely able to exercise agency over their

own bodies (a vital tenet of feminism, especially its third wave and postfeminism) by not conforming to an ideal image of femininity. This is obvious in the way they dress as they obscure (even hide in Lund's case) their femininity, even though Lund's Faroese jumper and Noren's leather pants became iconic. But more importantly, they step outside generally accepted norms of feminine behaviour, opening up possibilities for a new image of female detectives on the small screen (French 2013).

In today's era of postfeminist culture, female detective dramas are more prevalent (ibid.). They have even become a trend (Gerrard 2014), but on the other side, they are no longer deemed a novelty. In order to survive or remain relevant in the era in which, to adopt McRobbie's claim, "feminism has been taken into account" (2007: 255), they must come up with something particular. Something that would make them distinguishable in their own right; other than solving different crimes in different landscapes/countries.

Stella Gibson (Gillian Anderson) in *The Fall* (BBC 2013 - 2016) is easily distinguishable in the line of female detectives. Stella Gibson, unlike Lund, never hides her femininity and instead wears now-iconic silk blouses, which became her trademark style that has generated a lot of media attention and even sparked higher sales in retail (McVeigh 2013). *The Guardian* establishes Stella Gibson as a "professional woman not afraid of looking attractive" in McVeigh's article (2013) and as a "workwear hero" who helped reclaim pink as tough³ (Marriott 2014). Jermyn (2017: 268) attributes the seemingly endless media coverage of Stella Gibson's blouses to what they represent in postfeminist culture - "they symbolise the possibility of women attaining power in the workplace without abandoning their femininity." DSI Stella Gibson does not conform to already established tropes about powerful women on the small screen - accomplished female detectives. She is a respected professional whose authority is not questioned by her colleagues, many of whom are women. Gibson's gender is not an issue, and she does not submerge her femininity (as would be expected in order to be taken more seriously by male colleagues). She does not become emotionally involved in the case, but she is not depicted as emotionless.

Moreover, the fact that Stella Gibson does not sacrifice her personal life in order to become successful translates into an invigorating portrayal of an accomplished woman. However, she is not free from flaws, she makes her fair share of mistakes, but none of it could be ascribed to her gender. This all makes her authentic and more of a human than a superhero.

***The Fall* – introducing Stella Gibson and the F-word**

The Fall TV series generated prominent media attention, became a global hit and introduced DSI Stella Gibson, a new (post)feminist role model. The show was labelled "the most feminist show on television" by Sullivan (2015) mostly because of the way it portrayed women and, by doing so, challenged traditional conventions of TV crime drama. *The Fall* makes use of familiar tropes of the genre by building on the expectations that its viewers know the standards and thus, the series creates new meanings and complicates the conventional ones. Having said that, the series has not been just acclaimed for the revolutionary treatment of women but it has also been criticized for glamorizing violence against women.

With its three seasons, *The Fall* won praise for its feminism so distinctly embodied in its female lead - an ice-cool and confident woman as opposed to quick-tempered men around her. 'Stellar' Stella Gibson⁴ is unquestionably poised and methodical when it comes to her

work, and very casual in expressing what or who she wants when it comes to both her professional and private life. She has no problem initiating a one-night stand with a police sergeant whom she just met or to have a detective she fancies transferred to her investigation team (and whom she later gets sexually involved with). When she is confronted about it by Eastwood (a fellow male detective), she gives a powerful speech:

That's what really bothers you, isn't it? The one-night stand? Man fucks woman. Subject: man. Verb: fucks. Object: woman. That's okay. Woman fucks man. Woman: subject. Man: object. That's not so comfortable for you, is it?

(Season 1, Episode 3)

She is unapologetically sexual, and has sex with the men of her choosing. However, when Jim Burns (John Lynch), her superior in Belfast (a married man who she apparently has a sexual history with), appears in her hotel room drunk and demands sex, she firmly refuses and even breaks his nose when he would not take no for an answer. In the aftermath of this event, they have a powerful conversation in which Stella expresses her views on maleness:

[Jim Burns:] Why are women spiritually and emotionally so much stronger than men?
[Stella Gibson:] Because the basic human form is female. Maleness is a kind of birth defect.

