

Against Our Will

—Men, Women and Rape

By Susan Brownmiller

Penguin 1976, 472 pgs.

Reviewed by Gabriele Dietrich

IN A country where gang rape in caste clashes or assault against women in police stations are very ordinary news items, we need to take notice of Susan Brownmiller's study of rape which is written with a commitment to militant action. "My purpose in this book", she says at the end, "has been to give rape its history. Now we must deny it a future."

Brownmiller who is an American journalist, analyses not just the problem of sexual violence in Western capitalist countries, but goes back to the ancient civilizations of the Middle East, Greece and Rome, and also studies sexual violence in twentieth century wars, including the world wars, Bangladesh and Vietnam. She starts by raising fundamental questions about the psychology of rape, then goes into ancient and contemporary history of the crime and slowly proceeds to carve out a profile of the "average rapist", his motivation and attitudes, the victim and her attitude before, during and after the crime.

She also tackles the questions of rape and class, and most important, shows again and again, that rape has nothing to do with "sexual gratification" or satisfaction of "natural urges". Sexual violence is simply the imposition of domination and authority, the humiliation, sometimes annihilation of someone who cannot retaliate.

Brownmiller first realized that rape was not the product of an exceptionally diseased mind, when women began to "speak out" to each other about their most "personal" experiences, in the course of the developing feminist movement in America: "I learned that evening, and on many other evenings that victims of rape could be women I knew... women who understood their victimization whereas I understood only that it had not happened to me —and resisted the idea that it could. I learned that in ways I preferred to deny, the threat of rape had profoundly affected my life."

The Penis as a Weapon

Brownmiller points out that rape is not "natural": no zoologist has observed animals rape in their natural habitat. Freud, the father of modern psychoanalysis was convinced



that all little girls envy the "superior" sexual organs of boys, and the process of growing up to be "well adjusted" women means that they must accept their naturally inferior status. However, neither he nor later Freudians analysed society to ask the question: "What is it that makes women envy the position of men? What oppression do women wish to escape when they wish they were men?"

Even thinkers like Engels who understood that women were economically oppressed, and therefore enslaved within the patriarchal family, did not fully analyse the sexual power of men over women. Brownmiller tries to say what Engels left unsaid when she writes: "Man's discovery that his genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries in prehistoric times, along with the use of fire and the first crude stone axe. From prehistoric times to the present, rape has played a crucial function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear. ...That some men rape provides a sufficient threat to keep all women in a constant state of intimidation..."

Women— "Protected" Property

Since rape cannot possibly be retaliated in kind by women themselves, the problem of protection has unavoidably cropped up since prehistoric times. Brownmiller sees this as

the origin of the male-dominated family: “Once the male took title to a specific female body...he had to assume the burden of fighting off all other potential attackers or scaring them off by the retaliatory threat of raping their women. But the price of woman’s protection by some men against abuse by others was heavy... she became estranged from other women... a problem to this very day.... And those who did assume the historic burden of her protection—later formalized as husband, brother, father, clan — reduced her status to that of a chattel. The historic price of a woman’s protection by man against men was the imposition of chastity and monogamy.”

While these prehistoric events are left to speculation, their results are recorded in the laws of ancient civilizations. Invariably, these law codes treat rape not as a crime of men against women (forcing intercourse on a woman against her will) but as a violation of the property rights of her father, brother or husband by the rapist. The punishment therefore was that the damaged property had to be bought at a fair price—the rapist had to pay a sum of money and marry the woman. So also, the landowning lords in feudal societies had a property right not only over their wives but also over the wives of their serfs. This is why most societies do not recognize the rape of a wife by her husband as a crime.

Rape as a violation of property rights becomes particularly evident in wars. While for the victorious soldiers, rape is part of the conquest of land and the subjugation of people, the men of the defeated nation see it as “part of their own male anguish of defeat”— “their women” have been raped. Brownmiller documents in horrifying detail what happened to women in Europe during the world wars, and in Bangladesh and Vietnam—how they were tortured, raped, prostituted and then rejected by their husbands as somehow responsible for their “defilement”.

The chapter on ‘Riots, Pogroms and Revolutions’ shows how rape is a part of all these events too, but it does not analyse the socialist revolutions, which is a pity, since these intended to abolish private property, and therefore, a study of the incidence of rape would have been most enlightening.

Rape and Race

Brownmiller shows that rape of black women by white masters, was the most prevalent form of inter-racial rape in American history, but white racists always exaggerated the tendency of black men to revenge themselves by raping white women. Yet Brownmiller also shows that some anti-racists like Eldridge Cleaver and Frantz Fanon are utterly sexist in their views while they are acclaimed as leaders of liberation movements. Thus Cleaver in his autobiography writes: “Rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man’s law, upon his system of values and that I was defiling his women. This was the most satisfying to me because I was very resentful over the historical fact of how the white man has used the black woman.”

