

Men, masculinity and sexual violence

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Suddenly our country seems to be in the grip of an epidemic of different sorts. Every single day reports of rape pour in – rape of minors, gang rape of adult women, rape in a moving vehicle, rape followed by killing and so on. While one struggles to come to terms with the heinousness of each incident, a new debate has come to occupy us. Is the recent spurt in the incidence of sexual violence a result of increased reportage (and thereby a certain level of de-stigmatization around sexual violence) or is the incidence of sexual violence against women increasing by leaps and bounds? The debate continues but what is also gradually becoming evident is the fact that sexual violence, whether on the rise or not, is definitely coming to take up different contours every day. This fact has compelled many, including academics, social science researchers, activists and professionals to revisit once more, the causes and motivations behind it.

Let me begin by flagging a few incidents that were reported in the media in the recent past (the time period being between February 2011 to May 2014), though not in this chronological order

- A 9 year old gang raped and set on fire by her rapists.
- A teenage girl sexually harassed on the streets as a bet with a friend for Rs 500.
- Two teenage girls gang raped and hanged from a tree when they had stepped out to relieve themselves in the early hours of the day
- A young woman splashed with acid for daring to refuse the sexual advances of a man she was not interested in.
- A young woman stabbed and then axed because she did not agree to extend her relationship with her male co-student beyond friendship.
- A young male student killed for daring to protest his sister's molestation at the hands of other men
- A young woman gang raped by village community for 'daring' to love outside her community.

The list of sexual violations on women including young girls is long and unending as are the motivations said to drive these acts of violence. Some of the questions that come to haunt the discursive space of sexual violence are:

Who is the man who rapes?

The (biological) male? The (crazed) psychopath? The (cannibalizing) savage? The (social) man?
The (masculine) lover?

Does he act on the spur of the moment?

Does he act in uncontrolled sexual urge?

Does he act out of extreme physical aggression?

Does he act out of unreason?

Does he act out of cool calculated reason?

Does he act out of hate?

Or does he act in love?

What causes men to sexually violate women? Do the reasons lie with the woman or the man?

Is there a link between the male body and sexual aggression?

Does aggression stem from biology, from the social or from the psyche?

Gender role theory and aggression

Human aggression and its gendered expression has been the subject of numerous scientific studies for a long time. Social anthropological studies posit a universal theory of violence, drawing a link between aggression and primitive instinctual drives. Violence is described as a pre-social moment, a less civilized trait – sub-human, animal-like. Yet as a species, culturally and biologically humans appear to be preoccupied with violence. One could argue that the culture of becoming human is perhaps also a culture of becoming more violent. The very survival of the human race is premised on a certain violence, deemed ‘necessary’, ‘beneficial’ and ‘evolutionary’ as well.

From early childhood to old age, human psychology posits violence as the most obdurate, intractable behavioral gender difference. But this is not to suggest that the gender divide is seen as rigid and skewed. Women are also recognized as active participants in acts of violence but a pattern is said to inhere in such manifestations of men’s and women’s aggression. The differential in the acts of violence is said to be a way of “doing gender” (Kimmel 2000, 243). Proponents of the behaviorist school who lay stress on social learning and cultural influence proclaim that men are more aggressive than women because men and women interpret aggression differently. Women see it as a loss of self-control and are ashamed of their anger, associating it with being pushy, nasty, and socially isolated. Men, by contrast, see their

aggressiveness in a positive light, as a way of gaining control. To men, anger and rage can mean courage, success, and triumph and a proof of masculinity (Kimmel 2000, 244). Male violence is fast, dangerous, instrumental, initiated to accomplish a goal. On the other hand, women's violence is said to be more reactive to a situation – a sign of helplessness and emotional upsurge, a defensive outcome of feeling trapped. Therefore men are found more prone to crimes like street robbery, bank stick-ups while women are found involved more in shop lifting, suicide bombing, etc. Carol Smart (1976) has provided an incisive critique of such gendered explanations of criminality. She has argued that on one hand, such positivistic analyses reiterate legal/moral codes based on sexist assumptions of what constitutes normal female civility. On the other hand, they fail to examine the larger picture that would link crime to historical, social, political and economic factors besides gender.

