A Case Study of Nuances of Victimology in Coben's *Fool Me Once:* Novel and Adaptation

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ABSTRACT: *This research aims to extrapolate tangents of the process that ascribe meaning to the noun victim and how it transmutes into a verb, understanding victimology as a term through the story of Maya in Harlan Coben's novel and its television adaptation by employing qualitative analysis as research methodology. It seeks to delineate identity alteration caused by trauma, to discern gender as a parameter in victimization and coping and to trace secondary victimization across minor characters. This study reveals that Coben's narrative has portrayed the metamorphic cycle of trauma, reflecting its evolution from victimhood into moral insurgency. It is a multidisciplinary initiative in understanding the literariness of modern television adaptations. Deeper nuances of psychological turmoil come to light as the characters of the said corpus build themselves around a typically piquant Coben plot: rich in turbulence, existential dread and a class struggle, Fool Me Once (2016; 2024) is a textured tale of psychic morbidity and its resultant criminal deviance whose merit lies in aligning literary analysis with applied social insight, revealing how crime fiction echoes real world dynamics of victimization.*

Keywords: victimology, psychological turmoil, criminal deviance, class struggle, existential dread

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Introduction:

Victimology, the intricate exploration of the victims and the psychological turmoil of their experiences, dives into a realm rich with unspoken stories and hidden narratives. A well-rounded definition of victimology is stated by the respected researcher Leah H. Diagle to illuminate the diverse pathways in the field. In his own words,

Victimology is the study of the etiology (or causes) of victimization, its consequences, how the criminal justice system accommodates and assists victims, and how other elements of society, such as the media, deal with the crime victims. (Diagle 04)

The intersectionality of victims' experiences accounts for one of the most creative and fascinating facets of victimology where the synergy of race, gender and socioeconomic status offers diverse pathways for the investigation of trauma and recovery. The gripping narrative of *Fool Me Once* (2016; 2024) features the protagonist, Maya Stern Burkett, reeling from the brutal killings of her sister and husband. Maya's traumatic past collides with her intricate present and a shocking nanny cam discovery sparks a relentless pursuit of truth. This quest entangles her in a complicated web of deceit, violence and corruption, unearthing sinister secrets about her husband, the influential Burkett family – her in-laws – and their ruthless tactics to protect their reputation. The story builds to a thrilling climax culminating in a heart-wrenching sacrifice, leaving an indelible mark on posterity. Thus, Coben's *Fool Me Once* (2016; 2024) is a poignant exploration of human condition, trauma, memory and identity. In this research paper, I explore the theoretical nuances of victimology through Coben's work and its tv adaptation.

The victim-centered approach in *Fool Me Once* (2016; 2024) profoundly resonates with me, emphasizing the significance of amplifying victims' voices and experiences. My interest is piqued by the novel's and the television series' nuanced exploration of societal power dynamics and their role in perpetuating victimization. Maya's journey sparks interest in examining the complex interplay between trauma, resilience and victim empowerment, underscoring the need for resistance and asserting the strength and agency of victims. This study is going to examine the primary text and its screen adaptation, undertaking both literary and visual mediums for research and this qualitative analysis aims to explore victimology in depth, informed by insights from *Fool Me Once* (2016; 2024) according to the researcher's understanding of the data.

Victimization of Maya Burkett-the Protagonist:

Varied aspects of victimology deeply resonate with *Fool Me Once* (2016; 2024). From the very onset of the plot, the character of Maya as a victim is clearly situated with particular emphasis on the profound psychological impacts of her trauma and the techniques and methods she employs to mitigate her victimization. The inaugural episode of *Fool Me Once* (2024) features a poignant scene, capturing the haunting flashbacks experienced by Maya as the repercussions of her traumatic ordeal. Coben offers a vivid description of these flashbacks in the novel as, "The sounds – the gunfire, the whir of helicopter rotors, the screams of agony – rushed her all at once. She shut her eyes" (Coben 22). These visual episodes hint at the post-traumatic mental agony of Maya. Coben hence builds a deeply enmeshed idea in the reader's and the viewer's minds where trauma lingers as a strong theme from the very advent.

