

(Marital) Rape, Trauma and (In)Justice in *Criminal Justice 2: Behind Closed Doors*

Anuradha Dasani & Sucharita Sharma

Abstract

Judith Herman fittingly accentuates, “Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity or a close personal encounter with violence and death” (*Trauma* 33). Rohan Sippy directed web series *Criminal Justice 2* narrativizes the life of one such victim of trauma who cannot hold herself together and fails to process the series of events behind closed doors. Responding through varied mechanisms such as ‘psychological numbness’ or ‘shutting down of normal emotional responses’-Anuradha-the main protagonist finally retorts through murder. This paper attempts to read the trauma of marital rape under patriarchal subjugation and supports the findings with Julia Kristeva’s Theory of Abjection. The research is also an inquiry into such hushed questions that subvert the notion of a ‘good wife’ and dismantle the conventional feminist ideologies.

Keywords: Abjection; Fear; Memory; Patriarchy; Trauma.

Criminal Justice 2, an eight-episode web series, traces the story of Anuradha Chandra who stabs her husband Bikram Chandra in the middle of the night in their home and leaves him wounded and bleeding. A riveting narrative, it strikes its audience with the innocence of Anuradha’s face which renders it impossible to judge her as a criminal. As a courtroom drama, it poses a moral dilemma before us and beckons the audience to question the culpability of the ‘criminal’ in the committed crime. The audience knows from the very first episode that Anuradha is guilty of the crime she has been accused of, but what remains unknown is the provocation behind such a drastic step. Therefore, what initially appears as an ‘open-and-shut-case’ in legal jargon, soon turns into a quest for the ‘whys’ that lie behind Anuradha’s actions.

Researchers like Basser van der Kolk believe that the sufferers of trauma usually tend to dissociate or repress the memories of abuse and, hence, do not have any conscious memory of such events. However, the discovery of truth is hindered by Anuradha herself, who remains tight-lipped for the initial few episodes, refusing to communicate with her lawyer despite his exhortations. An astute man, Madhav Mishra (the defence lawyer), can tell that there is something that Anuradha is keeping under wraps. He, thus, ropes in Nikhat Hussain—a fellow woman practitioner—to help break Anuradha's passive stupor and, what is revealed is a harrowing tale of the physical and psychological abuse that Anuradha has suffered at the hands of her ostensibly 'perfect' husband. Susan Bordo, in her work *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, argues that "... muteness is the condition of the silent, uncomplaining woman—an ideal of patriarchal culture" (162). For the longest time, Anuradha has been silenced and gaslighted by her husband so much that she is in denial of all that has transpired in her life. It takes her quite some time to vocalize her long-standing struggle with domestic abuse.

"In sharp contrast to gratifying or even troublesome memories, which can generally be formed and revisited as coherent narratives, "traumatic memories" tend to arise as fragmented splinters of inchoate and indigestible sensations, emotions, images, smells, tastes, thoughts, and so on" (*Memory* 7). Anuradha's precarious psychological condition is hinted at in the very first episode when the sudden honking of a car horn or a small slip like forgetting what's on the grocery list makes her anxious and fearful. She has been on anti-depressants for long and displays signs of anxiety too. But herein lies the paradox; her psychological condition is seen as a cause—the cause of her forgetful and overwrought behaviour—but her condition is the consequence (and not the cause) of Bikram's controlling and abusive ways.

Simply labelling her as a mentally unstable person conceals the extent of the social problem that lies behind it, i.e., marital rape, of which Anuradha is a victim. Further, not only is she subjected to physical violence, but psychological torment too. She is under the constant monitoring of Bikram who keeps track of her every move—from maintaining a logbook of the distance her car has travelled each day, to the medicines she may have skipped, to the clothes she has worn—Bikram usurps her sense of privacy. One of the dialogues by Anuradha in this respect is particularly telling. She says, "Even when he wasn't there, he was there. He knew everything. Where I was, what I was doing. It felt like there were no walls in the house" ("The Trial Begins" 25:05-25:16). The overriding male gaze

of her husband is unmissable. What needs to be treated, therefore, is the diseased social set-up that allows the perpetration of physical and mental abuse but, what is being treated are Anuradha's outwardly manifested and perceptible symptoms of psychological trouble.

