

Violence on Women, Violence by Women: A Study of Marvel's *Jessica Jones* as a Postfeminist Series

Nusrat Tajkia

Lecturer, Department of English and Humanities, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh
nusrat.tajkia@ulab.edu.bd | ORCID: 0000-0003-1285-4567

Abstract

Marvel's *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) subverts gender roles, portraying a significant number of women in power positions usually played by men. The show presents the protagonist Jessica as a rape survivor who is motivated to help another victim of sexual abuse. Jessica and other characters demonstrate how victims of violence, traumatized as they are, would be prone to committing further violence. Additionally, violent acts are presented as tools to avenge victims of violence. Consequently, this leads to three specific situations: women making choices for themselves, acting similar to men, and being more (hetero) sex-positive. These three criteria are indicative of postfeminist concerns and help to conduct a critical discourse analysis of *Jessica Jones*, with focus primarily on season one, as a postfeminist series.

Keywords: choice, postfeminism, rape, trauma, victim, violence

Marvel's *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) "is one of the first superheroine television shows since the 70s, debuted to rave reviews from critics and the public" (Frankel 183). This Netflix web series, based on a popular Marvel character, "has been heralded by many critics for going above and beyond genre tropes to tackle complex themes of rape and addiction" (Smith). Jessica Jones, the eponymous main character, tries her best to show that everything is normal; however, her insomnia and constant flashbacks underpin a traumatic past. This includes her surviving a car crash that kills her whole family and the villain Kilgrave taking control of Jessica's mind to make her his criminal accomplice. *Jessica Jones*, season one, is a focused and extremely detailed thirteen-episode character study of Jessica Jones (a shady private investigator) who is an unusual superhero, an alcoholic, and has questionable ethics (Lao et al. 49). Other than Jessica, there is a long list of troubled characters who are subjected to Kilgrave's will. The resultant acts of violence from these relationships are, therefore, critically explored in this paper in its reading of season one of Marvel's *Jessica Jones*. This show unequivocally promises to be feminist, subverting gender roles in a more sophisticated way (MacDonald 69). However, it also portrays a significant amount of violence on women and by women. In this study, this portrayal of violence makes a

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connection with the idea of equality and choice for women. Furthermore, the paper analyzes how violence guides the show to be a more (hetero)sex-positive series. Ultimately, it shows that *Jessica Jones* is a postfeminist web series where postfeminism can be “a critical lexicon for understanding contemporary culture” (Gill 10).

As a qualitative research, this paper employs critical discourse analysis and textual analysis for studying violence on women and by women in *Jessica Jones* through a postfeminist lens. Postfeminism, as defined by Sarah Banet-Weiser, is:

a different political dynamic than third wave feminism, which is positioned more overtly as a kind of feminist politics, one that extends the historical trajectory of first and second-wave feminism to better accommodate contemporary political culture and the logic of consumer citizens. (Tasker and Negra 206)

This paper contends that *Jessica Jones* is not just a feminist show as its showrunner Melissa Rosenberg has suggested, but rather a postfeminist show as it assimilates some “aspects of feminism ... into popular culture” (Tasker and Negra 4). Theoretical work from second wave feminism has mostly stemmed from Women’s Liberation which is no longer simpatico with the re-articulations of popular femininity (Genz and Brabon 45). One of the objectives of second wave feminism was to prevent rape (Gunne and Thompson 3). The current social and ideological climate indicates “a culture that normalizes rape” hence the need for another scholarly tradition (Pearson 14). Again, despite “empowerment and agency,” both being concerns of feminism and postfeminism, the former is coming up short in today’s rapid consumer culture, falling victim to commodification, and to understand the rapidly changing world’s intersections of feminism and popular culture, emergence of postfeminism is needed (Genz and Brabon 24-25). Consequently, this paper seeks a new framework like postfeminism to understand a pop-cultural artifact such as *Jessica Jones* where multiple characteristics (e.g., empowerment roles usually allocated to men, focus on white women’s identity) of a postfeminist text are exhibited.

To understand postfeminism, the classification described in Sarah Projansky’s *Watching Rape Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* has been used, which underscores a “structure for understanding the complexity of postfeminist discourses in the popular media” (Projansky 68). Projansky sorted postfeminist discourse into five interrelated categories: linear postfeminism, backlash postfeminism, equality and choice postfeminism, (hetero)sex-positive postfeminism, and “men as feminist” postfeminism (67-68). This paper employs choice and equality postfeminism, and (hetero)sex-positive postfeminism for

its analysis. Choice and equality postfeminism imply that there is no difference between man and woman, therefore women do not need feminism for the establishment of equality. And (hetero)sex-positive postfeminism “rejects an antisex” feminist ideology and focuses on a type of concept that champions “individuality and independence” (Projansky 67).

