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Book Review: Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo¹Anjalee Nadarajan²

Mithu Sanyal's *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo* "a book about what we talk about when we talk about rape" (2), is not a "comprehensive cultural history" or a tabulation of rapes, but rather an examination of "basic convictions that have hardened into consensus truths" (2). As her subtitle suggests, Sanyal's objects of study range from classical rape narratives to the #MeToo movement of the 2010s. Sanyal seeks to "make visible the lines of connection" between these disparate cultural moments, allied loosely under the banner 'rape' (2). Additionally, she seeks to work through the challenge of "creating diverse narratives, diverse opportunities of being in the world—to get on with life as well as collapse, and everything in between and beyond" (70).

In connecting with the reader, Sanyal first lists the assumptions that her book will dispel: 1) Those who rape aren't necessarily male and those who are raped aren't necessarily female. For example, a male victim of rape found it difficult to heal, because "all cultural messages...addressed him not as a victim, but as a (potential) predator, *because he was a man*" (126). 2) Male sexuality is not one that "must be mastered and controlled" (5), while female sexuality need not be "protected and defended" (4). These two complementary assumptions prevent male and female sexualities from being arenas of "exploration" and "enjoyment"—keywords for Sanyal (4). In fact, part of her project is examining why we still adhere to this gender dichotomy: "as soon as we use the r-word, back go the clocks and it is forever 1955" (4). Sanyal notes that "everybody is against rape, but hardly anybody is against the same thing when they are against rape" (47). She also examines how when "the story is about rape...different perspectives become condensed into one hard truth about the victim's life" (66).

Much of Sanyal's analysis depends upon cognitive reframing because the prevailing framing of rape is one of the lines of connection that connect radically varied narratives of rape. She begins with reframing the functions of male and female genitals. Instead of framing the penis as the genital that acts by thrusting into a willing or unwilling female orifice, she frames the vagina as something capable of acting. The vagina can be likened to a corona that circluses, a verb brought into prominence by Bini Adamczak. Think circlusion instead of penetration. Now, who has power? To that end, Sanyal analyzes the etymology of vagina to discover the source of shame.

But most importantly, through relaying the anecdotes of women and men she has interviewed, Sanyal reframes rape victims/survivors within its constellation of associations. While rape is not just a physical act as Foucault contended, akin to a punch in the mouth, it also has no bearing on a woman's honour or honesty. But more controversially, rape also has no correlation to female pain and suffering. For example, Sanyal introduces Natascha Kampusch, who was abducted and held captive from ten to eighteen. Despite the horror of her trauma, Kampusch refused to feed "the public's hunger for her pain" by appearing "self-reliant" (66). Another woman, the French author Virginie Despentes, who was raped while hitchhiking as a teenager, is highlighted for refusing to reduce herself "to the stereotype of the little woman who should stay put and look after home and hearth and her genitals" (68). Sanyal includes anecdotes from

¹ Sanyal, M. (2019). *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo*. New York City, New York: Verso Books.

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men who have been raped. A formerly incarcerated male, Don, describes his wounds from rape in de-sensationalized terms, he doesn't dwell on his emotional state, simply tells it in clinical details: His rectum was torn. He developed PTSD from prison rape.

However, the main limitation of Sanyal's book is the lack of discussion of rape as a tool of war. Just a few months before #MeToo blazed onto the front pages of *The New York Times*, Rohingya women were being raped in Myanmar by soldiers. Rape as a weapon of war during the genocides, in Rwanda and Yugoslavia, during the march to Berlin, could have proved a nice contrast to the Cologne New Year rapes. And in fact, Sanyal works best when she is examining rape between individuals. Her aim is to create a multi-faceted narrative that allows forgiveness, understanding, resilience, and healing. She states that honour has been culturally imposed. However, what happens when a rape victim feels that something valuable has been taken away, where there is an irreparable sense of loss? This position is where an additional anecdote could have been useful. But Sanyal's anecdotes serve as antidotes to the accounts of rape that focus inordinately and voyeuristically on female trauma and suffering. Additionally, her anecdotes include those from former rapists who feel remorse due to their actions when they were younger.

While Sanyal wants to present a plethora of possibilities for those who have been raped, she also wants to avoid the black-and-white thinking that hounds the rapist. She asks who has been systematically cast as rapists? Controversially, she discusses the Cologne rape: are certain cultures more susceptible to the conditions that stoke rapists? She wants to bridge the gap between would-be rapists and would-be victims through empathy rather than hierarchy or cancel culture. To that end, she does not seek to "exorcise" rape through "ejecting individual actions, songs, or people" (110). Instead, rape "can be promoted or diminished—like all cultural acts—by cultural messages and norms." (110).

Mithu Sanyal's *Rape* is an accessible text, making it suitable not just for academics, but also for anyone interested in reframing the traditional binaries between rapist and victim, between winner and loser. This book is also suitable for anyone who has experienced what Sanyal talks about, even though it advocates for a reframing that does not automatically situate a victim of sexual violence as a victim. Reframing, along with breaking down stereotypes aligned with gender, allows Sanyal to state, "Isn't it a relief, that sexual violence isn't confined to one gender and one gender only? Because it is only when we understand rape as not being genetically or biologically determined that change becomes imaginable—for everyone" (132).