Works of fiction that depict sexual violence from a woman's point of view "inevitably engage with hegemonic patriarchal discourses of sexuality and gender relations" (Fitzpatrick 186) and in doing so, confront the cultural forces that lie behind such violence. The show depicts how the lack of laws prohibiting marital rape can give married men unchecked freedom to act upon their carnal desires with little respect for the woman's dignity, and most importantly, her consent. Consent (or its lack thereof), and more significantly, the little importance society attaches to it, is one of the major concerns that the series addresses. A married woman thus has no agency and control over her own body. Sharon Marcus, in her article "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention," attempts to explain rape as a "social script" (391). To put it otherwise, she conceptualizes the act as a 'scripted interaction' which is fuelled by culturally sanctioned identities of the sexes, alongside other gender biases that function in our society before the action takes place.

Theories of gender performativity have suggested that socially sanctioned conventions of gender are often ingrained in the minds of individuals so deeply that they become almost naturalized for them. Meekness, docility, self-abnegation and passivity in the face of oppression are the qualities that define a conventional, dutiful wife. Anuradha's ineffective resistance in the face of the display of aggressive sexual power by Bikram stems from cultural norms that teach women deference to male authority. This gendered behaviour on Anuradha's part is indicative of social directives, especially from the standpoint of response, because women most often let the desires of their better halves supersede theirs. Moreover, the sense of shame associated with what happens to her 'behind closed doors', further contributes to her silence.

Abram Kardiner comments on the victims overwhelmed by terror and observes that

...the whole apparatus for concerted, coordinated and purposeful activity is smashed. The perceptions become inaccurate and pervaded with terror, the coordinative functions of judgement and discrimination fail...the sense organs may even cease to function... The aggressive impulses become disorganized and unre-

lated to the situation in hand. (*Neurotic* 186).

It is even more surprising that Bikram convinces Anuradha that he is justified in 'punishing' her in bed. "That was my punishment. The punishment for not being a good wife" ("The Truth is Born" 41:00-41:03). She keeps on blaming herself by believing that the fault lies in her. It is very late when she learns to object to the narratives of pathology that Bikram ascribes to her behaviour. Anuradha derives her sense of 'self' only from her wifehood and motherhood. Bikram's repeated allegations on her ineffective fulfilment of these domestic duties and, further, her internalization of this feedback results in the lack of her sense of selfhood. This becomes firmly evident when it is revealed that Anuradha had called someone, on the night of the murder, to enquire about the life insurance policy in her name. We find her reiterating, almost like a *mantra*, that her 'husband loved' her. Perhaps, these reiterations were her defence mechanisms to guard herself against the unpleasant reality of being in a toxic and abusive relationship.

In fact, in the final episode she reveals that she had intended to kill herself with the knife she used to stab Bikram, but she lacked the courage to carry it out because she was terrified at the thought of killing the child in her womb. The only way to preserve her, and her child's well-being was to defend herself against Bikram. While this does not justify the act of murder itself, it does lead to the charges being reframed as culpable homicide- not amounting to murder- since she had killed Bikram in the apprehension of imminent harm to herself and her child.

What makes the show particularly apposite in the Indian context is that India is one of those few countries where marital rape is not considered a crime—an obvious socio-cultural manoeuvre aimed at guarding the sacredness of the institution of marriage. Any acknowledgement given to the issues of marital rape would disrupt the status quo on which the society thrives. The conversation between the Inspector and the Sub-inspector, who are in charge of Anuradha's case, is particularly telling in this respect: "Salian: When you take her for medical, test her for rape. Pradhan: Rape? Sir, why? They're husband and wife, right?" ("A Perfect Family" 48:00-48:07) Anuradha's actions are thus seen as disrupting the natural order of things.

