



"It's Only a Penis": Rape, Feminism, and Difference

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“It’s Only a Penis”: Rape, Feminism, and Difference

In 1985 and 1986 I carried out anthropological fieldwork in the Dayak community of Gerai in Indonesian Borneo. One night in September 1985, a man of the village climbed through a window into the freestanding house where a widow lived with her elderly mother, younger (unmarried) sister, and young children. The widow awoke, in darkness, to feel the man inside her mosquito net, gripping her shoulder while he climbed under the blanket that covered her and her youngest child as they slept (her older children slept on mattresses nearby). He was whispering, “be quiet, be quiet.” She responded by sitting up in bed and pushing him violently, so that he stumbled backward, became entangled with her mosquito net, and then, finally free, moved across the floor toward the window. In the meantime, the woman climbed from her bed and pursued him, shouting his name several times as she did so. His hurried exit through the window, with his clothes now in considerable disarray, was accompanied by a stream of abuse from the woman and by excited interrogations from wakened neighbors in adjoining houses.

I awoke the following morning to raucous laughter on the longhouse verandah outside my apartment where a group of elderly women gathered regularly to thresh, winnow, and pound rice. They were recounting this tale loudly, and with enormous enjoyment, to all in the immediate vicinity. As I came out of my door, one was engaged in mimicking the man climbing out the window, sarong falling down, genitals askew. Those others working or lounging near her on the verandah — both men and women — shrieked with laughter.

When told the story, I was shocked and appalled. An unknown man had tried to climb into the bed of a woman in the dead, dark of night? I knew what this was called: attempted rape. The woman had seen the man and recognized him (so had others in the village, wakened by her shouting). I knew what he deserved: the full weight of the law. My own fears

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about being a single woman alone in a strange place, sleeping in a dwelling that could not be secured at night, bubbled to the surface. My feminist sentiments poured out. “How can you laugh?” I asked my women friends; “this is a very bad thing that he has tried to do.” But my outrage simply served to fuel the hilarity. “No, not bad,” said one of the old women (a particular friend of mine), “simply stupid.”

I felt vindicated in my response when, two hours later, the woman herself came onto the verandah to share betel nut and tobacco and to broadcast the story. Her anger was palpable, and she shouted for all to hear her determination to exact a compensation payment from the man. Thinking to obtain information about local women’s responses to rape, I began to question her. Had she been frightened? I asked. Of course she had—Wouldn’t I feel frightened if I awoke in the dark to find an unknown person inside my mosquito net? Wouldn’t I be angry? Why then, I asked, hadn’t she taken the opportunity, while he was entangled in her mosquito net, to kick him hard or to hit him with one of the many wooden implements near at hand? She looked shocked. Why would she do that? she asked—after all, he hadn’t hurt her. No, but he had wanted to, I replied. She looked at me with puzzlement. Not able to find a local word for *rape* in my vocabulary, I scabbled to explain myself: “He was trying to have sex with you,” I said, “although you didn’t want to. He was trying to hurt you.” She looked at me, more with pity than with puzzlement now, although both were mixed in her expression. “Tin [Christine], it’s only a penis,” she said. “How can a penis hurt anyone?”

Rape, feminism, and difference

A central feature of many feminist writings about rape in the past twenty years is their concern to eschew the view of rape as a natural function of male biology and to stress instead its bases in society and culture. It is curious, then, that so much of this work talks of rape in terms that suggest—either implicitly or explicitly—that it is a universal practice. To take only several examples: Pauline Bart and Patricia O’Brien tell us that “every female from nine months to ninety years is at risk” (1985, 1); Anna Clark argues that “all women know the paralyzing fear of walking down a dark street at night. . . . It seems to be a fact of life that the fear of rape imposes a curfew on our movements” (1987, 1); Catharine MacKinnon claims that “sexuality is central to women’s definition and forced sex is central to sexuality,” so “rape is indigenous, not exceptional, to women’s social condition” (1989b, 172) and “all women live all the time under the shadow of the

threat of sexual abuse" (1989a, 340); Lee Madigan and Nancy Gamble write of "the global terrorism of rape" (1991, 21–22); and Susan Brison asserts that "the fact that all women's lives are restricted by sexual violence is indisputable" (1993, 17). The potted "world histories" of rape—which attempt to trace the practice in a range of different societies against a single historical/evolutionary timeline—found in a number of feminist writings on the topic, further illustrate this universalizing tendency.¹ Just as I, an anthropologist trained to be particularly sensitive to the impact of cultural difference, nevertheless took for granted the occurrence of rape in a social and cultural context that I knew to be profoundly different from my own, so most other feminists also unwittingly assume that the practice occurs in all human societies.² This is particularly puzzling given that Peggy Reeves Sanday, for one, long ago demonstrated that while rape occurs widely throughout the world, it is by no means a human universal: some societies can indeed be classified as rape free (1981).

There are two general reasons for this universalization of rape among Western feminists. The first of these has to do with the understanding of the practice as horrific by most women in Western societies. In these settings, rape is seen as "a fate worse than, or tantamount to, death" (S. Marcus 1992, 387): a shattering of identity that, for instance, left one North American survivor feeling "not quite sure whether I had died and the world went on without me, or whether I was alive in a totally alien world" (Brison 1993, 10). While any form of violent attack may have severe emotional consequences for its victims, the *sexualization* of violence in rape greatly intensifies those consequences for women in Western societies: "To show power and anger through rape—as opposed to mugging or assault—men are calling on lessons women learn from society, from history and religion, to defile, degrade and shame in addition to inflicting physical pain. Rapists have learned, *as have their victims*, that to rape is to do something worse than to assault" (Gordon and Riger 1989, 45; see also Koss and Harvey 1991). Clearly, the intermeshing of sexuality and personal identity in contemporary Western societies—such that Michel Foucault refers to sex as "that secret which seems to underlie all that we are" (1978, 155)—imbues

¹ For recent examples of such histories, see Madigan and Gamble 1991, 11ff.; McColgan 1996, 12–27.

² There are some exceptions to this. For example, Peggy Sanday's work on rape among the Minangkabau (1986) and within U.S. college fraternities (1990b) emphasizes very much its contextualized character. In fact, Sanday is one of the few feminists who has attempted to formulate a more general theory concerning the conditions under which rape occurs and under which it does not occur (1981; 1986; 1990b, 8).