

THE DEPICTION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN HOLLY RINGLAND'S NOVEL THE LOST FLOWERS OF ALICE HART AND ITS CINEMATIC ADAPTATION

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Summary

This article investigates the depiction of domestic violence in Holly Ringland's *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart* and its screen adaptation, with a focus on the interplay between literary and cinematic representations. Applying a comparative multimodal approach, the study examines textual strategies in the novel, such as floral symbolism, metaphors, and narrative techniques. It also investigates audiovisual strategies in the series which include cinematography, sound, performance, and pays attention to the intermedial translation of symbolic elements. Flowers emerge as a central motif which shapes narrative meaning and functions as a medium for reflection, resilience, and healing. The research also contextualizes Alice's experiences using criminological frameworks, including victim typologies and Lenore E. Walker's cycle of abuse, highlighting the generational impact of domestic violence and the psychological consequences for victims. The study demonstrates that multimodality enhances audience understanding of trauma and recovery, providing a nuanced depiction of gendered violence. The findings underline the importance of symbolic devices across media and suggest directions for future research on cross-media portrayals of abuse and the narrative power of symbolic imagery.

Key words: multimodality, symbolic meaning, violence against women, metaphor, intermediality.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.23856/7111>

1. Introduction

The issue of domestic abuse, or more precisely domestic violence, has always drawn public attention, though with varying degrees of sensitivity and empathy. Historically, it was often treated as a taboo subject, silenced due to the marginalized position of women in society and prevailing prejudices concerning the roles of both men and women. In recent decades, however, the narrative has shifted: domestic violence is increasingly represented as part of women's struggle against different forms of oppression and humiliation. It is no longer a hidden problem; many women speak publicly about their experiences, while for those who are still struggling to find support, literature and media have created a kind of mirror-encyclopedia of abusive scenarios that reflect real-life situations. Narratives of such kind make this problem more visible and those who are involved may get their unique chance to reflect on the issues that have been destructive to them but due to lack of knowledge might have seemed normal.

According to the World Health Organization domestic violence refers to “any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm to those in the relationship” (WHO, 2012). However, domestic violence is not limited to partners; very often, children also become direct or indirect victims. The Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention (2011) highlights this by defining domestic violence as acts of physical, sexual, psychological, or economic abuse that occur within the family or household and recognizing that victims may include women, men, or children. Closely related to this is the broader concept of violence against women, which the United Nations (1993) defines as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (the United Nations, 1993). These definitions provide a conceptual framework for understanding how fictional narratives reflect on social issues, which are skillfully woven into various plots. The website Goodreads (n.d.) lists over 200 contemporary novels addressing domestic violence, each offering distinct perspectives on this complex issue. Among them we can just name a few telling examples of how literature engages with the theme of domestic violence: *Big Little Lies* by Liane Moriarty (2014), *Behind Closed Doors* by B. A. Paris (2016), *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins (2015), *Black and Blue* by Anna Quindlen (1998) etc. They depict various forms of intimate partner abuse and psychological control. Similarly, visual media such as the series *Maid* (Netflix, 2021), the adaptation of *Big Little Lies* (HBO, 2017–2019), or the film *Sleeping with the Enemy* (directed by Joseph Ruben, 1991) highlight the pervasiveness of domestic violence narratives.

Against this background, Holly Ringland’s *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart* (2018) and its television adaptation directed by Glendyn Ivin (2023) stand out for their nuanced portrayal of the intergenerational consequences of abuse, particularly focusing on how trauma shapes female identity and resilience. Narrative power of figurative language helps authors to shape their stories in a way that even the most wild scenarios become unforgettable and provide food for thought, especially when addressing sensitive topics. Holly Ringland is no exception: her characters are strong, and their struggles call for action.

The aim of this article is to explore the depiction of domestic violence in Holly Ringland’s novel *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart* and its screen adaptation. Special attention is given to the multimodal role of floral symbolism as a narrative tool that reveals hidden trauma, communicates emotional states, facilitates the representation of female resilience against abuse. By comparing the literary and cinematic versions, the study seeks to demonstrate how different modes of expression (verbal, visual, auditory) contribute to a deeper understanding of domestic violence and its psychological consequences.