The postfeminist discourse in this research manifests through the instances of violence in *Jessica Jones*. According to Averdijk et al., “Victims of violence are likely to commit violent acts themselves” which is visible in the victims from the show (282). Equality and choice postfeminism as well as (hetero)sex-positive postfeminism have been used to prove *Jessica Jones* is a postfeminist text. The notion of equality and choice postfeminism refers to the fact that women cannot do anything about the patriarchal values or systems, so they accept the patriarchal ideologies and freely “choose” whatever role they want to play to attain gender equality. In *Jessica Jones*, the female characters make choices in accordance with their preferences that usually align with the patriarchal ethos. Again, with (hetero)sex-positive postfeminism “the sexual freedom of women is celebrated” (Warner 233). This paper argues that the titular character and women in power positions in *Jessica Jones* attain sexual freedom by behaving more like men. Justyna Włodarczyk argues that the biggest problem of postfeminism is that it has multiple meanings emphasizing on actions that reveal its flaws by neglecting class, color, and identity (3). In essence, postfeminism comes across as a retaliation against the achievements of feminism. Another serious concern is the depiction of “white, middle-class, heterosexual women’s success as markers of all women’s supposed success” (Projansky 73). Another drawback is that it positions itself as moving beyond feminism which stems from the belief that women are secure or empowered enough to not need feminist politics or supporting activism with the presumption that “women are empowered and able to freely choose” (White 8).

According to Krysten Ritter, the actor who plays Jessica Jones, it is “a very intimate story, a character-driven drama” (Miller). This series is “an extraordinary meditation on violence perpetuated by men against women, whether that is rape, stalking, harassment or abuse” (Saraiya). This paper examines characters like Jessica Jones, Patricia Walker (Trish/Patsy), Jeri Hogarth, Wendy Ross-Hogarth, Pamela (Pam), Luke Cage, Will Simpson, and Kilgrave to understand the violence inflicted on and by women. From a victim, Jessica becomes a savior. Sexual violence motivates this change in her. This portrayal of change is important because it allows the audience to see a clear connection between Jessica’s experience and the experiences of nonfictional victims. Thus, Lisa M. Cuklanz suggests that fictional depictions of sexual violence can lead to real

reform in laws regarding sex-related crimes (2). This is why critically reading shows like *Jessica Jones* can be particularly illuminating.

Television and film have a tendency to promote strong women with masculine traits, and the representation of violence is a commonplace phenomenon for both social and entertainment media. Therefore, evading representation of violence in a superhero genre would be next to impossible. Violence in such shows is usually limited to physical form but it can take an emotional turn as well. Potter defined violence as “a violation of a character’s physical or emotional well-being. It includes two key elements – intentionality and harm – at least one of which must be present” (80). Physical and psychological actions that are intended to cause harm are considered to be violence. It can include verbal threats, nonverbal behaviors, etc. (Signorielli 57). This research treats violence on women or by women as a physical or emotional action deliberately inflicted on others to cause harm.

In *Jessica Jones*, sexual violence is the core theme of the show. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), sexual violence is “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion” (qtd. in Ali and Rogers 614). Liz Kelly defines sexual violence as an unwanted act experienced by a woman that tampers with her ability to control intimate acts or contact (Walby et al. 92). The problem with this definition is that it restricts or imposes the victim tag only on women. While women are the usual victims, it is not always the case “so it is inappropriate to build this restriction to women and girls in to a definition of sexual violence” (Walby et al. 92). This paper uses the WHO definition of sexual violence while keeping in mind that men too can be victims of such crimes.

The word “trauma” refers to “a wound or external bodily injury in general” (qtd. in Luckhurst 498). However, psychological trauma has a tendency to disrupt the mental balance of a person and overwhelms them to a degree where assimilation through a mental process becomes daunting (Luckhurst 499). The current research focuses on the effects of trauma that causes unprecedented changes in Jessica and other characters’ psyches.