Furthermore, the coping mechanisms employed by the protagonist, to live through mental turmoil, are largely characterized by the deployment of avoidance and dissociation strategies as is usually practiced, unbeknownst, by many sufferers of mental agony and confusion. These adaptive mechanisms of Maya act as psychological defensive shield, enabling her to momentarily elude the mental anguish of her ordeal. She acts upon the principle, "Go numb. Don't focus on anything. Let all sounds and sights blur to the point of being unrecognizable" (Coben 09). This emotional stagnation of Maya, as a result of passive coping mechanisms, can potentially lead to the violent behavior, making her a victim as guilty as offender according to the classification of victims by Mendelsohn.

Moving further, the multifarious aspects of Maya's victimization can be interpreted through the events portrayed in the very first episode of the series, secondary victimization being the pivotal among them. Maya's emotional trauma and distress is aggravated by detective Kierce's vague and seemingly accusatory questions directed at her. In the same vein, Judith Burkett's constant suggestions about the need for professional help for Maya and questioning her sanity undermine her mental stability, worsening Maya's existent turmoil. It is important to note that Maya is trying to cope with her sister and husband's untimely deaths. The most distressing act of secondary victimization is perpetuated by Eddie, the dead sister Claire's husband. By indirectly blaming Maya for his wife's death and asking her to leave his family alone, he not only intensifies Maya's agony but also contributes to a sense of guilt though Eddie himself is also battling with a similar confusion and pain leading to depression and a drinking problem. Maya is forever haunted by Eddie's words, "Death follows you, Maya" (37). These words, though just a general understanding of a person battling pain himself, induce a self-blaming attitude in Maya, which

drives her to assume the onus of amending every situation and safeguarding her loved ones.

Secondary Victims:

Pertaining to the effects of victimization, secondary victimization cannot be overlooked. This notion is best delineated by the honored researchers Gekoksi, Adler and Gray as,

Secondary victimization occurs when victims of crimes feel they have been subjected to inadequate, insensitive or inappropriate treatment, attitudes behaviour, responses and/or practices by criminal justice and social agencies, which compound their original trauma. (Gekoski, Adler and Gray 307)

Put another way, the secondary victimization exacerbates the emotional or psychological distress of the victims caused by insensitive societal attitudes. A plethora of casualties punctuates Coben's narrative, yielding a myriad of bereaved secondary victims. One crucial instance is the character of Eddie, Claire's husband, whose fragile personality renders him vulnerable to the traumatic aftermaths of his wife's death. As evident in Claire's words, "If something happens to just me, Eddie won't be able to cope" (39). His emotional susceptibility leaves him struggling with grief, resulting in him resorting to maladaptive coping mechanism, for momentary relief. This illustrates a common gender dynamic, where men often turn to substance abuse as coping strategy while women tend to develop post-traumatic anxiety. *Fool Me Once* (2016; 2024) exemplifies this contrast through Eddie's alcohol abuse and Maya's internalized anxiety, highlighting the complexities of victimhood and varied coping mechanisms.

Besides Eddie, several other characters also fulfil the conventions of secondary victimhood. One such figure is Caroline Burkett, the husband Joe's sister. Her recurring victimization – having lost two brothers Joe and Andrew, coupled with the unsettled grief caused by the lack of closure, renders her vulnerable to denial and magical thinking. Her need for closure manifests itself in vivid dreams and strange visions as she confesses, "I have visions, Maya. I have these dreams where Andrew never died" (117). This delusional state of mind underscores the idea that secondary victimization can be precipitated by the lack of closure. Caroline never actually saw the dead bodies of both of her brothers which lead to her fantastical thinking. She explicitly mentions, "The loved ones at home… They need the body. They need that closure" (116). This exemplifies the profound complexity and depth of victimhood.