The minor characters in the series have also played a vital role in furthering the series' thematic concerns. The women characters that Anuradha encounters in the jail depict how women have internalized patriarchal be-

liefs- they may all be guilty of abominable crimes but they still have the right to look down upon Anuradha because the crime of killing a husband is, even for criminals like them, blasphemous and unforgivable. One of them says, "Most of the women you find here were treated worse than animals by their husbands. But they still consider a husband's murder to be the biggest sin" ("Murder" 35:01-35:12). Similarly, the relationship between the husband-wife police officers, that are in charge of the case, also speaks about the issue of consent in marriage. Gauri's consent is often disregarded by her husband- Harsh. Nikhat's mother too, accommodates to every whim of her husband; even agreeing to have his second wife over for Eid. Even Madhav Mishra, the astute lawyer and a positive character, is not responsive to his newly-wedded wife's physical and/or emotional needs. These characters, while providing contradictory standpoints to Anuradha's story, also serve as indicators of various forms of power and patterns of subjugation operating in our society.

In order to understand Anuradha's journey, we must understand her interaction with the abject. Julia Kristeva in her work *The Powers of Horror* states that the "abject" concerns itself with that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a saviour..." (4). Bikram, in subjecting Anuradha to the torture of marital rape, becomes a site of the abject. In fact, any crime, simply because it brings to the fore the fragile nature of law, falls under the category of the abject. Anuradha's violent attack on her husband is an act of self-preservation—an act of the 'self', attempting to guard itself against that which threatens it. She intrinsically understands that the law of her country and the unwritten norms of her community cannot protect her. She must have been unconsciously guided in her actions by this knowledge. She takes it upon herself to protect the little dignity and sanity that she has been able to retain along with preserving the life that is blossoming within her.

However, as the moment passes, the harrowing reality of her actions dawns on her and she seeks to escape the said scene, leaving her teenage daughter all alone at home with her dying father. Death, whether natural or unnatural, has been identified by critics as being a part of the broad concept of the "abject". With Bikram's body too, becoming a site of the abject, Anuradha rushes out; she must separate her own self from this threatening site and disgusting object. Fear and loathing are the two emotions that Kristeva associates with the abject and both these emotions are etched on Anuradha's face as she looks at the stains of her husband's

blood on her own gown at the police station. It reminds her that she cannot get rid of the memory of the abject just by separating herself from her husband's body. She vehemently urges to be allowed to remove the "dirty" clothes. Of course, her clothes are soiled with blood but they are also sullied with the memory of her own, and her husband's crime who has subjected her to marital rape. Blood, in itself, is an ocular portent of a rupture or the collapse of a whole. Several breaches occur concomitantly in this one moment: Anuradha breaks off from her abusive and stifling relationship, she severs ties with her oppressed, subdued self, she cuts off her 'self' from that which threatens her 'self' and finally, there also occurs a break off from the world of law and righteousness as she enters the world of lawlessness. Likewise, as she is about to leave after having stabbed Bikram, she covers her body (and symbolically, covers the site of violation) with an overcoat, almost as if she is evading the confrontation with the truth of what she has been put through 'behind the closed doors'. The kind of self-disgust which is generated by the abject thus becomes evident in the manner in which Anuradha responds to her clothes, since her body, like Bikram's, is a site of the abject- degraded and abused by her husband. Significant to note that here, Anuradha has been made abject (unclean, horrified, disgusted) by her own husband and by the patriarchal institutions that defend him.