2. Methodology and theoretical background

The study employs a comparative multimodal analysis of the novel *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart* by Holly Ringland and its screen adaptation directed by Glendyn Ivin. To interpret the symbolic resonance of floral imagery in narratives of domestic trauma, it is useful to draw on multimodal frameworks that emphasize the interplay of visual, auditory, and verbal elements in shaping metaphorical meaning in television narratives (Bystrov et al., 2023; Bilyk et al., 2024). Applying this approach allows us to unpack how flowers can symbolically signify notions such as resilience or transformation across different communicative modes.

The study further investigates the intersemiotic translation of symbolic elements from literature to screen. It considers how meaning is preserved, transformed, or amplified. “As

the transfer of imagery from literature to film often reshapes symbolic meanings” (*Bodnar & Malyshivska, 2023*). It is undoutful that literature and film belong to different semi-otic systems which “intertwine to convey messages to readers or viewers” (*Malyshivska & Romanchuk, 2024: 190*).

The representation of violence against women in modern media discourse is inherently multidisciplinary, drawing together insights from sociology, media studies, linguistics, and cultural studies. Scholars emphasize that media representations not only reflect but also shape social attitudes toward gender-based violence, making this area of inquiry highly relevant (*Car & Ravbar, 2021; Cuklanz, 2019*). Research demonstrates that domestic violence is frequently framed in ways that reproduce stereotypes, silence victims, or normalize structural inequalities, thereby underlining the need for critical analysis of media texts. Contemporary Hollywood often constructs the home as a contested site of feminine vulnerability, rendering the domestic space not as a place of safety but as one of danger (*Szczekala, 2025*). Similarly, Shoos (2017) has shown how depictions of abuse in film are subject to ideological manipulation often in a form of cultural “gaslighting” which reveals the complex interplay between narrative framing and sociocultural denial. More broadly, other scholars have analyzed how gender-based violence is represented across news reporting, literature, and television, underscoring the discursive mechanisms that either challenge or reinforce patriarchal norms (*Boyle, 2005; Meyers, 2012; Lloyd, 2020; Pletniova, 2024*).

From a sociological standpoint, Johnson (2010) developed a widely recognized typology of domestic violence, distinguishing between intimate terrorism, violent resistance, and situational couple violence, which provides a valuable framework for understanding the complexity of abuse narratives across media.

Taking into account the above-mentioned studies on domestic violence, it should be noted that those analyzing its representation in both literary and cinematic narratives are scarce. Therefore, our study seeks to bridge this gap.

3. Results and Discussion

The *Lost Flowers of Alice Hart* tells the story of a young girl, Alice, who experiences domestic violence and profound trauma in her early childhood. The narrative follows her journey of coping with loss, silence, and resilience, while highlighting how personal suffering intertwines with broader themes of memory, and identity.

Flowers serve as a constant background to the entire story, framing Alice’s life from her mother’s intimate garden to her grandmother’s expansive flower farm. The novel is full of references to native Australian flora, with each flower carrying symbolic meaning which is represented in the separate chapters. As an Australian writer, Holly Ringland introduces her readers to the uniqueness of her land in a particularly evocative manner: “her desk faced two large windows, staghorns and butterfly-leaf plants” (*Ringland, 2023: 4*). This vivid attention to the natural environment is carried into the screen adaptation, where close-ups and bird’s-eye shots capture the vibrant, colorful landscapes that surround Alice. Yet this lush imagery only intensifies the contrast with the darkness she endures emotionally, it highlights the tension between external beauty and inner suffering.

The novel itself is composed of thirty chapters, each named after a flower. Every chapter opens with a delicate black-and-white drawing of that flower, accompanied by a short encyclopedic description of its features and symbolic meaning. In this way, readers receive information through two intertwined modes: the visual, which appeals to the eye, and the verbal, which

conveys knowledge and interpretation. The series, however, is divided into only seven parts, yet it preserves the same structural device of beginning with a flower, its image, and its meaning (See Fig. 1) Still, only the very first chapter of the book coincides with the first episode of the series: “Black Fire Orchid. Meaning: Desire to Possess”. In the adaptation, all such openings appear against a black background, with flowers visually engulfed by flames. This striking repetition creates a powerful visual mode that recalls one of the central traumatic events of Alice’s life – the fire that destroyed her family. At the same time, the imagery emphasizes the paradox of destruction and rebirth: after fire, new life emerges, just as the black fire orchid itself is able to bloom only in the aftermath of flames. Thus, the visual symbolism both deepens the narrative and mirrors Alice’s own painful yet transformative journey.