Impacts of Victimization:

Victimology, being a comprehensive theoretical framework, seeks to understand the complicated dynamics of victimization by investigating not only the intricate causes but also the profound consequences of criminal acts upon the individuals. Esteemed researchers Shoham, Knepper and Kett talk about the repercussions of criminal acts upon individuals in the following words,

Victims can continue to experience the effects of victimization long after the event, and those effects can reach into the lives of many more people than just the primary victims; the ripple effect of crime travels across time, across place and through kin and friendship ties. (Shoham, Knepper and Kett 03)

Coben's nuanced narrative also reflects multi-dimensional impacts of victimization including physical, emotional and psychological ones. The protagonist, Maya Stern Burkett, serves as the primary conduit for the profound exploration of this notion. In spite of her physiognomy, it is her psyche which bears the scars of victimization. The horrible flashbacks and the terrible nightmares offer a glimpse into the deep recesses of her subconscious. These flashbacks trigger an episode of dissociation or depersonalization in Maya as is delineated in the text, "Maya wasn't in her bed. She wasn't back there either. She was this in-between world, suspended, lost" (Coben 157). The feeling of detachment keeps Maya rooted in her pain and trauma, restricting her from moving forward and embracing little happiness which destiny offers her, thus accounting for the psychological repercussions of her victimization.

Another personality change of Maya which can be attributed to her victimhood is her being over protective of her loved ones and being hyper vigilant about it even to the point of being paranoid. It is her paranoia for the safety of her daughter, Lily, which compels her to seek professional help regarding her mental issues and PTSD. It becomes the sole reason whys she accepts the help of Dr. Wu, her former therapist, who points out that, "You're not trying to make yourself better. You're trying to protect your child" (179). This accounts for the typical victim behavior where they prioritize the safety and security of the others over their own, embodying a noble altruism.

Victim's post-traumatic paranoia unfolds in several other ways, one of them is increased skepticism. A profound erosion of the trust is fostered by the trauma and grief experienced by the victims, making them mistrustful of others. Maya's case is analogous. This is highlighted by Eileen as, "You trust no one, Maya" (15). This attitude always keeps Maya on her toes, ready to defend herself and her dear ones. Moreover, the terrorizing incident happened during her military service in which she reluctantly chose to prioritize the lives of her

comrades over innocent civilians due to a dire sense of urgency forever altered the topography of her emotional landscape. As stated in the text,

After you serve in some hell hole, you just see things differently … No one sees what you're seeing … It's like one of those movies where only the hero can see the ghosts and everyone else thinks the hero is crazy. (Coben 149)

This post-traumatic emotional turmoil precipitates a cycle of psychological estrangement, underscoring devastating repercussions of victimization.

Multi-dimensional Victimization of Andrew Burkett:

The plot proceeds to reveal another victim, namely Andrew Burkett, Joe's younger brother. His initial portrayal as a trauma victim parallels him with Maya. They both find themselves ensnared in the enduring grip of a past mistake, forced to experience its haunting repercussions. This is what trauma does. This fact is illustrated by the author as, "You can't bury the past … trauma ripples and echoes and somehow stays alive" (244). It is exemplified in the case of Andrew Burkett. This evidence strengthens the notion of Andrew being a trauma victim.

What makes the narrative more thrilling and fascinating is the constantly altering trajectory of Andrew's victimization. Over time, the narrative unfolds and guilt rather than sorrow surfaces to be the root of his trauma, fitting him in Mendelsohn's category of "victim with minor guilt" (Mendelsohn, Victimology and Contemporary Society's trends). The text signals it out as, "It wasn't grief. It was guilt" (266). The guilt of not saving the life of his best friend, Theo Mora, was eating Andrew alive.

The most horrible and surprising revelation about Andrew's victimization is also made by Christopher Swain during his meeting with Maya Burkett. "Joe killed his own brother" (Brocklehurst, Coben and Oyefuwa, *Fool Me Once*). This startling disclosure specifies the ultimate nature of Andrew's victimization who fell victim to murder at the hands of none other than his own brother, making his demise even more tragic. There is thus a deeply connected and flimsy line of connectivity between all these characters who are victims of trauma, past violence and several inner conflicts.

Screen Adaptation of *Fool Me Once* (2016):

The Netflix adaptation of the primary text, namely *Fool Me Once* (2024), demonstrates a phenomenal fidelity to the source material which is the text of the novel written by Harlan Coben. However, in order to imbue the narrative with a profound dimensionality and to enrich the plot with nuanced character

development, the series boldly diverges in a notable manner through innovative addition of a subplot revolving around the original character of detective Roger Kierce, renaming him as Sami Kierce. He is portrayed as the "innocent victim" (Mendelsohn, Victimology and Contemporary Society's trends), keeping in view Mendelsohn's classification of victims. Sami became the recipient of the secondary trauma caused by the unfortunate and tragic demise of his fiancée Nicole Butler.