Anuradha, on her own part constantly tries to resist abjection by holding on to whatever vestiges of cleanliness she can get her hands on. Indeed, her obsession with cleanliness throughout is perhaps an attempt to defend herself against abjection, but such an attempt proves abortive at the best in the prison she is lodged in. The squalid conditions of the prison with its overflowing washrooms, cramped lodgings and unhygienic food bring her face to face with the object of abject. Not only death, but images of human waste and decay also signify the abject. The disgust and horror generated by these sights disorient Anuradha even more. Since immaculate surrounding is a far-fetched reality for her, as long as she is in the prison, she also tries to counter abjection through motherhood. Later, her devotion to her children becomes the sole means in the story through which she counters her status as an abject. Likewise, a growing awareness of the self is critical to undoing the dread and sense of abjection. Her defence counsel convinces her of her inner power to combat this dismaying sense of abhorrence. Interestingly, the self can make sense of its own autonomy and self-sufficiency only when it is made to realize this by other selves.

However, another aspect of the abject- its liminality- also comes into play in Anuradha's case. The abject occupies a liminal space in a way that one

feels both attraction and repulsion towards the abject. Anuradha rushes back to the hospital in order to check up on Bikram. It is associated with the fact that she has been conditioned as an ideal wife who must remain uncomplaining in the face of her husband's abuse. In the wake of this conditioning, she finds her actions unjustified. However, it may also reflect how she is drawn to the abject. This must, regardless, not take away from the fact that Anuradha does feel guilty about her actions- but only of having stabbed Bikram, not of guarding herself against him.

The series, therefore, directs our attention to those unwritten norms of a society that fail to safeguard its women against their own husbands' abuse which takes place "behind closed doors". The series questions and interrogates to reality an offence, otherwise publicly condemned, and explicitly excluded as a crime when it takes place within wedlock. The writers of the show have tried to level their strident criticism against a rape culture that defends itself. The series is reminiscent of the film *Provoked*, starring Aishwarya Rai, narrating a woman's plight who sets her abusive husband on fire and is later rescued from life imprisonment by social workers. Obviously, what distinguishes *Criminal Justice* is the fact that the focus here is on the individual's own struggle rather than on the efforts of a social organization.

Anuradha's credibility as a woman wronged is challenged continuously because Bikram's unimpeachable public image is incompatible with Anuradha's account of her husband's savage domestic self. The world finds it difficult to believe that the man, who voraciously defends the rights of the have-nots and the marginalized in courtrooms, can be guilty of the atrocities her wife describes. It is this image of Bikram that works in the prosecution's favour who, then goes on to slander Anuradha's image, especially concerning her relationship with her psychologist. The public prosecutor, a fundamentalist, sees Anuradha's actions not only as a crime against the legal system but also against the norms and values of his community. A devout follower of Hinduism, he has rigid notions of duty and righteousness, especially when it comes to women. With a barrelful of clichéd platitudes about wifely duties, he wants to make an example of Anuradha in the society by ensuring that she pays for her crime.

The final testimony, that Anuradha gives before the verdict, is particularly important because to be in a position to tell one's side of the story is to reclaim one's subjectivity and agency. This becomes Anuradha's chance to challenge Bikram's and, in turn, the patriarchy's narrative. Up until now, Bikram had been theorizing Anuradha's experiences for her but here, she

takes charge of her own story. The writers of the series have struck the perfect balance between ellipsis and explicit detail in Anuradha's testimony rendering her account realistic and believable. She voices years of oppression in this one speech. She expresses how he made her believe that she was ill: "He used to keep telling me I'm sick, that my condition is getting worse" ("Out in the Open" 27:25-27:33). She regrets having always complied with Bikram's controlling ways and recalls how much of her life was spent placating him; in making sure that she does not cause him unhappiness or dissatisfaction, even when in bed. Perhaps, what gives Anuradha the strength to assert her truth in public is Rhea, her daughter, admitting in the open court of her knowledge of Bikram's actions or at least a part of them. Anuradha's instincts had always prompted her towards guarding her children against potential harm, including protecting the image that Rhea had in her mind of her father. Initially, Rhea chose to hold on to her father's 'perfect' image, unconsciously shutting out anything that would call this image into question. But later on, not only does she testify to her father's crime (though inadvertently), she also reaches out to her mother during the trial, reaffirming Anuradha's belief in her worth as a mother.

