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Women of Color & Crime

"Wind River" is a 2017 crime thriller film that follows a wildlife tracker, Cory Lambert, who discovers the body of a young Native American woman in the snowy wilderness of Wyoming's Wind River Indian Reservation. He teams up with an FBI agent, Jane Banner, who happens to be the only agent near the site, to help solve the murder. The movie explores themes of grief, isolation, and the challenges faced by Native American communities. This film underscores the intersectionality of feminist criminology, criminalization, and racism to highlight the harsh realities faced by indigenous women in the context of law enforcement and the criminal justice system while also delving into the impact of violence on marginalized communities.

I have seen the film "Wind River" on three separate occasions, and each time I feel like something different stood out which is what compelled me to want to discuss the topic of the film. After rewatching it something I noticed which I never really put thought into was how there was no proper conclusion to protecting and calling the murder as it is when it comes to Native American women. When it got to the part of the film where the doctor was performing autopsy to determine the cause of the death, he indicated that he was not allowed to place what happened to her as a homicide due to the fact that her ultimately dying was because of the weather conditions. The FBI agent, Jane Banner, found this to be absolutely outrageous and even the doctor because to get her to be running in the middle of nowhere in the cold, without shoes, as well as the proof of being raped, is proof enough that she was running from someone, but not enough that it was deliberate. She had a target on her back, and if she did not run away the end result would have been the same.

The film addresses feminist criminology by emphasizing the vulnerability of indigenous women to sexual assault and violence. It explores the unique challenges they encounter in a system that often fails to protect or adequately respond to their needs. The character of Jane Banner, an FBI agent played by Elizabeth Olsen, embodies an attempt to address these issues

within a male-dominated law enforcement environment while entering a marginalized community. As indicated in the article, “The Personal is Political and so is Discomfort: Intersectional, Anti-Racist Praxis in Feminist Criminology”, “Unfortunately, scholarship that focuses on gender, race, sexuality, and ethnicity is often devalued and less likely than research in other areas to be published in mainstream journals” (Chesney-Lind, 2020; Medina & Luna, 2000; Pizarro, 2017). This highlights marginalization and invisibility of indigenous women within the criminal justice system, and how their stories are often overlooked, and they draw attention to this in the movie by showing the need for a more inclusive understanding of crime and victimization that accounts for intersecting factors such as race, gender, and socio-economic status. The movie showed for lack of many things such as the law enforcement's understanding of why the murder not being put under homicide on document is harmful, lack of resources that the community has to further work on the investigation, the little amount of people working within the law enforcement in the indian reservation, and proper investigation procedures such as sending one white woman who is underprepared into an environment with mostly males. This not only underscores the structural barriers that impede justice for marginalized women, but also shows how unserious and careless the system is to be working on a investigation that unless is considered homicide, then the rape is a minor issue not needed for their handling.

Furthermore, we saw in the film that Jane Banner, the FBI agent who was put on the spot to work on this investigation, had trouble with working through the system because she wasn't given any resources nor help from her organization. As indicated in the movie the reason why she was sent was because she happened to be the closest of the force near the crime scene, however, one can argue that she was sent based on the fact alone that she is a woman, the crime is still unidentified, and the death happens to be of a Native American female. This means that it was connected based on racism so they let a female handle it, or the fact that she may pick up on things based on female personal, or world experiences. “ process entails considering how social forces shape one’s personal experiences, generating theory that recognizes these connections, and working with similarly situated others to stimulate change” (Whittier, 2017; Yu, 2011). This connected with the idea of “the personal is political ” which essentially shows how experiences of oppression is what connects oppressors to have their eyes open to parts of criminology that isn't found in regular criminology.

In addition to the intersectionality of feminist criminology, this movie also highlights the criminalization and racism against not just indigenous women, but the indigenous community as a whole. As mentioned previously, racism also has a lot to do with the intersectionality within the study of feminist criminology, mainly because both stem from some form of oppression allowing for experiences to be connected based on that fact alone. From gathering information from this movie, we know that the film revolves around the murder of an eighteen year old Native American female who happened to be found on the snow (since the Indian reservations is snowy), without her shoes, blood all over her face, and blood found between her pants. Mentioned previously, the autopsy done to the girl's body displays enough evidence to allow this to be placed as a homicide. There needed to be proper evidence to place it as such, and that would be to find and make the person admit what they have done. While the movie does not explicitly portray individual characters as overtly racist, it does explore the broader context of discrimination, poverty, and neglect faced by indigenous people. Lack of resources and health care within these communities also further shows decisions that will be made when it comes to injustice and as stated, "More than one in five Native Americans (23 percent) reported experiencing discrimination in clinical encounters, while 15 percent avoided seeking health care for themselves or family members due to anticipated discrimination. A notable share of Native Americans also reported they or family members have experienced violence (38 percent) or have been threatened or harassed (34 percent)" (Gorski, 2019). There is already prejudice against many day to day things which would further prove the discretion when it comes to crime.

"Wind River" is a fictional piece of work, and I think this media source presents a great idea of criminalization and racism, as well as feminist criminology, because it addresses the real-life issue of the high rates of violence and crime faced by indigenous women in the United States. It serves as a commentary on the systemic problems and societal indifference that can lead to a lack of proper investigations and attention for crimes committed against Native American communities. The intention is to bring awareness to these issues and prompt discussions about the need for change and justice. Data from studies show that "geographic/neighborhood measures indicated variation in discriminatory experiences. Native Americans who reported living in predominantly Native American areas had higher odds of reporting greater institutional discrimination overall, compared to those living in areas that were not predominantly Native American." (Gorski, 2019), which results back to the studies of racism when it comes to crime.

Feminist criminology in the film also identifies not just with being female, but also connects with racism to women of color, “When defending the validity of their situated understanding of knowledge, standpoint feminists argue that, while all personal experience is a potential source of knowledge, social science inquiry should begin with the lived experiences of members of marginalized groups” (Rajah, Palmer, Duggan, 2022).

In conclusion, I think this movie represented a great idea of what Native American females get faced with day to day within the criminal justice system. It underscored the intersectionality of feminist criminology, criminalization, and racism to highlight the harsh realities faced by indigenous women in the context of law enforcement and the criminal justice system while also delving into the impact of violence on marginalized communities.

References

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