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Book Review Essay: Semiotics of Rape: Sexual Subjectivity and Violation in Rural India¹
Nikita Puri²

In her book, *Semiotics of Rape*, Rupal Oza explores various components that play a role in shaping the sexual subjectivity of women in Haryana, India. Oza's research method is qualitative but also personal to some extent.

Semiotics of Rape is a culmination of a three-year committed and active engagement with survivors of rape and their families. Oza addresses individual victimization and the relationship of victims within their communities, uncovering the role of patriarchal and misogynistic ideals. Oza incorporates the voices of victims, the survivors, as well as lawyers, activists, and community members. Her research highlights what she characterizes as "rape scripts," which legitimize and perpetuate violence against women, specifically Dalit women who belong to a subordinate caste. This propels the argument that rape in Haryana is not an isolated incident of violation of individuals, but rather an act of violence against subordinate caste members as a whole and who are seen as less worthy due to their place in the social hierarchy. Dalit women are used as leverage to wage war on the Dalit community so that higher caste members, Jats, can mark their hierarchical territories as their "rightful" place in the economic and social sphere.

Oza declares the sexual subjectivity of women to be of utmost importance in her research as she searches for ways that women define their subjectivity and how it persists in the face of contradictory community ideals. These antithetical views are polluted by the predilection of the Dalit and Jat communities to uphold patriarchy and misogyny, which runs rampant in Indian society, and to enforce caste discrimination.

A 2019 research paper published in the National Library of Medicine, titled "A Dyadic Relationship on Sexual Subjectivity and Romantic Relationship Functioning," defines sexual subjectivity as the self-concept that is formed in regard to one's sexuality, which includes the emotions that may arise relating to one's body and the thoughts around sexual pleasure and its self-reflection (Kohlberger et al., 2019). This paper focuses on the formulation of sexual subjectivity through relationship experiences, measuring the depth of achieving sexual pleasure with heterosexual partners and its relation to the functioning of a healthy sexual relationship and its impact on self-perception (Kohlberger et al., 2019). While this research focuses broadly on sexual relationships, it is significant to note the definition of sexual subjectivity as defined by the paper because Oza's book takes this further by examining communal notions about rape and its impact on the sexual subjectivity formed by victims and survivors.

In *Semiotics of Rape*, the relationship the women hold with their family and the community at large shapes their sexual subjectivity in ways that allow them to reclaim their autonomy and

¹ Oza, R. (2023). *Semiotics of Rape: Sexual Subjectivity and Violation in Rural India*. Durham: Duke University Press.

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sovereignty. The latter becomes a form of resistance against the very ideals that keep women oppressed, not just by the Jats but also by fellow Dalits.

Oza divides the book into four chapters which focus on consent, compromise, land, and death respectively. In the first chapter, Oza reveals that when women and girls are involved in a consensual sexual relationship, the family and community feel threatened by this act. Women are not understood as beings with libido impulses and autonomous decision-making ability. Their sexual autonomy is seen as an infringement on the honor of the family as girls and women are the core of their reputation. In one interview, Oza surfaces the truth about a girl whose rape case was filed falsely because she was involved in a consensual sexual relationship with a Jat man, someone from a higher caste than her, and the relationship had been known to the family and community. In her discussion, Oza analyzes the rebellious nature of the girl in having this forbidden relationship as a means of owning her sexuality. Although the case was filed by her family, the girl speaks of the truth and declares her lover as innocent which confirms her state of autonomy in the face of threat and violence. However, in this particular anecdote, Oza fails to consider that perhaps the family filed a false rape charge because of the fear that the boy their daughter is in love with is a Jat man whose family would wholeheartedly oppose this affair and potentially cause harm to the family as a response. The family's declaration of the relationship as a rape case, in this instance, is not just a retaliation effort due to their daughter's reclamation of autonomy but also a reaction to the potential dangers that can arise from this miscalculated relationship with a man from a higher caste. This story introduces the dangerousness of rape scripts that form amongst the communities and police officers who view all rape charges as lacking any validity or credibility. While some rapes may be of this classification, not all of them are, and this rape script only disrupts or obscures the path to justice for many real survivors of rape.