(Season 2, Episode 3)

Interestingly, hotel room 208 in the Hilton constitutes Stella Gibson's private world as she is on a work assignment, therefore just visiting Belfast. As revealed in Season 1, she flies in from London, yet she is never reminiscent of her (private) life there. It is only in the series finale, the last episode of Season 3, that we get to see Stella Gibson return home, gather up her mail, and settle down with a glass of wine ready to continue with her (normal) life. However, one might merely wonder what that would be like since we only get a glimpse of her private world. And even that is distorted as it is a hotel room (only a temporary abode) and she does not spend much time there (as she often sleeps at her office). But when Stella Gibson is in her hotel room, she is dressed in a nightdress and a silk dressing gown with her bed often part of the picture, essentially making bedroom views the only glimpse of her private life. She shares her bedroom with her two one-night stands, but her bedroom is invaded (and her privacy breached) first by her boss who comes uninvited and demands sex and later by Paul Spector (Jamie Dornan), the serial killer she hunts. Her bed is the place where she writes in her diary and also becomes the setting for a crucial scene that promotes the female point of view in the male-dominated narrative. It is when Stella Gibson, having been asked by Tom Anderson (one of her one-night stands) whether physical likeness between him and the serial killer (who the policeman admits to be charismatic) turns her on, delivers a withering response and says:

A woman, I forget who, once asked a male friend why men felt threatened by women. He replied that they were afraid that women might laugh at them. When she asked a group of women why women felt threatened by men, they said: We're afraid they might kill us.

(Season 2, Episode 6)

It is the decision of showrunner Allan Cubitt to relocate the story of Stella Gibson and to place her in Belfast on a work assignment that creates new standards for the genre.

Another falling off the expected tropes is that Stella Gibson is not given much of a backstory thus, she defies easy categorizations of being a mother, wife, or daughter. The audience is left knowing next to nothing about her background. But instead, her actions and especially her conversations with other women or powerful speeches addressing male-dominated narrative reveal the most about Stella Gibson. This allows her to just be a person. It is the detective who is the enigma, not the serial killer. In a twist on the traditional storytelling of a crime in a TV procedural, the serial killer is identified for the audience in the first episode and his backstory gradually revealed.

Paul Spector whose victims are dark-haired professional women (whom he stalks, murders and then bathes, paints their nails and arranges their bodies) becomes fascinated by Stella Gibson from the moment he watches her at a press conference. The press conference for which she painted her nails red (in a nod to Paul Spector's latest victim) and during which one of the buttons on her silk blouse came undone to reveal cleavage what made Paul Spector call her an "English bitch" (Season 1, Episode 3). His fascination, explicitly linked to her femininity, is the driving force behind him breaking into Stella Gibson's hotel room and reading her diary. Later in the series, Paul Spector (in a conversation over the phone) claims that he and Stella Gibson have in fact, a lot in common, and argues that she actually hates men as much as he hates women. Given *The Fall's* complexity, it is not solely their gender that sets them apart; it is the power that comes with it. Paul Spector, being a man, uses physical violence against women to exercise his authority. On the other hand, it is Stella Gibson's gender that provides her with strength, acuity, and enables her to infiltrate the killer's psyche. She is a brilliant detective because of her gender, not in spite of it.

Quite interestingly, Stella Gibson defies the norms by refusing to obsess over the killer, her main priority being to ensure that justice is served. When asked about Paul Spector by her one-night stand (implicating that she might be fascinated by the killer), she answers:

He might fascinate you. I despise him with every fibre of my being.

(Season 2, Episode 6)

Similarly, replying to Jim Burn's describing Paul Spector as a monster, she says:

You can see the world in that way if you want, you know it makes no sense to me. Men like Spector are all too human, too understandable. He's not a monster, he's just a man.

