

BOOK REVIEW

Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo

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Mithu Sanyal did not embark on writing *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo* to provide a historical account of the development of sexual violence. Rather, this is a book “about what we talk about when we talk about rape” (2). By “we,” she first means all of us, whose inherited narratives of femininity and masculinity have normalized sexual violence for much of its history, but also, secondly, feminists, who, in challenging the “rape myths” through which rape appeared on the public agenda, went on to allegedly create myths of their own. Rape, she concludes, is “a topic where nothing is self-evident” (2), and she sets out to show us why.

This book seeks to turn on its head much of what we thought we knew about rape, mostly in relation to the role gender plays in its perpetuation. As such, Sanyal’s approach evokes Michel Foucault’s controversial call for the decriminalization of rape as a sexual crime. Foucault was concerned that defining rape as a sexual crime would maintain sexuality as a core feature of people’s identities in a context where the social was already unduly saturated with the sexual. According to Foucault, since the nineteenth century, people had been so preoccupied with checking, controlling, confessing, and managing sex and sexuality that all kinds of other inequities had gone unaddressed. He saw the singling out of rape as a sexual crime as a “ruse of power.”

For Sanyal, the same potentially detrimental outcome is true of many responses to rape today, including feminist ones. The author seems invested primarily in highlighting the contradictions that have arisen from feminist antirape discourse’s determination to expose sexual violence and the responses to it. For instance, she points out that discussing sexual violence in relation to a violated femininity itself ironically reproduces stereotypes of gender, namely of men as aggressors and women as victims. According to world statistics, men are 150% more likely to become victims of violent crimes than women. So why aren’t men then warned, Sanyal asks, about being potential victims of violence? Why isn’t manhood associated with vulnerability in the same way rape statistics associate victimization with women? Her (implicit) answer to these questions: because antirape discourse is a seamless and unaware extension of the stereotype of women as weak and powerless rather than a genuinely oppositional movement.

Sometimes, contradictions are less contradictory than they first appear. One of the reasons that male violence has not led to a discussion of masculinity as vulnerable may simply be that violence aimed at men is perpetrated predominantly by men, not women. Therefore, it would be difficult to see vulnerability as a defining aspect of

the experience of hegemonic masculinity since it cuts across the gender line. That social commentators may want to be careful not to reproduce stereotypes of femininity or masculinity in their responses to sexual violence should not come to mean that the power relations those stereotypes and constructions continue to enact can be negated through a wishful denial of their effectiveness.

According to Sanyal, feminist representations of the crime of rape inevitably reproduce the idea that women are its passive victims and men the inevitable aggressors: “Rape is the most gendered of all crimes. It’s also the crime that genders us the most” (8). “The discourse around rape still genders us by teaching us how many genders there are, (namely) two—victims and perpetrators—as well as how to act according to our gender and how the genders interact. Rape is by no means the only source of gender information, but nowhere else do we gender so relentlessly” (129). It is unclear why she identifies “victims” and “perpetrators” as “genders” here, since those are neither gendered identities nor character traits but outcomes of actions and events. To Sanyal, and it is again unclear why, rape in antirape discourse is “always something only men do to only women” (132). This is all the more confusing since the vulnerability of children, including boys, to sexual violence has been part and parcel of feminist and antirape discourse for much longer than the absence of its mention in this book suggests.

Sanyal’s account of “how we talk about rape” (2) spans from Lucretia—whose legendary rape and suicide was said to be the downfall of the last Roman king—to Tarzan, the Roman Polanski case, Title IX and its impact on American campuses, and finally, second-wave feminism and #MeToo (which, she observes, did not lead to male victims coming forward, a gap for which she seems to fault feminism’s monopoly of antirape discourse rather than statistics or the stereotypes of masculinity that would discourage men from speaking out). Sanyal further traces the persistence of stereotypes of femininity as devoid of sexual agency and of masculinity as “fueled by phallic fire” (11) in Ovid and Aristotle, Byron, Darwin, and the Victorian sexologist treatises by Kraft-Ebbing and Ellis. She finally concludes by placing feminist antirape discourse in the same lineage as these problematic and canonical representations. In other words, the women’s movement that set out to resist “rape culture” has somehow ironically, inadvertently, and repeatedly fallen into the trap of reproducing the very same assumptions of female passivity and male aggression it originally set out to contest.