Once a girl is raped, she is seen as having lost her value in marriage for which the father or the male guardian is responsible. Oza discloses instances when compromises allow a woman to reclaim her sovereignty such as cases when she has been forced to lie to uphold her false rape case. In these instances, the woman is able to remain sovereign by keeping her alleged "perpetrator" out of jail because only she knows of his true innocence. In other situations, the complexity of the matter shines through for victims who are forced to settle out of court due to coercion and threat from powerful Jat families. For these survivors, there is no real justice. Dr. Jaya Shrivastava (2016) claims that there is no real unanimity when it comes to the definition of rape, which is ubiquitous in India where patriarchal views rule sexual violence as mere fabrication and personal vendetta for women against men who did not want to marry them. Oza reveals that it is the compromises, similar to a mediation between the victim and perpetrator's families outside of court, that only perpetuate this narrative further.

A 2018 YouTube video, titled "Rape is Consensual: Inside Haryana's Rape Culture," garnered approximately 2.7 million views which highlights the common sentiments of settlers in Haryana, the majority of whom believe that rape is a woman's fault. It is ironic that the Dalit community as a whole face wrath from Jats, and yet within their own communities, girls and women also have to confront patriarchy as an additional obstacle. Rape by itself is agonizing as the survivors exhibit feelings of guilt, self-blame, and shame associated with the traumatic incident

(Haskell & Randall, 2019). However, the notions held by the families and communities only further exacerbates the state of victimhood.

Semiotics of Rape highlights the complicity of authority figures in the erasure of rape cases and the malfeasance of the court system which enables the violence committed by the Jats. In its entirety, the book uncovers the complexity of rape cases and fosters further understanding amongst the victims, their families, and communities. Through it all, the actions of the survivors and storytellers as well as their truth break the confines of patriarchal mindsets that attempt to encage them. Oza traverses beyond the surface level of these stories and investigates the economic aspect of the caste system, which points to neoliberal policies that assist Dalit communities through educational and job programs created by the government, which the Jats seek to avenge by committing caste atrocities. The semiotics goes beyond the rape; it encompasses not just a violation on Dalit women, but also the truth about the Jats communities' desire to socially avenge Dalits for their upward mobility in the economic sphere. It is the truth about hatred and resentment that contaminates the relationship between Jat and Dalit communities who remain sundered due to the inability of the Jats to recognize Dalits as human beings who deserve equal rights.

Oza dissects many stories, but one is particularly touching of a father who commits suicide after seeing his daughter's gang rape in a recorded video. As a Dalit man, he realizes his supposed place in society and is consumed by utter hopelessness and despair felt by the entire Dalit community. Before his death, he says, "there is no hope for us." For Dalit women, the shame and guilt are brought forth not just through the rape or the communities' ideologies but also by way of coercion and threats from higher caste members.

Semiotics of Rape is a book enriched with profound research that sheds light onto the various components and perspectives that pervade a rape case, including the ideals that encompass its understanding by each member of society in India. Oza does not shy away from addressing the utmost vulnerability of Dalit lives whose stories are only taken seriously after the death of a victim or their families. Instead, she treats rape as a crime against humanity as Dalit women are viewed as far less than human by the Jats who remain powerful in their impunity. This only breeds a society which remains stagnant in its outdated views and beliefs that are carried out in the name of preserving honor and reputation.

However, in *Semiotics of Rape*, Oza goes beyond just the economic and social sphere of India and its people. Oza creates parallels in the treatment of Dalit women and Black women in America to understand sexual subjectivity and autonomy in the face of coercion. She is successful in this quest as she draws on the work of contemporaries like Saidiya V. Hartman, whose work on the conditions of enslaved people provides a framework for understanding sexual subjectivity of women in Haryana. Beyond Indian society, this book is a must-read for everyone who seeks to scrutinize institutions which uphold ideals that actively discriminate against specific groups of people on the basis of their cultural and political identities. Additionally, lawyers, activists, and scholars in the field of women's studies and those actively working to give voice to victims of rape and sexual violence will find the book incredibly useful in understanding the psychology of survivors and the communities in which they reside. Doing so, they can discern the ideals and practices that perpetuate sexual violence and keep women and their truths repressed. By

acknowledging and recognizing this, grassroots work can begin to disintegrate systems which oppress Dalit women and Dalit communities as a whole. This lesson can apply for institutions outside of India where systemic change is deemed necessary to dismantle frameworks which disproportionately impact minorities and oppress their economic and social growth.

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