A striking analogy can be discerned between two major male victims of the story, Eddie Walker and Sami Kierce, considering the fact that they both grapple with fragile personas and share the inability to surmount the overwhelming sorrow stemming from the unfortunate loss of their intimate partners. Another compelling similarity between these two figures is the coping mechanism employed by them which is substance abuse in the form of abnormal alcohol consumption. At multiple points in the series, explicit indications are offered by other characters about Sami's post-traumatic drinking. The earliest indication in this regard is provided by Pam Proctor, the commanding officer at the police station, in the scene where she enlightens Marty about the past trauma and alcohol abuse of Sami as, "After his first fiancée was murdered … He never got over it, and that's when he started drinking" (Brocklehurst, Coben and Oyefuwa). Episode six features an overt confession by Sami himself. Per his own words, "My name is Sami and I'm an alcoholic" (Brocklehurst, Coben and Oyefuwa). This dialogue of Sami Kierce shows that he himself is fully aware of his dilemma.

A major actor which makes his situation singular, and in many ways better than the other, is that his trauma acts as a positive catalyst for him. It is his very trauma of losing a beloved which spurs him to seek redemption through professional intervention, aimed at ensuring that his dear ones, Molly and his unborn child, do not get inflicted with similar distress. Per his own words, "The thing I'm most scared of is dying. Not dying, but dying on someone, leaving them with all the shit that goes with losing someone you love" (Brocklehurst, Coben and Oyefuwa, *Fool Me Once*). This clearly explains why he breaks down when he comes to know about his health predicament and tries to distance himself from Molly by calling off their wedding.

Parallel to Andrew, Sami's victimization is also multi-dimensional because he is not only a victim of trauma but also a victim of fraud and corruption related crimes committed by the Burkett's Global Enterprises. Throughout the course of the series, his psyche is wrecked by the relentless torment, perpetuated by the unnerving episodes of black out and amnesia. The specter of a potentially life-threatening malady drives him to the brink of despair, culminating in a desperate suicidal gesture. However, in a dramatic reversal, the real culprit is

revealed to be the very medication itself, that had purported to soothe his distress. Kierce tells Maya that,

I thought I was dying. I was blacking out. But it was their medication. The Burkett medication. Black outs, hallucinations (Brocklehurst, Coben and Oyefuwa, *Fool Me Once*).

This victimization experience of Kierce again acts out in a positive manner because it urges him to help Maya in exposing the dark secrets and evil doings of the Burkett family as this is the only way he will be avenged.

Victim Offender Overlap:

While considering the factor of revenge, another complex and rather fascinating facet of victimology, namely "Victim-Offender Overlap" (Berg and Felson 31), emerges wherein the intricacies of revenge are juxtaposed with the blurred boundaries between victimhood and perpetration. Esteemed professor and researcher Horst Entorf shares his stance on this concept as follows, "Offenders are more likely than non-offenders to be victims, and victims are more likely than non-victims to be offenders." (Entorf 02*) Fool Me Once* (2016; 2024) can be fruitfully examined through the prism of victim-offender overlap. Within the narrative of both novel and the drama series, two major characters namely Maya Stern Burkett and Joe Burkett, epitomize the intricate dynamics of victim-offender overlap.

To begin with, the evaluation of Maya's character in the light of this viewpoint can be done. From the very beginning of the storyline, a profound and bewildering complicacy pervades Maya's character. She defies the archetype of a docile, subjugated and oppressed victim. Maya's defiance manifests as a latent propensity for violence in her character, demonstrated by her conviction that violence can perpetually serve as a solution. As elucidated in the prose, "If you carry a weapon … It is always, for better and worse, an option" (100). This inclination can be perceived as a byproduct of her exposure to combat during wartime. Her military service has induced a strange dichotomy in her personality. She wants to distance herself from war and danger but at the same time, she has developed a kind of addiction to danger. It is explicitly clarified in the words of Maya herself as, "The unspoken truth was a part of you jonesed for the danger. You didn't like what it said about you. Liking it means you are prenatally violent or lack empathy … But there was an addictive element to fear" (Coben 29). This is a clear indication of discernable streak of insurgence in Maya's character.