Interestingly, Bikram had also managed to convince their daughter Rhea of the so-called mental ill-health of Anuradha. Throughout the series we repeatedly find Rhea telling the police officers, the volunteers at the CWC, the defence counsel and the judge that she, together with her father, would "help" Anuradha but with what, is never clearly specified and remains shady throughout the story. The tasks that Bikram had entrusted their daughter with involved spying on her mother's whereabouts, keeping a check on whom she met or called, and observing her actions throughout the day. Rhea accuses her mother of being forgetful and dependent. However, the testimonies given by the people who knew Anuradha before her marriage, such as her friend Mrs. Seth, are very different from the ones given by the people with whom Anuradha came into contact after her marriage. She is described by the former group as a "normal" person but the latter group refers to her as someone who always seems lost, living in a world of her own imaginings. While the term "normal" is in itself open to the most controversial debate which this paper would abstain from getting into, a marked distinction can be seen in how Anuradha is perceived by the two sets of people. Kristeva conceptualizes literature as a world "where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject" (Kristeva 207). The reticent, vulnerable and abject persona that we see before us is a product of the years of psychological and physical torment meted out to Anuradha by her husband. As the series progresses,

the heartrending revelations that Anuradha makes reveal how she perpetually denied of being in a violent and abusive relationship, and how it took her a good deal of effort to finally muster the courage to tell her story to the world. Nikhat Husain, Anuradha's defence counsel rightly says:

Your honour, the time has come for our society to understand abuse. It should understand that an abusive person is just like the rest of us. Just like us, he too has family and friends. He can also be a well-respected man in our society, just like Bikram Chandra, a very well-respected lawyer ("Out in the Open" 38:58-39:20).

Indeed, the tactics of domination employed by Bikram are so well-concealed that they are imperceptible even to the people living with him. The above cited dialogue also suggests that abusive men can easily maintain a pleasant demeanour outside of their homes, which precludes the possibility of other people ever knowing their alternate selves. The show is unsparing in its portrayal of society too, because it shows how the issues of psychological and physical abuse within the confines of a marriage seem to escape our society's narrow thinking even after it has been made to privy to it. One may be tempted to ask- Why? Why is it that society turns a blind eye towards perpetrators of marital rape or psychological abuse? The answer, though simple, is disconcerting—denial. Society refuses to even acknowledge the presence of such instances of violence and perhaps, it is this continued silence that contributes to the generation of such misconceptions as violence being limited to marginalized classes.

By placing the story in not only an urban area but in an upper-middle-class family, the writers jettison the prevalent myth that only backward classes and rural areas are rife with such social ills. In conclusion, a catenation of the collective memory of violence against women in the past, the current socio-cultural scenario, as well as the protagonist's own precarious mental condition contribute to the events of the narrative and make the show an exposition of issues that are often swept under the carpet. In a country where cinema and web shows glorify toxic masculinity and male entitlement, *Criminal Justice: Behind Closed Doors* is an eye-opener about the devastating psychological trauma that non-consensual physical relationships can cause.

Works Cited

- Bordo, Susan. "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity." *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, California UP, 1993, p. 162.
- Fitzpatrick, Lisa. "Signifying Rape" *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*, edited by Sorcha Gunne, Zoe Brigley Thompson, Routledge, 2010, p. 186.
- Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence*, Basic Books, 1998, p.33.
- Kardiner, A and H. Speigel. *War, Stress and Neurotic Illness*, Hoeber, 1947, p.186.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. p. 4-207.
- Levine, Peter A. *Trauma and Memory: Brain and Body in Search for the Living Past*, North Atlantic Press, 2015, p.7.
- Marcus, Sharon. "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention." *Columbia Academic Commons*, <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D85B0BS>. Accessed 5 August 2021.
- Sippy, Rohan and Arjun Mukherjee, directors. *Criminal Justice 2*. BBC Studios India and Applause Entertainment, 2020. *Hotstar*, www.hotstar.com/in/tv/criminal-justice-behind-closed-doors/1260049386.