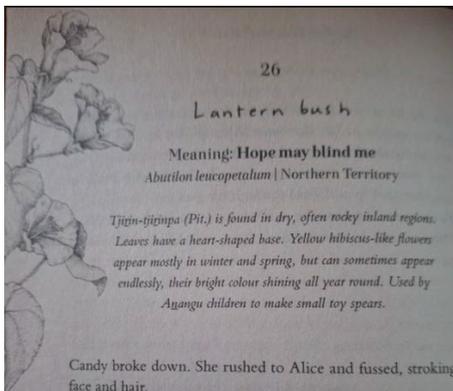
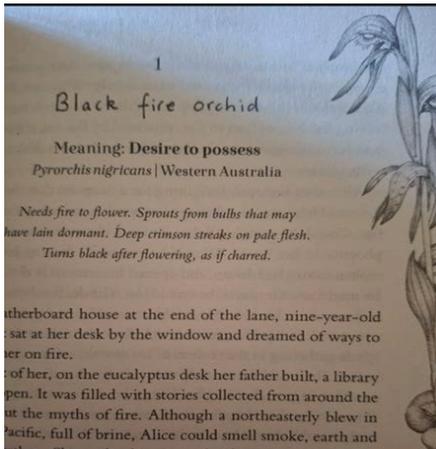


Fig. 1. Flower depiction from the novel and the series

To guide her readers, Ringland opens the book with a dedication on the cover page: “for women who doubt the worth and power of their story” (Ringland, 2023). This signals from the very beginning that the narrative will center on a story that is not simple to tell, one shaped by silence, trauma, and resilience. The title itself can be interpreted in at least two ways, and the author gives subtle hints to both. On the one hand, the flowers represent Alice’s lost hopes and dreams, fragile yet persistent across the years. On the other, they evoke her grandmother’s farm,

which was far more than just farmland it was a refuge for women in need, whom she tenderly called “Flowers.”

In the screen adaptation, this symbolism expands into a multimodal metaphor where woman is a flower. Importantly, it is not limited to the conventional notion of women as delicate beings whose beauty must be nurtured or else they wither. Instead, the metaphor draws on the richness of Australian flora, suggesting that women, like native flowers, may bloom again after fire, carry poisonous strength for protection, or survive in harsh environments. This imagery transforms the floral motif into a layered expression of endurance and renewal. It connects women’s stories with the land’s own cycles of destruction and rebirth.

According to criminological typologies, victims of domestic violence can be categorized into six types: passive, who do not resist due to inability or family circumstances; passive-provocative, whose lifestyle or behavior may inadvertently provoke aggression; impulsive, characterized by fear and diminished rationality during abuse; aggressive, who actively resist and may retaliate; active, who immediately seek assistance from authorities or support systems; and latent, who endure prolonged abuse in silence without seeking help (*Tychyna, 2023: 519*). Such characteristics cannot be strictly divided, as mixed types often occur depending on the situation. Nevertheless, these outlines provide a useful framework for understanding victim behavior.

In *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*, both in the novel and its screen adaptation, we can identify representations of the passive and latent victim types. Alice, as a child, embodies the passive type: she neither knew how nor was able to escape from her father, a man she both loved and feared. As the narrator notes, “maybe Alice would never again see his blue eyes turn black with rage...” (*Ringland, 2023: 4*). Her mother, Agnes, in contrast, exemplifies the latent type. She endures everything in silence: the isolation from society, as they lived far from the city and were forbidden to visit it; the physical abuse, as her husband regularly beat her; and the psychological abuse, as he convinced her she had no choice but to stay. When Alice hugged her mother after another fight, “she smelled like jasmine, and fear” (*Ringland, 2023: 5*). The author creates here a striking simile: the pleasant fragrance of jasmine is contaminated by fear, which, through this comparison, becomes almost tangible.