For Sanyal, the statistics that show that 90% of incidences of rape are perpetrated by men and 90% of victims are women are, remarkably, part of this same problem of reification. She then works to debunk the numbers by citing anecdotal evidence and relies on anecdotes and specific studies in which women are shown to be the aggressors (of other women), and men the victims (of other men). For instance, she argues that the statistics of male victimization increase dramatically, going from 10% to 38%, depending on definitions of rape as penetrative or not (125). But that women can be aggressors too (as per Lara Stemple’s study of prison inmates [Stemple & Meyer 2014]), or that men are the victims of violent crime, including sexual crimes (perpetrated mostly by men), does not undo or cancel out the previous statistics under scrutiny: the awareness that male-on-male rape exists in addition to male-on-female rape only reinforces the reality of an aggressive form of hegemonic masculinity; it certainly does not debunk it. Similarly, that female-on-female assault does occur (Sanyal’s example here is of incidences of rape in women’s prison) does not diminish but rather adds to the number of female victims; nor does it absolve hegemonic masculinity of accountability or cancel out the number of rapes perpetrated by men. It does show, however,

that some women too—although not as often and presumably not the same women as those who are victimized—can and do internalize hierarchical assumptions about masculinity and femininity, which in turn make some of them identify with and support a sexist and racist structure at the expense of a subordinated form of otherness. To give another parallel example, that there are women holding governmental offices does not negate the fact that leadership in politics remains predominantly a male affair, nor does it mean that in bemoaning the statistical imbalance, we would be implying that women are weak or to blame for the prevailing and continuing inequity.

It is not a pre-existing vulnerability (of femininity) that sets the stage for women's or men's rape. It is rape and "rape culture," the entitlement of a particular form of toxic and normative masculinity that is sometimes ventriloquized across sexual difference that creates the condition of vulnerability that may or may not be felt at a psychological level by the actors involved. In other words, the vulnerability that derives from the act of rape needs to be distinguished from any form of psychological vulnerability that may or may not precede it and that may or may not result from it. It is the act of rape itself, not how women or individuals react to it or fail to do so, that defines the form of finite vulnerability rape produces, one not to be confused with passivity. To refrain from discussing the statistical reality of women as victims of rape in fear of reproducing stereotypes of femininity as passive assumes an inherent acquiescence to a stereotypical understanding of femininity to begin with, not to mention that it subordinates a legal understanding of victimization to a psychologized one. The fudging of different instances of vulnerability itself is what defines antifeminist arguments that seek to make feminism more accountable for rape culture than patriarchal legacies themselves. Similarly, that women can be aggressive may be, to some, the revelation Sanyal wants it to be, but it will surprise no feminist who has long taken to heart the lessons of gender as construction.

Some time spent volunteering at a rape crisis center would have reassured Sanyal that male victims of rape have long been recognized, supported, and provided services in the feminist movement. Their existence neither undermines the reality of a structural and subordinate femininity nor the reality of a hegemonic, white, normative, structural masculinity from which men and women both suffer. The awareness that men are victims of rape has led to alliance, not division. It is striking to note that Sanyal discusses men as victims to defend "men, masculinity, and myths," as if masculinity had not long been broken down into its different manifestations and permutations (as toxic masculinity, hegemonic, nonhegemonic, black, normative, nonnormative, trans or queer masculinity, and so on). Sanyal's triumphant assertion that "[i]f femininity isn't a biological constant, neither is masculinity" will leave any feminist reading her book deeply puzzled: we would think that by now, the confusion of either masculinity or femininity with the biological had long been debunked and settled.

There is, in Sanyal's approach, a slippage between rape and the response to it (however flawed the latter may be), as if the two were communicative vessels. Representation and its effects must indeed be weighed carefully in terms of the inadvertent messages they may carry and reinforce. But to promote such careful consideration is a far cry from claiming that those representations create the reality they set out to address. Why doesn't masculinity get associated with vulnerability when men are 150% more likely to become victims of violent crimes than women? Again, because in cases of vulnerable masculinity, the culprit is predominantly the same aggressive masculinity whose existence Sanyal's question aims to challenge, a form of masculinity that is ironically often violent precisely because of its own perceived and resented sense of vulnerability.

The problem is not one of feminists declining to view men as vulnerable but of an assumed superiority or resentful vulnerability being played out through the act of rape.