Maya's underlying tendency for violence climaxes in her assuming the role of perpetrator, epitomized by her act of murdering Joe in retribution for her sister

Claire's death. This momentous revelation is hailed as both the novel and the adaptation's most significant plot twist, laying bare a series of long-concealed horrible secrets of the Burkett family. She remains resolute in her lack of remorse which is palpable in her dual-status confession she makes in front of Shane, "I killed him", Maya said. "I killed Joe" (284). This confession solidifies her status of an offender. A captivating revelation that makes the ending of the narrative more exhilarating is that Maya was not a novice offender before the moment she chose to end Joe's life. Maya's confession about the terrorizing military incident of her past that she intentionally killed those civilians during the combat, alters the arc of her victimization, making her a victim of moral injury rather than a victim of guilt-related trauma as she was previously designated. Maya says, "You think I have these horrible flashbacks because I feel guilty about those dead civilians. It's just the opposite. I have them because I don't feel guilty". (Coben 283) This striking discovery not only establishes a past record of offending and perpetration of Maya but also categorizes her as a "victim as guilty as offender" (Mendelsohn, Victimology and Contemporary Society's trends) in accordance with Mendelsohn's classification of victims.

Another significant embodiment of the aspect of victim-offender overlap can be noticed in the pivotal figure of both novel and the series, the antagonist Joe Burkett. From the narrative's inception to its riveting climax, he is depicted as one of the major and primary victims within the story. However, his image of a perfect victim is tainted by Maya's relentless quest for truth. Her unyielding investigation illuminates the concealed and nefarious deeds of Joe Burkett, unmasking his true identity as an offender, positioning him as the genuine antagonist of the narrative. She vividly lists out all the crimes of Joe as,

Joe killed Theo Mora. He killed Andrew. He killed Claire. He killed Tom Douglass … He took a baseball bat to some kid's head in the eighth grade. He tried to burn a kid alive in the high school over a girl. (Coben 292)

This illustrates that Joe had an innate predisposition towards violence, facilitated by a lack of constraints leading to occasional acts bereft of remorse, ultimately solidifying his status as a habitual offender or more specifically "most guilty victim" (Mendelsohn, Victimology and Contemporary Society's trends) as per Mendelsohn's taxonomy of victims.

Gender Dynamics and Victimology:

Furthermore, a critical discourse analysis of gender dynamics in victimology underscores the salience of gender as a category of analysis in understanding the heterogenous coping mechanisms employed by the victims in particular

reference to *Fool Me Once* (2016; 2024). Research and investigation reveal that most female victims manifest a tendency for somatization and anxiety-related disorders contrasted with male victims' propensity for externalizing strategies, including the substance abuse. One such research is done by venerated scholars Musat, Militaru and Udristoiu in which they identify these differences as,

While anxiety disorders are more prevalent in women compared to men, men tend to have higher rates of alcohol intake and AUDs. Women often report different symptom profiles and coping mechanisms in response to stress compared to men, experiencing more internalized symptoms, such as rumination and anxiety, whereas men may cope with stress through behaviours such as substance use or aggression. (Musat, Militaru and Udristoiu 02)

The narrative of *Fool Me Once* (2016; 2024) offers a model exemplar of this gendered research. Two of the major female victims, namely Maya Stern and Caroline Burkett, display the explicit signs of anxiety and depression related disorders such as denial and delusion, in consonance with aforementioned research findings. Conversely, many male victims exhibit a pronounced inclination towards substance abuse as an adapting strategy for their traumatic experiences. These male victims include the prominent male figures of the story such as Eddie Walker, Sami Kierce and Christopher Swain. The narrative of both the novel and the series features explicit mentions of Eddie's and Sami's post traumatic alcohol consumption. Additionally, the character of Christopher Swain, albeit a peripheral figure in the story, serves as an embodiment of this complex dynamic, as evidenced by his introduction in the story as a rehabilitation center patient grappling with addiction. Notably, he confides in Maya during their only meeting, that his drinking was a maladaptive coping strategy for the trauma of Theo's murder, which subsequently escalated into a pattern of serial addiction. Per his own overt confession, "I keep trading one addiction for another. I've been in here for booze, for pills, for coke … you name it" (263). These instances of male and female victims from the narrative align with the extant research in this field. However, this oversimplification neglects the experiences of the individuals who defy these gender norms. There is a need for diverse research in this field which goes beyond simplistic gender stereotypes and will work towards a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of victimhood.