(Season 2, Episode 6)

The nuanced complexity of Stella Gibson's character allows her to navigate the world filled with gendered double standards. Her implicit empathy makes her a keen observer and passionate advocate of female views. She does not turn away from emotional situations. Yet, she provides a realistic balance by staying focused on justice being served (her main priority) and by doing so, she defies traditional expectations that a woman needs to take on the role of a nurturer. When a junior female police officer is riven with guilt after an error, Stella Gibson treats her with sisterly compassion instead of admonition. She later consoles Rose (the victim of Paul Spector that survives a kidnapping) and acknowledges her fear that she might have unintentionally led Spector to her. When Rose's husband Tom (in his male perspective) questions his wife's lack of resistance during her abduction, Stella Gibson provides a compelling explanation of what submission and consent really mean:

[Tom:] Why didn't she cry out? Or scream? Why didn't she fight him? Why did she go with him?

[Stella Gibson:] Tom—

[Tom:] Do you know that Nancy saw them crossing the street arm in arm?

[Stella Gibson:] Tom, I need you to listen to me right now... Men always think in terms of fight or flight. In fact, the most common instinct in the face of this kind of threat is to freeze. If she didn't fight, if she didn't scream, if she was silent and numb, it's because she was petrified. If she went with him quietly, it's because she was afraid for her life. And not just her life—yours and Nancy's and the baby's. In that state of fear, she might well have been compliant. She might well have submitted. But that does not mean she consented.

(Season 3, Episode 1)

On another occasion, she instructs a constable to drop the word innocent from the press release describing Paul Spector's victims (all professional women) by saying:

Let's not refer to them as innocent. What if he kills a prostitute next or a woman walking home drunk late at night in a short skirt? Will they be in some way less innocent, therefore less deserving? Culpable? The media loves to divide women into virgins and vamps, angels and whores. Let's not encourage them.

(Season 1, Episode 3)

It makes a difference that a female detective investigates violent crimes against women. The victim's body is not just a body as the victims in this series are not nameless women, but they are given lives and families to mourn them. And even more importantly, they are given a strong female advocate in the character of Stella Gibson, who will not stop until justice is served.

Concluding remarks – So, whose fall is it after all?

The Fall TV series could be thoroughly studied and analysed, actually, it has withstood its fair share of both criticism and praise. The series has been continually discussed for its take on feminism, defying standard norms of the genre, and creating a new postmillennial type of a TV female lead that the viewers have been waiting for. Stella Gibson is intelligent, confident, accomplished, always fashionable, but also imperfect, and above all, she does not tolerate misogyny. Her pursuit of the serial killer, her interactions with other male and female colleagues create so much discussed vibrant gender dynamics. The TV series addresses the world in which women need to fight sexism and become victims of male violence, and as Deacon (2014) argues, it is the correct approach. However, it is purposely not easy to interpret the eponymous fall. On a rather obvious level, one can comprehend it as the fall of Paul Spector, from being a serial killer exercising his (male) authority on his female victims to a captured prisoner stripped of his power. On another level, it could be understood as the series' falling off the expected tropes of the genre. However, the author's proposed interpretation is that it is the viewers' fall for Stella Gibson on a global level.

Notes

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²The likes of Sarah Lund (Sofie Gråbøl) in *The Killing*, Saga Noren (Sofia Helin) in *The Bridge*, Ellie Miller (Olivia Colman) in *Broadchurch*, Kate Fleming (Vicky McClure) in *Line of Duty*, Janet Scott and Rachel Bailey (Lesley Sharp and Surrane Jones) in *Scott & Bailey*, Stella Gibson (Gillian Anderson) in *The Fall*, to name a few.

³Marriott (2014) actually uses a pun, relating Stella Gibson to Stella, the Angry Birds character, which is also pink but is set to challenge the stereotypes related to the color. This relates to Priya's *Guardian* article (2014) in which he discusses the reshaping of image of somewhat problematic pink color (from receiving backlash for being associated with gender specific toys and stereotypical girliness to being slightly reappropriated). In the article he refers to Stella, the new addition to the Angry Birds set that is female and pink.

⁴Reference to the main female lead Stella Gibson made by both French (2013) and Jermyn (2017).

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