Rape as Exertion of Power

The chapter ‘Power: Institution and Authority’ best expresses the main thesis of the book that rape is the primeval and the ultimate act of subjugation. Surveys show that a vast majority of rapes are planned. This goes to disprove the theory that the rapist is usually ‘provoked’ by the flimsy clothing worn by the victim, and is overcome by an overpowering physical urge. In fact, the rapist is asserting his power and urge to dominate. Statistics show that in many cases, the victim is subjected to some form of sexual insult over and above the rape. Rape is easier to commit in situations where the aggressor has the advantage of structural domination such as feudalism, slavery, war, or in police stations where the victim is often too overawed by the power of the authority figure to be able to protest.

Similarly, the rape of children by family members, a very common but rarely investigated crime, is made easier because the adult is an authority figure to the child, and his word would be trusted against hers. Brownmiller analyses rape among male inmates of prisons and shows that it is used to establish a hierarchy of terror, to prove ‘masculinity’, to secure services and advantages. It is important to note that this kind of contact has nothing to do with homosexual love. It is the humiliation of unwilling weaker and younger men who are defined as ‘women’.

This chapter raises questions which need to be analysed under the specific conditions of different societies. In India, the occurrence of rape in caste clashes, communal riots, among landless labourers, working women in factories, offices and shops, is widely prevalent but rarely reported. Assaults in police stations are beginning to be more reported. Very little study has been done of rape within the family.

Rapist and Victim: Myths and Reality

Since rape is an expression of dominance, films and newspaper reports often project the image of the ‘heroic rapist’.

Popular myths about the victim are: All women want to be raped; A woman cannot be raped against her will; If you can’t avoid being raped, you might as well relax and enjoy it; She was asking for it; She changed her mind afterwards and cried rape. Brownmiller analyses reported rapes to show that these are all blatant and conventional lies. There is nothing heroic in rape since the victim is helpless. Women do not ‘ask’ to be raped, because females of any age from 15 months to 80 years and not necessarily the beautiful ones, have been victims, as statistics show. Studies also show that women who fight back skilfully have a chance of escape while submission may well end in being murdered.

Fighting Back

Our society assumes that women do not have a right over their own bodies since these bodies are the ‘natural’ possession of men. Not only rape but also eve teasing, the use of women’s bodies in prostitution, or its more hidden

forms—pornography, advertising, is based on this assumption. So also, the wife is presumed to be the property of the husband. Marriage gives him the right to copulate with her against her will. It is important to note that some countries in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia have laws against marital rape.

Brownmiller suggests certain short-term measures such as training of girls in self defence and competitive sports to help them overcome the feeling of vulnerability. We should demand laws which adequately punish rape and that the police should have a 50 percent composition of women. The presence of female constables in police stations to prevent rape must be put forward as a demand in India too. Experience shows that rape cases get reported and prosecuted much more adequately that is, at a rate comparable to other crimes if women work on them. Normally rape is one of the most under-reported of crimes. It is also true that armies like the Vietnamese which have many women in them, do not so easily commit rape.

She makes the very important recommendation that a woman who is threatened with rape, should attack the aggressor at his most vulnerable area — the genitalia. Traditionally, men have protected themselves from this most painful assault by ‘gentleman’s codes’ which forbid hitting ‘below the belt’. As Brownmiller says, this “gentlemen’s agreement is understandable — among gentlemen”. When a woman is threatened, she should realise her natural advantage and make full use of it.

She concludes, “Rape can be eradicated, not merely controlled or avoided on an individual basis, but the approach must be long-range and co-operative, and must have the understanding and good will of many men as well as women.”

The question would also arise of fighting for a mode of production which would give equal opportunities of employment to all, a structure which would free women from housework and childcare, so that they would not be dependent on men. The larger political struggle for a truly egalitarian society can only succeed when women wholeheartedly participate in it and bring their own issues to the forefront. Brownmiller does not spell out these implications of her thesis that rape is the assertion of dominance, namely that it can be eradicated only in a society free from dominance of all kinds.

Nevertheless, her book is very valuable as an analysis of a problem which has historically been distorted and ignored. It may help inspire studies in other countries and cultures. Such studies are certainly necessary to develop action against rape not only in the women’s movement but also in all movements for human liberation.

TOWARD AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF WOMEN

Edited by Rayna R. Reiter

Monthly Review Press, New York Price: \$15

Distributors: Oxford University Press

The feminist movement has opened the way for an

investigation into sexual inequality in modern society. This collection of essays by feminist women anthropologists is an attempt to examine the origins and continuation of such inequality. It is at the same time a challenge to traditional anthropology, a demand to incorporate feminist critiques into its work.