The exploration of rape culture is another key feature of *Jessica Jones*. Healicon argues that giving the definition of rape “is both complicated and unequivocal” (4). She gives a fundamental definition nonetheless: rape is “non-consensual penile penetration of the vagina, mouth, or anus,” and, furthermore, it is the lack of “the freedom and capacity to choose to have sex” (Healicon 4). This definition has been considered throughout the paper. Here the victim is unable

to make a choice because there could be the presence or threat of violence, use of drugs, physical disability, and incapacity to consent. Horeck asks about the ethics of the audience's reception of the representation of rape as she points out whether we are "bearing witness to a terrible crime or are we participating in a shameful voyeuristic activity?" (Gunne and Thompson 3). As previously mentioned, rape as a subject matter can shed light on the correlation between TV programs and social reformation.

Most of the critical works related to *Jessica Jones* accentuate sexual violence, trauma, or the show's connection with feminist ideology. The following section reviews and underpins how and why sexual or other forms of violence has been used in *Jessica Jones* – making it a postfeminist show. Jessica, the protagonist, a rape survivor trying to cope with the associated trauma, is abducted by the villain, Kilgrave, at a very young and impressionable age, and that experience especially leaves her vulnerable. Kilgrave can compel people into doing whatever he wants. The story begins with Jessica who, as a private investigator, meets a couple from Omaha, looking for their daughter, Hope Shlottman. Hope is being controlled in the same way that Jessica had been by Kilgrave and, as a result, kills her parents and is later sent to jail. Jessica sees her personal trauma reflected in Hope. She seeks justice for Hope but this rapidly transforms into a journey for revenge (Lao et al. 76). Jessica assumes responsibility for Hope because both of them have experienced sexual violence (Healicon 63). Hope's death has a devastating effect on Jessica and, initially, exonerating Hope becomes the reason for Jessica to go after Kilgrave so that he is punished by the judicial system (Frankel 188). Jessica tries to regain whatever she can of Hope's reputation. If she can salvage parts of Hope's life, then her own life can be somewhat salvaged as well.

According to Grace Randolph, in *Jessica Jones* "the fight scenes [are] not only brutal, they have a lot of physicality to them ... but they were all very clever" (00:10:41-48). In particular, there are two major instances of violence in *Jessica Jones* that are inflicted on women. These forms of violence are rape and murder attempts. We see flashbacks where Kilgrave says to Jessica, "[y]ou want to do it. You know you do" ("AKA Ladies Night" 00:09:33-36). Here the flashbacks are disorienting, which shows the lack of control on Jessica's part and her attempt at trying to forget the untold horrors. Then she recites, "Main Street. Birch Street. Higgins Drive. Cobalt Lane" ("AKA Ladies Night" 00:09:40-54). The repetition allows her to remember a happier, normal past. Kilgrave is not willing to take genuine consent from others and he does not understand that he has committed rape, which is evident in the following conversation between Jones and Kilgrave:

Kilgrave: ... Which part of staying in five-star hotels, eating in all the

best places, doing whatever the hell you wanted, is rape?

Jessica: The part where I didn't want to do any of it! Not only did you physically rape me, but you violated every cell in my body and every thought in my goddamn head.

...

Kilgrave: How am I supposed to know? Huh? I never know if someone is doing what they want or what I tell them to! ("AKA WWJD" 00:28:54-00:29:23)

Here, Kilgrave is playing the victim card, and is incapable of seeing himself as an abuser. According to Edwards, the mundaneness of the "control he exercises over Jones, over nearly every woman who crosses his path, is what makes him so evil, even more menacing than the typical villain" (qtd. in Frankel 184). In episode 6, "AKA You're a Winner!" Hope tells Jessica about her child: "I can feel it growing like a tumor ... Every second it's there, I get raped again and again" (00:11:52-00:12:24). In the show, Jessica and Hope are victims of mind control and rape where they lost control over their agency. Kilgrave, according to Edwards, "is every woman's worst nightmare" (qtd. in Frankel 184). His crimes include but are not limited to rape, murder, and stalking. According to David Tennant (who plays Kilgrave):

[There is] a grotesque innocence beneath Kilgrave's sadism, a distorted belief that this is true romance. It's the ultimate in entitlement: he deserves Jessica because he desires her, which means that her own desires are just obstacles. (qtd. in Murthi)

In addition, Kilgrave, Will Simpson (a police officer and Captain America-like hero character who lacks Captain America's resolve and moral values), and Luke Cage (Jessica's love interest) attempt to murder Jessica. Kilgrave willingly wants to kill whereas Simpson and Luke want to do so under Kilgrave's influence. Kilgrave clearly wants to kill Jessica as he cannot control her. He proclaims, "[m]ay be I'll get strong enough to control her again Or maybe I'll just kill her" ("AKA Smile," 00:16:52-00:17:34).