In other words, despite Sanyal's formulation, vulnerability is not the opposite of aggression—far from it: it sometimes causes the latter. The role gender difference plays in the rape script is true of the sexual violence women experience but also of the forms of violence and vulnerability men encounter, predominantly at the hands of other men. In other words, instead of trying to undo the workings of the gendered binary in relation to rape by reframing its effectiveness as a function of discourse rather than of its actual workings, it would behoove her to undo it in relation to a potential imagined futurity rather than a backward-looking and revisionist finger-pointing.

Let us remember, for instance, and before proclaiming that the vulnerability of masculinity has been obscured by feminists eager to cause rather than solve the rape problem, that to black feminists, as well as black mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, black masculinity has never *not* been a vulnerable form of masculinity. Sanyal's questioning of a monolithic masculinity's association with aggression (in the name of some putative sense of fairness) amounts to a denial of white masculinity's violent and murderous history in relation to blackness. Indeed, any mention of an unspecified form of masculinity inevitably evokes its white and heteronormative configuration in history. Neither does the fact that white femininity was called upon to be complicit with the criminalization of blackness absolve white masculinity of the aggression it has carried out in white women's name. As Angela Davis explains in her masterful *Women, Race and Class* (Davis 1983), the first wave of lynchings after the Civil War did not follow from accusations of rape perpetrated by black men against white women (there simply were none!) but rather, from made-up stories about black male rapists that were used to make lynching more acceptable after the murders of black men were met with outrage and horror by white neighbors. Yes, although it is true that white women often failed to stand up to the atrocities that would be committed in their name throughout the history of the imbrication of race and rape, it is nonetheless white masculinity that needs to be held accountable first and foremost. The assumption that the feminist association of masculinity with aggression is based on a mere rhetorical sleight of hand designed to put female victimization over that of its male victims is simply beyond the pale. So is the assumption that the effects of feminist antirape discourse could be as detrimental if not more so than those of white masculinist aggression.

It is also a logical fallacy to claim that when feminists speak against the victimization of women, their consciousness-raising necessarily implies women's passivity or lack of sexual agency. In fact, the very same feminists that Sanyal (like her source, Katie Roiphe) is blaming for (inadvertently or emphatically) reproducing stereotypes of femininity very openly defended and upheld women's sexual agency by fighting for the establishment of a "rape shield law." The law ensured that women's prior sexual history could no longer be used in court as evidence that a rape did not occur. Feminists wanted to make sure that the victim's sexual activity with one or more men could not be cited as a reason to dismiss the crime, that "yes to one did not mean yes to all." For Sanyal to conclude that in exposing the gendered nature of rape, feminists necessarily reproduce stereotypes of female vulnerability is as absurd as claiming that disallowing any mention of the victim's previous sexual history in court detracts from women's sexual agency. Not everything means what Sanyal and so-called feminists like Roiphe want *their* statistics to mean, and in this case in particular, the book's critique of feminist antirape struggles as complicit with—and duplicative of—the very

mindset that has supported “rape culture” throughout history is wrongheaded at best and misogynistic at worst.

Sanyal seems to assume that any attack on the paternalism and self-entitlement of toxic masculinity or of its role in perpetuating the subordination of otherness furthers a restrictive view of what women can do. Instead, I argue that such a claim amounts to reproducing a form of binary thinking: it assumes that a critique of toxic masculinity cannot take place without reproducing a finite set of psychologized assumptions about the women who are subjected to forms of violence.

As for Sanyal’s protracted need to defend masculinity as potentially vulnerable, its rationale simply escapes this reviewer. Men as vulnerable, yes, of course, but “masculinity” as a monolithic category that requires our understanding, no, just no. The form of normative masculinity that grounds rape culture is necessarily aggressive, via the enactment of the act of rape itself, whether there is a pre-existing sense of power or belligerence, or an absence thereof. In fact, a debilitating or internalized sense of vulnerability rather than an aggressive temperament may itself be a motivator for the form of aggression the rape act stages. A form of masculinity that requires the repeated re-enactment of rape in culture is necessarily one that is vulnerable, in a terrorized form that cannot think of its existence outside of the subordination of otherness through which it defines itself. This is the norm of masculinity that, far from needing a defense, would have to be supplanted by nonnormative forms of masculine interdependency and selfhood. So why spend such inordinate amounts of energy and fact-twisting insights to reframe normative masculinity as less toxic than it truly is?