The essays examine women’s condition in a wide range of societies, from the simplest hunter-gatherer tribes in Africa to post-revolutionary China. Among them are an examination of our primate inheritance, a comparison of the way male and female anthropologists derive very different portraits of the same culture, a feminist critique of the theory that places men’s hunting at the centre of cultural development while minimizing the contribution of women’s food gathering, an examination of the patterns of survival among poor women in Latin cultures, a re-examination of the matriarchy question, an analysis of male and female language and a study of how rigid gender roles and division of male and female domains contribute to the oppression of women in primitive societies.

The essays in this significant volume provide guidelines and directions for an anthropology of women and represent an important contribution to the founding of this new discipline and body of thought. Very useful explorations into the vast unexplored area of the roots of our oppression — how it all began.

EMMA GOLDMAN — PORTRAIT OF A REBEL WOMAN

By B.N. Ganguli

Allied Publishers Price: Rs. 25

This is a biography of the famous nineteenth century radical activist and writer, Emma Goldman. It attempts to trace how from a grim childhood in a poor but orthodox Jewish family, which made her deeply sensitive to all forms of injustice, she grew up with the vision of liberation for the individual and her society. She worked as a member of an anarchist group supporting workers’ movements and her courage earned her the title ‘Red Emma’.

But her anarchist philosophy was not a theory restricted to political activity — it pervaded her life as a woman. Emma defied external authority in all its forms — the Church, the State, social conventions and oppressive institutions like marriage. She paid the price for this rebellion. In 1916 she was imprisoned for advocating that women should not “keep their mouths shut and their wombs open”.

It is interesting to find that she anticipated today’s movement in many of her ideas, for instance in stressing the need for freely available contraception to give a woman control over her own body. Also, in the emphasis she placed on changing the methods of revolution and the need for non-authoritarian organizations that do not stifle the individual.

This biography serves as a brief introduction to the life and legacy of a pioneering feminist whose autobiography and other writings would also repay study.

SYMBOLS OF POWER

Studies on the political status of women in India

Edited by Vina Mazumdar

Allied Publishers Price: Rs. 60

This compilation of studies focuses much-needed attention on the low political status of women in India. The figures speak for themselves. Since the first general elections in 1952, women who have contested Lok Sabha seats have never been more than an abysmal five per cent of the total number of candidates. Women have never contested in even 20 per cent of Lok Sabha constituencies. The number of women voting in general elections has been steadily declining. In the most populous state Uttar Pradesh, which has the largest number of Lok Sabha constituencies, women candidates have never comprised more than three percent of the total number of candidates.

The book discusses these problems in three different sections. The first gives a brief historical account of the demand

for women's franchise made during the national movement. This section also contains an analysis of women's participation in general elections and a study of political attitudes of women voters. The second section, the weakest in the book, carries state-level surveys of women's attitudes to participation in politics. The samples are small and the approach over-statistical.

The section 'Profiles of Women in State Politics' is more worthwhile since voting patterns are analysed and the role of political parties in sponsoring women candidates considered, taking note of literacy levels and other socio-economic factors. However, the quality of these studies is uneven.

This book could be useful for the specialist who wishes to collect more data and come to more comprehensive conclusions. A deeper analysis of historical processes, women's movements in different regions and their effect on political participation of women is called for.

ERRATA

Malini Das in her article "Women against Dowry" in the third issue of **MANUSHI** forgot to mention that the anti-dowry demonstration in Model Town was organized by Stri Sangharsh. We regret the omission.

CHANDIGARH ADMINISTRATION

CARE FOR WOMEN & CHILDREN

- * A child and women development corporation being set up with a share capital of Rs 5.00 lakhs for carrying out programmes of child and women welfare.
- * 27000 children being supplied nutritious diet under Midday Meal programme. *it* 2500 girls belonging to weaker sections to be awarded attendance scholarships.
- * 50 talent scholarships, meritorious scholarships to all students belonging to scheduled castes, securing above 55% marks in Middle Standard Examination, guaranteed.
- * Free text books, stationery, uniforms and scholarships to all the scheduled caste children studying in class 1 to 8.
- * Rs. 14.30 lakhs provided in the 6th Plan for opening creches for the children of working mothers including Rs. 0.85 lakhs for the children of sweepers and scavengers.
- * A Nari Niketan set up to provide Institutional Care, Moral Protection, Psychological adjustment and Rehabilitation of Widows and unmarried mothers, deserted and destitute women.
- * Rs. 15 lakhs provided in the Sixth Plan for this purpose.
- * Crafts Centres opened in Labour colonies to provide training in handicrafts to poor women.
- * Fans, water coolers, children's playing equipment provided in all village schools *if* Balwadis, Anganwadis, Mahila Mandals set up in Rural Areas.

ISSUED BY:
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