Furthermore, Officer Simpson, a genuine representation of toxic masculinity, attempts to kill Jessica in "AKA Take a Bloody Number" (00:35:12-00:39:05). He believes Jessica is letting Kilgrave live and strongly believes she had many opportunities to kill Kilgrave but she did not take them. Simpson believes he is on the right side, which is particularly problematic as it did not just stem from Kilgrave's mind control. Simpson takes a red pill that makes him strong like Jessica. The "red pill" is an "obvious reference to 'red-pillers' men's rights activists

who see themselves as proud anti-feminists interested in dominance, traditional gender roles, and the subjugation of women” (Loofbourow). It is also an homage to *The Matrix* (1999), a sci-fi film where the hero chooses to take a red pill as that is the only way to the truth.

Luke Cage is a supportive boyfriend who, unlike Simpson, does not feel the need to show off his masculine prowess. At one point in the series, he tries to kill Jessica under Kilgrave's influence (“AKA Take a Bloody Number” 00:45:25-00:51:23). This exemplifies how two unlikely victims of violence who have the means to protect themselves are utterly helpless. The scene ends with Jessica successfully defending herself by shooting Luke, where he is only badly injured.

In *Jessica Jones*, Kilgrave is the core reason women become inflictors of violence, which is manifested through murder, abortion, and suicide. Kilgrave's control on Jessica and others forces them to enforce physical violence to protect themselves. All these violent behaviors exhibit certain choices the characters make to allow them to behave more like cis-gender men – which demonstrates equality and choice postfeminism. Again, their choice and behavior also lead to a promotion of (hetero)sex positive postfeminism.

The gendered subversions in *Jessica Jones* are meant to present equality or choice, yet they are allocated only to white women. This is not unusual as representation of “liberated women” in popular culture is meant to be “a compromise between the demands of feminists and the resistance of antifeminists” (qtd. in Brown 145). For Rikke Schubart, “in *equality and choice postfeminism* everything becomes a choice by a free individual” (16). The women of their own volition are choosing to be violent.

Jessica has to kill Kilgrave and commit the ultimate form of violence as he is responsible for a lot of the deaths in the show. At the beginning, Jessica wanted to catch Kilgrave, not kill him, so that “he can take responsibility for his crime” (Frankel 188). Hope, the victim, however, is the one who lands up in jail, not the perpetrator. This is indicative of the treatment victims have to face in a social structure where male authority is prevalent (Toadvine 46). It is also a brilliant nod to the incompetency of the justice system that forces Jessica to take matters into her own hands. Hope ends up in jail for shooting her parents under Kilgrave's influence. This act of murder, followed by Hope telling Jessica to “smile,” is meant to be a message for the latter. Throughout the series Kilgrave repeatedly insisting Jessica to smile is an act of control that “conforms to gendered coding” and a “sacrifice of agency” (Lao et al. 207). Kilgrave believes Jessica is incapable of harming or killing him. This is clear in his statement to Hope:

She'll never kill me. Despite her calloused, hard-bitten, and, frankly,

poorly styled facade, despite her several problems, she still hopes that, at her core, she might just be a hero. But only if she can save you. The ultimate innocent victim. (“AKA 1,000 Cuts” 00:42:26-57)

At the end, before killing Kilgrave, Jessica tells him to “smile” as an act of taking back control. Again, she takes control by using drugs (sufentanil) to make Kilgrave’s power ineffective. By telling Kilgrave to “smile” and using a drug for control, Jessica Jones is replicating what sex offenders usually do in cinema or real life. The series in this case is in a controversial state, where behaving like her abuser becomes Jessica’s only way out. She “transcends the tradition of narrating women’s experiences of sexual violence” and, at the end, is able to confront and overcome her abuser by killing him (Lao et al. 168-169). Specifically, by becoming similar to Kilgrave, Jessica finds salvation.

Hope, the ultimate victim, after becoming pregnant with Kilgrave’s child, hires an inmate while she is at prison to beat her up so that she loses the baby. However, “[o]ne beating was more likely to kill [her] than cause a miscarriage” (“AKA You’re a Winner!” 00:12:29-32). In summation, Hope has the choice to live, yet she is risking death for an abortion and she does not want a reminder of the violation that had been inflicted on her. This choice reflects her agency that she holds on to through violence.

