

'I May Destroy You': Why media representations of sexual violence matter  
*Transforming Society* Magazine, June 2022 (as part of the Media Sigils)  
<https://www.transformingsociety.co.uk/2022/06/27/i-may-destroy-you-why-media-representations-of-sexual-violence-matter/>

### **'I May Destroy You': Why Media Representations of Sexual Violence Matter**

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In April, the Media Sigils held our first event: a panel discussion on Michaela Coel's riveting drama *'I May Destroy You'*. Part of the [Violence Against Women and Girls Research Network \(VAWGRN\)](#), we are a group of PhD students with a shared interest in media representation of violence against women.

*I May Destroy You*, as well as being a captivating piece of television, explores sexual consent, different forms of sexual violence, and the intersections between sexism, racism, homophobia and structural inequalities, providing a refreshing escape from generic rape narratives and stereotypical representations of Black trauma. The show has been deservedly [lauded](#) for its nuanced exploration of complex and deeply impactful events, and does so with humour and deep authenticity, as Michaela Coel explores [her own experiences of sexual assault](#) through the central character, Arabella. The issues tackled in *IMDY* also reflect the *raison d'être* of our special interest group: if media portrayals of sexual violence, gender inequalities, racial and homophobic discrimination contribute to the harmful myths and stereotypes which enable these social ills to flourish, can progressive and challenging messages be conducive to social change?

Traditionally, the media has been part of the problem, with an "intellectual distance" existing "between violence and the representation of violence" (Roxane Gay, 'The Careless Language of Sexual Violence, p.132). [Much has been written](#) on the damage caused by media stereotypes, especially in relation to public understanding of what counts as violence and who can be a victim or an abuser. Yet TV shows, film, and other cultural products also provide an important window to the world: in the words of academic Jenny Kitzinger, the media can enable people to speak out about abuse, to name and find meaning in their experiences, and is ["a catalyst for change at an intimate, private, as well as public, level"](#) (2001, p.100).

Media can help us to understand events that we have not experienced. It can interrogate notions and terms that are taken for granted within mainstream rhetoric and criminal justice systems, healthcare environments, political and policy discussions. Media can also lead to direct action: a domestic violence storyline on *The Archers* radio soap was partly responsible for [a huge increase in calls to Women's Aid](#). TV, film, and social media may be particularly meaningful for people from marginalised groups, especially young people, who do not see themselves represented within the mainstream messaging of racist, sexist, and homophobic societies. Media offers new opportunities, identities, and meanings, especially to women and girls: as the [Geena Davies Institute on Gender in Media](#) states, "if she can see it, she can be it".

As *I May Destroy You* so deftly reveals, sexual violence is messy and complex. What Arabella initially calls "the thing in my head" takes on shifting forms and meaning over time, from a frightening unknown to a beacon for solidarity with other survivors and a weapon of resistance against abusers. Arabella's journey shows us that trauma can be all-encompassing but can also provide fragments of hope, meaning, and humour, while justice can mean many things and be

simultaneously meaningless. While TV and film often depict rape as a limited, one-off event between two individuals – the victim and the villain – *IMDY* shows us the complexity of interpersonal dynamics around power, gender, and sexuality. It explores what academic Nicola Gavey calls the '[cultural scaffolding of rape](#)', the aspects of society which enable and normalise 'rape culture' by making male violence against women seem inevitable and ordinary: gender norms, patriarchal justice systems, and expectations of 'ideal' victims.

Throughout the series we follow Arabella, Kwame, and Terry as they navigate consent, relationships, identity, violation and healing, and their collective journey shows us how sexual violence operates freely in a world where prejudice and stereotypes infuse every level of social interaction. The show subtly exposes how these disparities run deeper than rape by confronting the realities of the phrase often used by bell hooks: "[the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy](#)" (hooks, 1994). It highlights the hypocrisies and systemic linkages of patriarchy, racism, capitalism, and colonialism with the characters' identities and the experiences that pervade multiple spheres of their lives, from [veganism](#) and climate justice to the [psychological burden of tokenistic representation](#) garbing 'diversity, equality and inclusion'.

The show sheds light on whose voices are prioritised when it comes to discussions about violence and the deep inequalities that run through criminal justice system responses: where Arabella experiences empathy and support from police officers following rape, Kwame is met with confusion, derision, and insensitive assumptions when he tries to report an assault. Arabella finds self-care and solidarity among other victim-survivors while Kwame is left without. This underscores the urgent need for [therapeutic jurisprudence](#) which looks at healing, wellbeing and justice as two sides of the same coin rather than either/or options for women and men.

As a show steadfastly about the realities of rape, *IMDY* depicts Arabella's struggles within the context of her demanding writing career and intricate personal relationships, while the spectre of sexual violence looms in every scene: life does not stop after rape and she has to incorporate it into her everyday reality, as is the case for many victim-survivors. The meta-narratives weave a tale that is deeper than fiction - are we seeing through the eyes of Arabella or Coel the writer? - culminating in cathartic alternative endings where Arabella/Coel confronts her rapist through bloody revenge, by giving him an empathic backstory and finally telling him to 'go' and take her trauma with him. *IMDY* perfectly illustrates the complexities of healing from trauma, the importance of seeing violence accurately represented *and* the crucial role of creativity, art and storytelling for those navigating their own journeys from violence.

These themes were explored in our panel discussion, which was a wonderfully interactive experience with attendees sharing their thoughts, interpretations, and emotional responses to the work. *IMDY* was an ideal springboard for interrogating complex and potentially distressing topics within a shared framework, using a common language to break down obtuse concepts like bodily autonomy, consent, and intersectionality. We are excited to plan future events which can be a platform for sharing and exploring alternative sources of meaning through media and encourage thoughtful reflection on some very challenging issues.