

(UN)BECOMING VICTIMS: ENVISIONING AN ALTERNATE RAPE SCRIPT

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Abstract

The global human rights regime stands to be grossly bigoted. The expansive power hierarchies and the constricting structures of gendered relations abnegate the process of individuation; this prefigures the idea that gendered interactions always underwrite inequality. This brings to the fore the issue of women and their marginalisation through co-optation, representation, and sabotage of human rights. Violence towards women has been found to be related etiologically to the substantive representation of masculinity as an universal ontology. The act of rape, premised basically on the tenets of masculine power and feminine powerlessness, imposes as well as presupposes misogynist inequalities. The ‘rape script’ solicits women to position themselves as endangered, violable and fearful which serve to excoriate the psycho-social, cultural and ideological dimensions of gendered violence. The need for an alternate ‘rape script’ arises which enables the overturning of dominant patriarchal scripts of feminine victimage and leads to the process of women becoming subjects and (un)becoming victims.

Keywords: Gendered violence, rape, rape script, subjects of violence, subjects of fear, Pamela Haag, Sharon Marcus, alternate rape script, self-defense, fantasies of retribution.

The global human rights regime, albeit representing an emerging constitution of the world, is grossly bigoted. Instead of fulfilling its intention of offering protection and cognisance to the weak and the vulnerable, neoliberal interests have co-opted the idea of human rights as legitimating the practices of globalization. Gender, constitutive of politics, is a subjective process which serves as a problematic construct constantly restructuring itself. . The unrelenting struggle against objectification, fetishization and subsequent erasure of women have forced women to deploy, amongst many strategies, their own bodies as subject matter to question, confront and negotiate issues of representation(s). The body, bearing the connotations and the cultural markers of repressions, has come to stand as a metaphor of society, an instrument of ‘lived’ experience and a surface of inscription. Rape has become academia’s under-theorized and apparently untheorizable issue. The physical inscription of rape degrades all paradigms of body

relationships and instinctual drives. The violence associated with an act of rape is endowed with an invulnerable and terrifying facticity which stymies women's ability to challenge it.

Efforts to widen and deepen rape's visibility in law has been seen as a regressive extension of patriarchal scripts of female vulnerability and violability. Rape laws specify the criteria of ideal victimhood that rape complainants have to fulfil in order to be regarded in law as a 'victim.' Rape laws, usually constituted with certain political axes to grind, end up re-victimizing women by further constituting them as vulnerable victims rather than as capable agents, normalizing rather than eliminating sexual harm and its catastrophic implications. Further, rape laws' vested political interests serve to assert and underscore the legitimacy and power of the courtroom in dispensing justice rather than provide reparation and credibility to the wronged. Jill Dolan has waxed eloquent on the continuing interconnections of rape laws with gender segregation, class stratifications and ethnic hierarchies and re-iterates:

The law demands that victims be victims through and through before rendering its limited forms of justice. Because the law needs victims in order to render justice, it perpetuates the very gender arrangements that creates the terms that make sexual violence possible in the first place. (79)

Further, the recourse to legal deterrence to contain the incidences of rape is premised on the assumption that men simply have the power to rape, and therefore, they should be *persuaded* not to. That it is the onus of the masculinised legal system to dissuade men from wielding this power is complemented by the fact that it (the bigoted legal system) doesn't envision strategies which will empower women to sabotage men's power to rape, thereby impeding the actual occurrence of rape. To complicate matters further, the legal system makes it incumbent upon the victim to establish the reality of the 'wrong' which has occurred. Dolan further observes:

One is a victim not in the moment of suffering a wrong but in the moment of being divested of the means to prove a wrong occurred, a moment in which one is not seen (by others, in language, in law) as a 'victim' in the sense of being regarded as a wronged party. (103)

This brings to the fore the notion of a 'rape script' which suggests that bigoted social structures and a gendered code of interaction *inscribe* on men's and women's embodied selves and psyches the misogynist inequalities (of masculine power and feminine powerlessness) which actually enable rape to occur. The rape script strives to endorse men as subjects of violence, legitimately brandishing physical aggression, and women as the objects of violence, whose passivity and defencelessness is embodied in the flesh. Thus, this culturally dominant script promotes male violence against women and abnegates women's will, agency and capacity for resisting and combating (sexual) violence and aggression. The dominant rape script is premised on the normative discourse about heterosexuality that presumes that men are entitled to rape women, that women's sexuality is based on physical attractiveness to men, and that attractiveness invites rape. The female body is marked out as an 'object,' a spectacle for (hetero)sexual voyeurism, a product of complex social processes—including objectification, commodification and globalisation. Men's capacity for violence is derived from a sense of entitlement to violate, ravish and occupy women as property, which reinforces their position in the rape script. Social inequalities and bigoted institutional, economic and socio-cultural practices reinforce the notion of women as vulnerable and violable, and posit the idea of female sexuality as property which can be 'taken' or 'occupied.'