What is more, the flowers, which are traditionally perceived as a universal language of love, in the hands of an abuser are transformed into a language of violence and gaslighting. After another fight that left Alice’s mother devastated, her father reflects: “If he spoke to her in flowers, maybe then she would understand. Forked sundew, I die if neglected. Harlequin fuchsia, cure and relief. Wedding bush, constancy” (*Ringland, 2023: 11*). In this context, the seemingly romantic symbolism of flowers is distorted into a manipulative tool. Instead of expressing tenderness, the floral codes reinforce control, placing the responsibility for the abuser’s actions on the victim. The father uses the connotations of devotion, healing, and permanence not to comfort but to reassert dominance, turning symbols of love into a justification for suffering.

Domestic violence rarely occurs as an isolated incident and, according to Lenore E. Walker’s cycle of abuse, typically follows four recurring stages: (1) tension-building, when the abuser seeks control and may justify behavior by stress or blame the victim; (2) incident of abuse, including physical, economic, psychological, or sexual violence; (3) reconciliation, where the abuser apologizes and shifts blame onto the victim; and (4) a calm or “honeymoon” phase (*Walker, 1987*). All these phases are clearly present in the novel.

For example, tension-building phase is reflected in her father’s thought: “He wanted to reach out to her, to explain she just needed to be more mindful of her behaviour so he wouldn’t be provoke” (*Ringland, 2023: 11*) Here, the blame is shifted onto the victim, as though her actions were responsible for his anger.

Incident of abuse resonates with Alice's memory that "being around him was like being outside without shelter during stormy weather, always watching the sky" (Ringland, 2023: 33). This description captures the unpredictability and violence of his outbursts.

Reconciliation comes after, when the abuser softens and reestablishes control, as seen in "he made her a writing desk" (Ringland, 2023: 30). Such gestures attempt to erase the harm with material or symbolic gifts, while never addressing the underlying violence. Calm or "honeymoon" phase is revealed in the line: "Her father's tides were peaceful" (Ringland, 2023: 32). For a time, harmony returns, but it is only temporary, before the cycle begins again.

Alice subconsciously carried this destructive cycle into her adult life. She entered a relationship with a boyfriend who also beat her, then asked for forgiveness, made presents, and once again returned to violence. "Flashes of Dylan merged with memories of her father. Faces white with rage" (Ringland, 2023: 338). In this way, the cycle of abuse perpetuated itself across generations, shaping Alice's understanding of love and intimacy. She ultimately managed to break the vicious circle of abuse by gaining self-awareness, recognizing patterns of control and manipulation, and learning to assert her own boundaries.

The presence of flowers shapes each part of the story in both the novel and its screen adaptation, often signaling the key message of a chapter or guiding the reader's/viewer's attention to significant emotional or narrative elements. In the novel, flowers also play a role in the characters' healing and self-discovery. For example, the author writes of Alice's mother: "the truest parts of her mother bloomed among her plants, especially when she talked to them" (Ringland, 2023: 16). Here, flowers are intimately connected with emotional expression and personal growth. Similarly, when Agnes introduces Alice to books, she frames them through floral imagery: "from Agnes' description, Alice imagined a library must be a quiet garden of books, where stories grew like flowers" (Ringland, 2023: 17). In both examples, flowers function as a metaphorical space for nurturing, reflection, and recovery, reinforcing the themes of resilience and the restorative potential of care and attention within a world otherwise marked by trauma.

4. Conclusions

The present study has shown that *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart* and its screen adaptation offer rich, multimodal representations of domestic violence, illustrating how abuse shapes the experiences and emotional development of victims across generations. The analysis demonstrated that the novel uses textual strategies such as floral symbolism, metaphors, narrative techniques, and also descriptive language to convey the cyclical nature of abuse, victim typologies, and the psychological impact on Alice and her family. The series translates these experiences into audiovisual forms where cinematographic techniques like different shots, sound, actor expressions help convey tension, trauma together with moments of reconciliation.

A key finding is that flowers operate as a central symbolic and narrative device in both media, signaling the emotional tone of each chapter or scene. Flower images provide clues to underlying themes and function as instruments of reflection and healing. The study also highlights the interplay between verbal and visual modes in conveying sensitive topics, showing that multimodality enhances audience understanding of abuse and resilience.

Further studies might explore cross-cultural differences in symbolic representation, the pedagogical potential of multimodal narratives in raising awareness about domestic abuse, and the impact of visual metaphors, such as floral imagery, on audience perception and empathy. By integrating literary, cinematic, and symbolic analyses, such research could deepen our understanding of how complex social issues are communicated across different media.

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