Again, in episode 11 “AKA I’ve Got the Blues,” a fight breaks out between Officer Simpson and Jessica where Trish Walker (Jessica’s best friend and adoptive sister) chooses to take Simpson’s “red pill” resulting in Trish’s saving Jessica (00:35:00-00:40:00). Trish, in matching Simpson’s violent strength which almost kills her, is deliberately choosing a hyper-masculine trait – of becoming violent – for survival and avoidance of victimhood (Lao et al. 105).

Jessica portrays the subversion of “archetypal Hollywood scenes by flipping gender roles” (Abad-Santos 12). In the series, Jessica is not just stronger than the men, she is equally, if not more, brutal. In “AKA Crush Syndrome,” the bar fight scene where she hurls a man twice her size across a bar with one hand (00:35:20-00:36:23) establishes the idea that female-led superhero dramas work just like male-led ones. In *Jessica Jones*, female agency is seen, yet Jessica or the other characters committing violence or establishing assertive sexual choices is reminiscent of the familiar male characters. It can, thus, be seen as a reclamation or reestablishment of a type of role usually allocated for male superheroes.

Jessica attempts to find some form of normalcy when she engages in a relationship with Luke but she ends up behaving like a stalker while investigating him. Jessica engages in casual forms of sex and behavior that might not attract a romantic partner (Toadvine 43). As a result of this relationship, Kilgrave is able to command

Luke to kill Jessica whose autonomy over her sexual partner selection also leads to violence. Again, there is Jeri Hogarth, an attorney, who, in the original comic, was a man. Despite the gender swap, the archetypal powerful male character who cheats on his wife with their younger and good-looking secretary is reaffirmed. In the episode titled “AKA 1,000 Cuts,” there is a fight scene between Jeri and her ex-wife Wendy Ross-Hogarth. Grace Randolph calls it an “emotional and powerful fight scene” (00:09:05-09). Kilgrave fulfills Wendy’s wish of avenging Jeri’s betrayal (having an affair and divorcing her because of it). He encourages Wendy: “You want death by a thousand cuts. Do it!” Wendy immediately cuts Hogarth with a scalpel and counts (“AKA 1,000 Cuts,” 00:10:44-52). The count escalates to “twenty-nine” when Pam (Jeri’s affair partner and hyper-feminine secretary) enters and hits Wendy with a vase (“AKA 1,000 Cuts” 00:15:22-23). Subsequently, Wendy bleeds to death. Pam here is forced to commit a violent act as she tries to protect Jeri, the love of her life.

Jeri’s promiscuous behavior leads to divorce, which leads to her being cut by her wife, Wendy. Jessica’s sexual relationship with Luke leads to her almost getting killed by him. The characters have sexual autonomy yet it always leads to violence. Women are in control when their choice is exercised, but in most cases Kilgrave is the catalyst for that incitement of violence. Therefore the autonomy of choice becomes questionable as women are inciting violence for themselves and other women, yet their reasoning for violence can be traced back to a man. Women are seen as forces with agency when their action is masculine in nature. The characters’ questionable choices is what makes *Jessica Jones* a postfeminist show where strong independent female characters become strong when they behave like men. Ultimately it becomes a postfeminist show where female agency or self-expression of individuals is turning into fodder for entertainment. Postfeminism finds a way to make women the product of consumerism by exploiting the idea of individual self-expressions (Nguyen 164). Jessica is capable of inspiring all and becoming a hero for all, yet the focus on season one stays on white women making empowering choices, where men are forcing them into making those choices – ultimately leading to some form of violence.

The show’s female characters are subjected to rape, sexual violence, attempted murder, and additional physical trauma that push them to choose violence, which is manifested through physical harm, murder, abortion, and suicide. A traumatized Jessica inflicts pain as well as kills others. Hope chooses a violent abortion. She also chooses a violent form of death: suicide by stabbing herself with a piece of glass. Pam chooses to kill, for Jeri. Trish chooses the violence-inducing pill to save Jessica. Acts of violence motivate the characters to make a choice to act on behalf of other women as well and not just for themselves.

With the use of violence, the women become more like men, reflecting the notions of equality postfeminism, which also has the tendency to lead towards a more (hetero)sex-positive representation. By locating both violence committed on women and by women, Marvel's *Jessica Jones* (season one) proves to be an example of a postfeminist text as the idea of choice, equality, and sex-positive discourse become prevalent in the show through the portrayal of such violence where it has been argued that this very violence molds the female characters of *Jessica Jones*.

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