The gender-role-socialization theory locates the family at the center of gender differentiation. A strict public/private divide, a more or less tenable sexual division of labor and a regimen of parental stereotypes ensures the almost diametrically opposite gender training received by the boy and girl child in the family. The rigid adherence to the inculcation of masculine and feminine traits in the child combined with the scientific weight of an evolutionary “truth” about reproductive heterosexuality leaves no space for any alternative or “unconventional” forms of behavior, desire or identity without attracting the label of “pathological”. The gender divide is said to go as far as the sexual act as well. On one hand, sexual agency is granted to the male alone and woman is expected to respond, receive and reproduce male desire. On the other hand, aggression (masculine) is considered integral to sexual intercourse (love) as well as an acceptable means of seduction. Coercion is considered necessary to overcome initial hesitation. It is taken for granted that women need to be seduced as they are socialized to enact a script of ‘simulated resistance’ (modesty in common parlance), that is, saying ‘no’ while desiring to participate. Once the consent is obtained, the sexual act, however abusive, can escape the label of forced or violent.

Biologists see sexual difference ingrained in the very form and behavioral pattern of the gametes – the tiny sex cells identifiable as either eggs (if large and produced in small numbers) or sperms (if small and produced in large numbers). Since sperms are produced in vast quantities it is biologically possible for males to have large numbers of offspring, but the actual output of embryos is limited by the number of females they finally succeed in fertilizing. By contrast, females are believed more likely to maximize their reproduction by concentrating on quality, on producing successful offspring, rather than out-competing other females for the sexual attention of males. This in a way offers an evolutionary explanation of the popular discourse on the male/female ‘split’ in romantic love and in sexual proclivities that shape much of the consumerist culture as well as the romantic sagas. Sexual promiscuity in men followed up with intra-gender competition is a replay of fertilization itself, in which numerous males, like hyperactive

spermatozoa, show a universal penchant for multiple female relationships and compete among themselves for access to females. The woman on the other hand, in a show of maturity and perseverance remains committed to the well-being of the progeny and therefore, monogamous (Kimmel, 2000:25). Just as it is now clear that the egg doesn't merely passively receive suitors, it is increasingly understood that females can be active participants in their own reproduction. Nonetheless, when it comes to sperm makers and therefore males of the species, success is likely to crown those who out-compete their rivals. So, in species after species, it is the males who are larger, nastier, armed with the natural disposition to mate (read penetrate). Even though later studies have revealed that females are more prone to sexual adventurism than had previously been thought, when it comes to sexual intercourse, the male/ female divide is as robust as ever and aggression becomes embedded as a necessary component in the process of propagation of the species and deductively civilization itself.

Evolutionary Psychology puts forward the theory of psychological dispositions to the act of rape based on both biological theories of evolution and psychological conceptions that sexual difference of the mind is knowable through behavior. Sex being projected as a body phenomenon in most sexology and scientific research, sexual violence also comes to be treated as the same. The *Adaptation* view explains the disposition to rape as a specific adaptation favored by selection to increase male reproductive success by increasing the number of mates (Wertheimer 2003, 81). In other words sexual violence is an adaptation of the male's need to plant his fertile seed and as if the competition for the fertile womb is played out naturally through the aggression on women. The *By-product view* (Wertheimer 2003, *ibid*) sees the disposition to rape as a by-product of other dispositions favored by selection, principally the intense sexual desires of human males and sexual choosiness of human females. Therefore the evolutionary account of rape is said to follow from the conflict between the male disposition to seek quantity and variety in sexual relations and the female disposition to limit sexual access to healthy men who promise to be good partners and providers. This conflict is thought to reach its crisis in men faced with limited sexual or reproductive opportunities who tend to be left out of the evolutionary cycle (Wertheimer 2003, *ibid*).

While evolutionary theory holds the homosocial competition between men for sexual access to females as responsible for the gender divide in aggression and biological theories draw a link between certain hormones called "male hormones" (androgens)¹ and a male predominance of aggression, the Psychoanalytic school of thought argues that male violence becomes a way to

¹ The category male hormones is a veritable misnomer as is female hormones. Believed to be responsible for the overall anatomical and physiological growth of the two human sexes from the embryo stage right upto the old age there is no such specific chemical substance, the same hormones being present in both male and female but in varying proportions (Moitra 2002, 7).

prove the successful accession to masculinity. It is proof of the fact that man has successfully separated from the mother and transferred his identity to the father.