Victimization of Minor Characters:

Moving further, a distinguishing feature that amplifies the appeal and allure of *Fool Me Once* (2016; 2024) is that, beyond all major and primary figures of the narrative, all minor and secondary characters are likewise victims in some capacity. This facet imbues the narrative with heightened sense of realism,

resonating with the pervasive reality that all individual human beings endure some form of victimization during the course of their lives. Each minor character carries the burden of their own tale of victimization. Victimhood of these characters falls in different categories. For instance, two of the main minor figures, namely Theo Mora and Tom Douglass, are victims of murder. The antagonist Joe Burkett is responsible for the brutal killings of these two minor but significant figures. It is explicitly evidenced in the words of Maya as, "He killed Theo Mora … He killed Tom Douglass" (Coben 290). It solidifies their status of a victim.

Christopher Swain stands as another figure who fits the victim profile. Categorized under Mendelsohn's taxonomy as "victim with minor guilt" (Mendelsohn, Victimology and Contemporary Society's trends), his inadvertent involvement in Joe's heinous and brutal act against Theo Mora marks his culpability. This trauma renders him guilt-trapped and agitated for the rest of his life. Another minor character who fulfils the criteria of victimhood is Eileen, Maya's friend, renamed Eva Finn in the Netflix adaptation of the novel. Her plight and trauma as a victim of intimate partner violence is unfurled in both the novel and the series, portraying her torment and suffering under the brutal and violent hand of her obsessive partner Robby. Eileen recalls, "He came back and beat me. Broke two ribs" (88). She later ends her victimization by seeking legal help and getting separated from Robby. Thus, the portrayal of victimization of minor characters imbues the narrative with heightened sense of realism, resonating with the pervasive reality that all individual human beings endure some form of victimization during the course of their lives consequently bringing to light the fact that literature, through its kaleidoscope of narratives and devices, elucidates the societal constructs and psychological depths that shape victimhood and recovery. Beyond mere empirical victimology, a literary approach towards the discipline tends to humanize the victims and portrays the intangible aspects of victimization, ultimately capturing the essence and contributing to the holistic understanding of the subject, as articulated by the venerated researcher Krapivnyk in the following words,

The concept of victims refers not only the characters of any crime fiction text but also goes beyond its limits and embraces the text addressees who frequently turn out to be the victims of the consumer society culture that manipulates the minds of individuals and groups, forming their needs and transforming their core values. (Krapivnyk 78)

In the light of this research, it can be safely said that literary portrayal of victimhood can serve as a catalyst for social change.

Conclusion:

To bring things to a close, the study in question, through the meticulous and erudite data analysis, undertakes an innovative and robust inquiry into the phenomenon of victimization, leveraging incisive argumentation and textual evidences to elucidate the diverse forms, latent determinants, ruinous consequences and resilient adapting strategies, thereby culminating in magisterial assessment of the novel and the series *Fool Me Once* (2016; 2024) and bringing to light the versatility in the depiction of victimization in crime fiction which encompasses its emotional, social and moral dimensions rather than the isolated criminal acts. Additionally, the victimization of minor characters highlights the narrative economy of the text, showing that the suffering can still be consequential despite being peripheral. Moreover, the portrayal of victim-offender overlap reveals the tendency of trauma to generate morally ambiguous responses instead of clear ethical divisions. In addition to this, the research paper at hand serves as a testament to the persistent sway of literature in deciphering the practical themes like the intricacies and nuances of victimization. Positioned against the wider backdrop of collective trauma, the text mirrors global experiences of distrust, vulnerability and grief. Future research may extend literary victimology to audience reception of victim accounts, global crime narratives, comparative adaptation studies and trauma informed critical framework. The researcher wishes to add an authorial stance that this understanding of victimization and crime is their personal way of fathoming the depth of such themes from the vantage point of said selected literature.

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