Within the context of gendered violence, then, the woman appears to absolve herself of her body, to absolve herself of being a woman. Rape itself doesn't happen to preconstituted

victims in a premeditated fashion; the rapist does not simply *have* the power to rape; the social script which underlies rape and the extent to which that script succeeds in soliciting the target's participation contribute towards creating and solidifying the rapist's power. Victims are created rhetorically and physically. The stereotype that facilitates male-on-female rape, namely the idea that women are helpless and incapable of resisting rape, is reinscribed through the victim's non-combative acquiescence to the rapist's demands. Even though the victims' passivity is not necessarily tantamount to their compliance to a dominant social script of femininity, victim's claim to agency is defined by the culturally gendered scripts available to her and those deemed socially appropriate. These generalized inequalities do not come into play nor are fully inscribed before the rape occurs— rape itself is one of the techniques which continually scripts these inequalities anew.

Feminist theorists' articulations of the theme of victimhood, shaped around the politics of race-ethnicity and class, have generated many new representations to replace that of the "vacant, dark continent of female sexuality" (Mulvey 174). Their belief in the political efficacy of deeming rape to be an inevitable, incorrigible, clear, fixed reality which circumscribes women's lives have led them to concur that rape has inevitably, always already occurred and women are always either already raped or already deemed rapable. They propagate that women can derive power and credibility from proving that they have been rendered powerless and from identifying the perpetrators of this victimization; when they think of rape, they inevitably see a raped woman already (and always) overpowered and incapacitated. Yet, feminist anti-rape politicizations have been diagnosed as a failed success. Aiding and abetting the latest incarnation of masculinist state power(s), which Pamela Haag has propitiously termed "the carceral politics of neo-liberal capitalism" (33), they have merely re-fashioned femininity in submissive vulnerability and masculinity in invincible agency, failing to contain and eliminate the problem of rising incidences of sexual violence. Haag pans feminist anti-rape activists failure to contribute to the general deconstruction of the identifications of women with real sexual vulnerability and men with real sexual power and rues, "the feminists of identity politics . . . stylize the victim, exaggerating her vulnerabilities and indignities to enshrine her as a singularly damaged subject who deserves cultural and legal redress" (34-35).

Viable counter-images of female agency and resistance are lacking in feminist anti-rape politics. Mulvey locates the source of women's continued oppression in their inability to distance themselves from restrictive social codes and argue that feminists are responsible for rape victims' lack of critical assessment (Mulvey 53). In their effort to accord greater recognition to an increasing incidence of sexual harm and violence, feminists accord masculine dominance the sense of political stability it actually lacks. Victims, in fact, owe their victimization not to the experience of rape but to a feminist propaganda that has coerced women into thinking of, and debasing, themselves as victims. Haag contends that 'rape victim' is a reductive label that casts women who have been raped as spectacles; that the category of raped women has been used as a form of social stigma (Haag 87). In other words, rape scripts the perception of women and the further trauma that women endure in its representation. Instead, Haag treats the word "victim" (and its attendant connotations) as a wholly negative, debilitating and disabling identity and emphasizes on women's positive capacities for directly combative resistance to male violence. Counter-images of female agency will serve to remedy the malaise of victim-focused feminism and help in conjuring increased possibilities for prevention and resistance against violence and aggression.

Sharon Marcus's seminal essay draws on feminism's most powerful contention on rape—that rape is a question of language, interpretation and subjectivity—and proposes that we try to understand rape as a language and “use this insight to imagine women as neither already raped nor inherently rapable” (Marcus 387). She posits the efficacy of an alternate ‘rape script’ with attendant preventive measures by which we can come to view rape as a *process* of sexist gendering which we can actively disrupt. Exploring the construction of rape as a cultural artefact, she highlights how the rape script can be challenged from within. Positing that culturally dominant rape scripts permits the would-be rapist to constitute feelings of power and invincibility and causes women to experience corresponding feelings of terror and paralysis, she focuses on how the strategic enactment of a culturally dominant rape script can potentially open up a gap within which that script can be contested and the act of rape or threatened death resisted successfully. She also examines how strategies of appropriation can subvert dominant rape scripts even as they establish complicity with them. Her refusal to treat rape as an incorrigible inevitability leads her to treat it as a *linguistic* fact. Marcus posits:

The violence of rape is enabled by narratives, complexes and institutions which derive their strength not from outright, immutable and unbeatable force but rather from their power to structure our lives as imposing cultural scripts. To understand rape in this way is to understand it as subject to change. (389)

For Marcus, the fact that rape is structured like a language will account both for the rape's prevalence and its potential prevention. Marcus's argument is important because it challenges the view that male domination is total, absolute, uncontested and unflinching with a conception of masculine dominance as unstable and dependent upon repeated practice renewal.

The language of the rape script solicits women to position themselves as endangered, violable, fearful and submissive and invites men to position themselves as legitimately violent and justified in deploying physical aggression. This language structures and anticipates physical actions and forms as well as modes of responses, for example, the would-be rapist's feelings of powerfulness and invincibility and women's commonplace sense of immobility when overpowered and threatened with rape. She contends that rape is not a biologically ordained event; rapists do not prevail unassailably simply because they are decidedly stronger than women or the fact that they rape simply because they possess the power to do so; a rapist follows a social script and enacts conventional, gendered structures of feelings, actions and responses by which he positions himself relative to her socially rather than his allegedly superior physical strength. This presupposes the incontrovertible aspect of assumed male-female interactions in a bigoted society. His *belief* that he possesses more strength than a woman and that he can use it to objectify and violate her merits more attention than the putative fact of that strength or its wilful demonstration; because often that belief in itself effectually produces and accentuates the power that appears to perpetrate rape and sexual violence. For Marcus, an attempt to rape is a bid to accord reality and credibility to this otherwise assumed theoretical power, a bid that is vulnerable to failure. The “apocalyptic tone” (Marcus 387) of feminist anti-rape activism and the exclusive focus on the post-rape legal remedies and criminal justice reform serves merely to confirm the sexist gendering of the rape script, helping to render rape as inevitable rather than preventable. Marcus's proposed alternate theory of rape and its prevention seeks to abolish the paternal narrative in which male desire and power control, colonise and eradicate female subjecthood and, instead, focuses on women's capacities to disrupt and annihilate the rape script and “take the ability to rape completely out of men's hands” (388). By refusing to conform to the victim-role, the would-be victim can deny the would-be rapist the power to debilitate her.

Envisioning rape as a scripted interaction where conventional gender inequalities have already been inscribed before an individual instance of rape, Marcus opines, “To speak of a rape script implies a *narrative* of rape, a series of steps and signals whose typical initial moments we can learn to recognise and whose final outcome we can learn to stave off” (Marcus 390). Thus, the dominant cultural script where rape is the beginning, middle and end of any interaction is avoided and “the narrative element of a script leaves room and makes time for revision” (391). This enables a gap between the threatened action and the actual occurrence of rape— “the gap in which women can try to intervene, overpower and deflect the threatened action” (389). For her, rape is one of culture’s many modes and adopted methods of feminizing women and attributing to them generalized feminine tendencies and, thus, abnegating their individual psychological differences. The rapist tries to imprint the gender identity of “feminine victim” on his target. The rape act, thus, imposes as well as presupposes misogynist inequalities. Marcus critiques feminist anti-rape politicizations as having solely focused on the post-rape phase (in terms of economic as well as legal reparation), thereby neglecting the pre-rape phase in which rape can be resisted and combated, thus securing on behalf of patriarchal power an impression that “rape can only be feared or legally repaired, not fought” (387). She further observes that our culture’s techniques of feminizations tend to reinforce the ‘rape script’, since the femininity they induce and popularize “makes a feminine woman the perfect victim of sexual aggression” (393). Her alternate ‘rape script’ posits female sexuality as an intelligible process whose individual instances can be re-interpreted and renamed over time. It is here that Marcus triumphantly declares, “Rape is not only scripted, it also scripts” (391) and then goes on to explain that by defining rape as a scripted performance, “we enable a gap between the script and actress which can allow us to re-write the script. . . ultimately, we must eradicate this social script” (395).