Psychiatry seeks to understand rapists either as emotionally disturbed or having certain personality disorders. Some literature associates rape with brain damage and learning disabilities. Rapists are not seen as suffering from psychiatric disorders per se though there have been some instances of sexual offences being committed by persons suffering from mental illness. The general trend is to see rapists as persons with adverse childhood experiences that impair a normal healthy relationship with the 'opposite sex' resulting in either sexual inadequacy or perverse sexual desires. Psychological explanations of rape see the rapist as suffering from cognitive distortions that affect their perceptions and judgments about the world and provide justification for their sexually aggressive behavior (Sarkar, 2013).

Sexual violence and the male subject

The gender-trait theory of human aggression fails to explain the inter play of bodies and social processes while naturalizing violence. Moreover, sex role theories do not provide any conceptual framework to understand power as productive of subjectivities and not merely operating as a tool of repression. On the other hand, theories of rape that ground it in psychopathological models culminate in rape becoming a "medicalized" problem. Such explanations however cannot help one comprehend the meaning of rape in its socio-historical perspectives. The cause and analysis of the rape cannot be reduced to a master molecule nor can it be reduced to the selfish motive of an isolated gene or uncontrollable excesses of a single hormone. The rather universal claim of evolutionary advantage would remain seriously suspect in the face of the shifting conceptualizations of sexual violence across time and space. For instance such theories do not and cannot explain the rape of men and children. On the other hand, psychological theories even if allowing for a certain level of social influences tend to be equally restricted in that they assume a pre-determinist notion of the sexed body and the gendered mind. Moreover, even if violence is found to be located in genes, hormones or a particular psychic structure, it does not in any way justify the perpetration of the same. Such theories only tend to naturalize male sexual aggression and establish the potential perception that 'all men are rapists'. Unfortunately, such naturalistic assumptions cut across all sections of expertise – police, lawyers, students, teachers, doctors and mental health professionals leaving some men to revel in their phallic masculinity. Against this backdrop, women seem to have only two choices – either give in to men's lustful demands or run into the 'safety' of their homes.²

² The public/private divide often remains stark in much of the safety tips given to women by well wishers and experts alike. For instance, women are often advised not to 'loiter' outside home unnecessarily thereby inviting

This naturalization then seeks to justify the advice given regularly to women/young girls to undergo martial arts training or at least some form of physical defense training as if to match up to the male physical-psychological excess.³

Women's rights activists have challenged explanations of sexual violence framed in terms of men's inherent, irresistible sexual urge which in a moment of 'civilized' existence remains adequately under check but which is always under the threat of losing control (Porter 1986, 219). Such analyses focused on the individual rather than on the social – an individualized expression of anti-social personality traits, or a result of the globalized media spawned aberrations instilled in young minds. Sexual violence comes to be treated in these analyses as an isolated personal/individual mishap perpetrated by the "crazed fringe of the society", the "sex maniacs", who vent forth their excess libido on women – not-so-undeserving by virtue of their dress, lifestyle, and body language – said to provoke men's inherent 'animalistic' instincts (Porter 1986, 216). Following such theories, women also come to be understood as 'always rapable' and consequently prevention measures focus on how best to protect women from such masculine excesses, suggesting keeping under wraps one's 'feminine wiles' through a series of *do's* and *don'ts*. Feminists on the other hand, have overturned such explanations to argue that sexual violence functions as an extension of gender discrimination and an expression of power and control emanating from a certain sense of masculine superiority.⁴

Men and Masculinity

Sexual violence is one of the most frequent and one of the most under-reported of crimes against women in India. In fact, for many women violence is a significant way by which they come to terms with their sexuality. Sometimes sexual violence takes the form of 'child's play' – an unthinking, unlearned act of pleasure but violative nevertheless, at other times it can take the form of a reasoned act – a deliberate establishment of masculine right over the woman's body, even in the name of protecting her honor or the honor of the community. One critical element in

trouble. But it is a long known fact that women have never been safe inside homes as well. Women of all age groups have been subjected to a range of violations from sexual abuse to domestic violence.

³ Advocates of physical training for young girls and women chose to overlook the fact that sexual assault is not merely a result of physical power or bodily strength. Sexual assault is as much or more an instance of psychological-social coercion and subjugation. Merely learning the physical script of how to punch and kick when attacked might fail miserably in the face of a social script that thrives on psychological intimidation.