Sanyal’s discussion of Title IX on campuses is particularly telling in this respect. Following Laura Kipnis, she argues that the accused are often treated unfairly because the standard of proof demanded by the Department of Education in Title IX cases is very low, the accusation itself often functioning as the only evidence required to prove an offense. As a result, she argues that Title IX legislation and its implementation have actually increased a sense of insecurity on campus, not the opposite. But perhaps most importantly, she emphasizes that “the premise on which most Title IX investigations are conducted doesn’t break at all with the gender scripts of women as passive recipients of men’s violent desires. As a result, they are paternalistic toward women in the name of ‘protecting them’” (105).

Different statistics will necessarily throw a different light on Kipnis’s assessment of Title IX as unfair to the accused. Indeed, the 2014 Senate report released by Senator Claire McCaskill showed that more than 40% of US colleges and universities had not conducted a single sexual assault investigation in the past five years, and more than 20% of schools had not investigated all of the sexual assault incidents they had reported to the Department of Education (United States Senate 2014). In 22% of schools, the athletic department was given oversight for sexual violence cases involving student athletes—something that Senator McCaskill identified as “borderline outrageous” (Reese 2014). What is more, a *Huffington Post* investigation found that fewer than one third of campus sexual assault cases ended in expulsion for the perpetrators (Kingkade 2014). According to the Rape and Incest National Network, factoring in unreported rapes, only about 3% of rapists ever serve a day in prison (RAINN n.d.). Certainly, these statistics do not disprove the point that Title IX may indeed have been misused in the ways Kipnis relates in her book (as are bullying and academic freedom policies sometimes), but they are meant to question the assumption that such misappropriation is necessarily due to the strict adherence to—rather than dismissal of—the feminist principles that led to the establishment of Title IX.

Here is a perspective that could maybe stop the endless feminist-bashing that has stalled the antirape movement in the United States since the 1990s (and which I see Sanyal's book as partly reproducing): Not all men are rapists, but all rapists have a sense of entitlement that relies on the subordination of otherness and that is most prominently represented and modeled (consciously or unconsciously) by the "ideal," white, normative masculinity in relation to which other identities define themselves; this is a form of entitlement and subjugation that ideologies of (white, able-bodied) masculinity vs. femininity have historically and relentlessly produced, reproduced, normalized, and modeled through action as well as representation. Whether the victim is a woman, a child, or another man, closeness and familiarity to them seem to only increase this sense of entitlement. What is more, such entitlement is often overlaid with a form of displacement whereby people process their insecurities through, sometimes, the re-enactment of the rape script as a conscious or unconscious answer to their shaken or terrorized sense of self. Yes, women can be violent too, no doubt in an attempt to appropriate the same model of social domination and belonging that has been normalized by masculinity's unreachable "ideal." And absolutely, women rape victims are not weak or passive any more than are the American soldiers whose heroism President Trump once questioned on account of the fact that they had died rather than conquered. Similarly, women should not be expected to be strong so as to deserve not to get raped. Last but not least, male rapists can and often do act out of a vulnerability they resent so much that they try and rape, beat, and insult their way out of it (consciously or unconsciously).

It is one thing to argue, as Foucault did, that our antiviolent, rhetorical, and legal response to a gendered crime should not perpetuate the association of sex with identity which has saturated all discourses of the social in modernity. It is quite another to accuse feminists of shooting themselves in the foot by calling rape "rape" (whether it is by adopting legal or moral definitions of it). Foucault is right that the recognition of violence should ideally not reify sex as our core identity, but as controversial as his 1977 intervention became, it did not argue for the withdrawal of a legal response to rape *tout court*; rather, he called for the criminalization of violence outside of its link to sex (because to Foucault, treating sexual identity as an essence was a debilitating feature of modernity). Today, we should know better than to assume that his theoretical and therefore speculative point about the evacuation of sex from legal sentencing would remove sex from court proceedings altogether, or guarantee that the awareness of its presence through testimony would not attenuate the recognition of the severity of the harm or damage inflicted. Unfortunately, the sexual nature of the crime is exactly why rape often fails to be recognized as an offense in culture, let alone in the legal arena, especially in the absence of a feminist or legal recognition that the presence of sex does not and should not negate the evidence of violence.

Maybe, just maybe, social commentators could stop trying to locate in feminist discourse the key to the societal woes it has been trying to address. Yes, some white feminists have used language infelicitously, and others have been downright racist. But no, feminism as a movement cannot be folded into the long lineage of sexist and racist thought that has accompanied the history of rape in this country, simply because doing so sells books.

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