Marcus’s revisionary theory of a ‘rape script’ derives its form from what she calls a ‘gendered grammar of violence,’ “where grammar means the rules and structures which assign people to positions within a script” (Marcus 392). This presupposes and dictates men as objects and legitimate perpetrators of violence, and the operators of its tools, and women in a disadvantageous position, as the subjects of fear, coerced into imagining themselves as (justified) objects of violence and aggression. Marcus’s alternate ‘rape script’ encourages women to become subjects capable of wielding (as well as combating) aggression and equipped to impede and overturn the threat, and actual occurrence, of sexual violence. Thus, the overturning of the ‘rape script’ involves continual making and re-making of social roles by soliciting responses to the terrifying silence of violence. The standardized ‘rape script’ is embedded in a language of social representation and can be challenged from within by breaking out from the mould of prescribed victim-roles.

The postmodern call to reject victimism in the feminist politicizations of rape has its premises on the grounds of re-imagining the female body as an ‘object of fear’ and an ‘agent of violence’ rather than a ‘wounded and violable space,’ thereby echoing prevention-oriented discourses. Marcus has brilliantly analysed how, apart from being the objects of violence, women are also the subjects of fear; this affects our enactment of the rape script incorrigibly. She contends that the grammar of violence defines rape as an act committed against a subject of *fear* and not against a subject of violence- not, that is, against someone whom the would-be rapist assumes would try to impede his threatened action; “A rapist responded to with fear may feel his power consolidated” (Marcus 396). Therefore, to prevent rape, we must resist a would-be rapist’s attempts to place us in a sexualized, gendered position of passivity. Traditional, prefabricated gendered scripts of polite deference entails a legitimized flourish of objectification and violence.

In this respect, self-defense and physical retaliation go a long way to disrupt the grammar of rape; “The use of retaliation undermines the powerlessness which the scenario of violence and fear scripts for us” (397) and Marcus further explains,

By talking back and fighting back we place ourselves as subjects who can engage in dialogic violence and respond to aggression in kind; in addition to offering us an opportunity to elude or even overpower an assailant, self-defense undermines a would-be rapist by catapulting him out of his role of omnipotent attacker and surprising him into having to fight someone whom he had marked out as a purely acquiescent victim. (397)

Self-defense, which is at the core of rape culture, abnegates conventional notions of women’s ‘fearful powerlessness’ and dismantles the notion of the ‘rape script’: the would-be rapist as powerfully real and really powerful. Thus, deployment of physical retaliation acts as one of many sites through which women can contest and interrupt culturally dominant rape scripts. Self-defense is not the equivalent of patriarchal violence (or for that matter equivalent to the performance of symbolic counterviolence) precisely because the consequences are not the same. Symbolic performance of women’s counter-violence and the self-defense movement disrupt cultural rape scripts and prefabricated scripts of male dominance and female submission. One crucial contradiction of the rape script is that it casts women as ineffectual and vulnerable victims yet posits massive amounts of force and violence as necessary to rape them. This leads to an inexorable inference that women may possess more force than the script leads them to think they do.

Another paradigm by which the ‘rape script’ is overturned is the schema of revenge fantasies harboured by the victims of rape- where women act as the aggressors. The ideology of heterosexual virtue entitles men to terrorize, possess, humiliate, violate, objectify women and forecloses the possibility of women’s active and effective response to men’s sexual terrorization. Revenge fantasy partakes in the debunking of the myth of the male desire to rape by foregrounding the power, aggression, and brutality of sexual violence, thereby redefining the experience from the victim’s point of view. The victim rewrites the rape narrative of male power by constructing herself as the one who inflicts pain and violation. Projansky adumbrates how the language of rape and the dominant structures of gendered subjectivity continue to speak through women’s resistance, and how rape marks the female subject physically and psychologically (74-76). The desire for retribution reverses the binary opposition(s) male/power and female/powerless without deconstructing it. The paradigm of revenge fantasies is not without its concomitant loopholes. Revenge fantasies envision and contribute little towards the deflection or prevention of the threatened action of rape and death. Here, rape has already occurred. A woman’s subjecthood has already been annihilated. Thereby, this schema has already presumed the inevitability of rape. Yet, the fantasies of retribution challenges cultural scripts about women’s helplessness and in doing so, represents women as agents of aggression and anger. In order to account for the pain that women endure to claim agency in the context of sexual violence, the need to understand rape as both a material and a discursive site of struggle for cultural power arises and persists. Thus, the agency, capable of aggressive violence, doesn’t emerge outside of culture or language but ensues out of the gaps within culturally dominant discourses and ideologies and their material enactments. Thus Marcus’s wish to “frighten rape culture to death” (Marcus 404) commences with women (un)becoming victims and objects of sexual violence.

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