⁴ Nivedita Menon summarizes three broad ways in which feminists have perceived sexual violence. (a) Rape is violence, not sex; (b) Rape is violence and a unique form of violence because of its sexual nature; (c) Rape is violence and violence *is* sex (Menon, 2004: 110). All these understanding situate sexual violence away from biological, psychological explanations of sexual violence and more specifically in the power relations between the two genders.

the attempt to understand such wide range of acts of violence is to understand the link between male sexual aggression and masculinity. How do we understand the contours of masculinity whereby a “no” cannot still be comprehended as NO!

To understand sexual violence it is important to understand the playing out of masculinity in different spheres of life for example, in the daily institutions of gender relations such as family, education and work, in the cultures of masculine and feminine behavior, in the normative space of friendship, intimacy and romance, etc. The linking of notions of purity and pollution to women’s sexuality, the interrelation between woman’s body and caste class hierarchies, the pervasive discourse of shame and honor around woman’s sexualized body – all these create the ground for the institutionalization of masculine supremacy. The elaborate celebration of male virility, ferocity, and fertility, the lessons in male solidarity, bellicosity, the overvaluing of male life-forms and masculine traits, the training that instills the urge to dominate women and accept dominance of older men spawn a pervasive gender hierarchy and men, particularly heterosexual men, take their power in patriarchal societies for granted. Men are brought up to expect and assume power especially over women, and given their deep belief of the equivalence between masculinity and control, they resent any affront to their superiority. A discourse that serves to equate manliness with bravado, risk-taking, and the denial of fear often also makes it ‘cool’ to be sexually aggressive.

Masculinity does not, however, have any necessary link with the male sex⁵ or the biological body. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 836) argue, “Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting”. It thrives by creating boundaries among men *and* spreads its domination over women, and children. It expresses itself through actions that range from disciplining to punishing women and children, queer bashing, male gang fights to international wars and even ‘combatting terrorism’. This form of masculinity which is a certain psychic positioning in the social has been called hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt (2005). Sexual violence becomes just another tool, either as a threat or a practice that serves to maintain dominance over anyone who happens to inhabit the non-masculine subject-position – women, children or the queer.

Not all expressions of masculinity are aggressive and oppressive. Articulations of masculinity can be mapped in two directions: one, the feudalistic aggressive clamping down on women’s freedom

⁵ Women have also known to embody masculine aggression and have been active agents of domination over other women and some men. However, the present paper does not deal with this complex positioning and defers that discussion for a later time.

and two, the subtle sophisticated globalized gender bending type, more difficult to discern as controlling. On the face of it, such gender bending appears as a mode of questioning gender stereotypes and resisting dominant expressions of masculinity. The new global-local man located in the changing contours of masculinity – the cultural *avant-garde* – has had an image make-over. Men subscribing to the dilution of gender roles appear aware of women's right to equality, heavily prescribing women's growth, autonomy and freedom. The 'new man'⁶ thrives on ceding space and privilege to women, treating them as 'almost equal' at home and at workplace and creating niches of sensitivity, softness and understanding. However, such magnanimity is, almost always and ultimately, a mark of benevolent patriarchy where gender difference is dealt with through a protectionist approach. To be part of the game of gender equality, women have two choices: one, you have to be as good where gender differences will have to be transcended/overlooked; two, you have to admit that you are not so good and gender differences will be accommodated as inherent specificities/weaknesses. Both choices are provided within the logic of benevolent inclusion. In no situation are differences allowed to affect in any way, the overarching principles of the game where equality is defined by masculine standards.

A new cultural politics that invests in the rediscovery of body thus far imprisoned by respectability explores novel markers of masculinity such as the androgyne or the metrosexual man. Mapping the coordinates of a sober and controlled masculinity is the lithe muscular shaved body, the hairless beautiful young body reminiscent of the Greek heroes. There remains almost no difference between the 'normal' and its abject other – the homosexual or the effeminate man. Fashion statements that capitalize on the new-found culture of blurring gender distinctions however shy away from any radical questioning of gender and sexual norms. These new and market friendly expressions of self remain entrenched in an economy of heterosexual masculinity. As Brett Billman argues, the masculine body in all its enfleshment is discursively marked and this enfleshment helps maintain the power and privilege of hegemonic masculinities. "The masculine body conjures images of muscles, toughness and power. This very phallic vision of the masculine body also produces specters of tradition, authenticity and naturalness" (Billman, 2007: 03).

Rape is the coercive, unruly face of hegemonic masculinity. Meanwhile hegemonic masculinity gets reorganized in our everyday lives – in our public spheres, in our private realms, in our political imagination as well as our ethical beings. Hegemonic masculinity is necessarily disaggregated, heterogeneous, complex, benevolent and perpetually mutating. To understand the masculinity of sexual violence, we also need to take on board expressions of individual masculine prowess in everyday activities of love and duty, in the bedroom and outside. Masculinity operates in a continuum, from an individualistic project of creating circuits of desires, aspirations and

⁶ New is as much the new age man as also the transformed man – the neo-liberal subject.

possessions to the need to establish communal masculine solidarity on the bodies of women. Operating in a continuum of normalized forms of everyday masculine benevolence to disruptive moments of pathological aggression, from loving persuasion to aggressive persecution, masculinity has no fear because it does not see its aspirations as illegitimate, rather as an entitlement to power.

The flip side of masculine aggression is that women themselves have borne violence daily within the family and outside, sometimes without acknowledging the fact that it is illegal, unethical and a tool of domination. The social ideal of a “good woman”, the internalization of “normal femininity” often cause women to perceive violence as justified. It is commonly believed by women and men that certain norms and duties define woman’s gender role. Women who do not follow these deserve chastisement. Such reprimand is not held to be violent. Thus, wife beating is not seen as any form of brutality if the woman gives cause for jealousy, or does not perform her “wifely” duties adequately. This is further complicated by a common belief that violent acts are an expression of love and merely a tool to help woman improve as a person.

Hegemonic masculinity is neither static nor self-reproducing. It is always already open to contestations and disruptions, needing constant affirmation and reiteration. Masculinity is perpetually mutating with different forms of masculinity co-existing, endlessly seeping into each other and other modes of discrimination to produce new configurations of power and social status. There has been a decisive foregrounding of women’s rights and her autonomy in the form of legal reforms and policy changes which has further questioned male privilege and gender hierarchies. The uncoupling of sex and reproduction with the emerging possibility of sexual liaisons outside monogamous heterosexual marital couplehood has led to some form of loosening of the Indian family structure. The middle class who has been the bearer of such markers of globalization has experimented with new ways of being, including pushing the boundaries of family and romance. Liberalization accompanied by increasing instabilities of earning, living and social securities has served to reinforce fundamentalisms of other kinds. Such anxieties have led to various social reactions ranging from sprouting of men’s rights groups⁷ to the suppression of women’s rights as seen in *khap* rulings and honor killings. Caste hierarchies, ethnic boundaries are becoming more and more consolidated, rigid and intolerant. Contemporary articulations of masculinity steeped in Hindu nationalist ideology become apparent periodically in violent shows of intolerance against events believed to threaten the

⁷ The earliest men’s groups emerged in the early 90s in response to the apparent misuse of Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), introduced in 1983, which made cruelty to any woman in her marital home by her husband or his relatives a criminal offence leading to immediate and non-bailable arrest. For a detailed discussion of the emergence of men’s rights groups in India, see Romit Chowdhury 2014, “Conditions of Emergence: The Formation of Men’s Rights Groups in Contemporary India”

sexual morality of women belonging to a more superior race, i.e. the Hindus. Be it the screening of a film with same-sex content, or a painting depicting a female Hindu deity in the nude, or consensual interreligious marriages, the Hindu right wing response seeks to retrieve and restore the “lost honor”.⁸

Borrowing from Freud (1991[1953]), one could argue that present day violence against women could well point towards a certain ‘castration anxiety’ that fears emasculation and annihilation in the face of growing expressions of agency that question its superiority. Men are socialised to accept patriarchal values of control and superiority over women and a questioning of these norms cause tensions between their fears of castration, their helplessness in many fields and their basic beliefs of entitlement to power over women. Violence against women can then be read as a masculine backlash against women’s agency, her coming out with her desire, in the form of public visibility, sexual assertion, entering education institutions, work force etc. This provokes a repressive clamping down on women’s freedom, mostly in the name of ‘protecting her’, but sometimes also in the name of protecting community honor, caste purity or national cultural heritage in the face of western onslaught.

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⁸ Since 2009 the concept of Love Jihad has caught the imagination of this nation where it is believed that Muslim men seduce Hindu women and trick them into marriage followed by conversion into the Islam religion. In 2014 this belief took the form a widespread paranoia whereby the Hindu Right Wing organizations started travelling from village to village to warn hindu women against an organized Love Jihad (as part of a conspiracy theory) and in some cases took active and violet steps to break interfaith marriages which were no doubt consensual.

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