

Beauty and the Beasts: Rethinking fantastical paradigms that cast women as damsels in distress, in need of being saved from agentless men in a global context

Scattered across the media and popular discourse, one can find many examples of lexis choices that dehumanise men. Former television star and now charged sex offender, Bill Cosby has been described as a “sexual predator.”¹ Donald Trump, President of the United States and the defendant of many unresolved sexual assault claims, a “monster.”² The actions that they are accused of no doubt merit such insults and disgust. On the one hand, the use of such terms highlights just how unacceptable, and against the values that we hold synonymous with humanity, such assaults against women are. Confronting such behaviour has enabled the rise of movements such as #metoo. Victims everywhere are finding confidence that their voice will be heard, and this conduct will no longer be accepted or silently brushed under the carpet. Yet, I argue that by dehumanising perpetrators, we are allowing them to be considered as devoid of autonomy and choice. A beast cannot be held responsible for its actions. Monstrosity is its inherent and unavoidable nature. Rather, it is necessary to concurrently condemn this behaviour, while emphasising that such conduct was not predestined but the product of choices made by conscious actors. Moreover, such language and ideas of sexual predation are frequently evoked in state and nationalist rhetoric. Outsiders are stereotyped as agentless, morally repugnant and naturally predatory to further anti-immigration and interventionist campaigns. Thus, decoupling sexual assault and suggestions of the inherent bestiality of men, firstly, emphasises that perpetrators of sexual violence were fully responsible for the choices they made, and secondly, belittles euro-centric arguments that present outsiders as fundamentally dangerous.

Rebecca West’s provocative taunt, “Aren’t men Beasts?” resounded well within the liberating climate and feminist writing of the time in 1970. Academic writing for the first time truly examined what they understood as the universally subordinated of women. The commonality of women’s unjustly inferior position, suggested as due to their entrapment in the domestic sphere³ and psychic changes of menstruation, childbirth and child raising,⁴ was paralleled by the idea of a uniformly dominating male sphere. Thus, men were but one category, a category which due to their dominating position could easily be considered uniformly bestial in their relation to women. With third wave feminism and the rise of intersectionality, the uniformity of the experiences of women was called into question, as factors such as class, ethnicity and sexual orientation were emphasised to demonstrate the plurality of gender relations and experiences.⁵

¹ BBC NEWS (26/04/2018) Bill Cosby found guilty of sexual assault in retrial, Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-43915033> (Accessed: 27/04/2018)

² Jenkins, Simon (15/02/2017) Yes, Donald Trump is a monster. But his agenda isn’t all bad, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/15/yes-donald-trump-is-a-monster-but-his-agenda-isnt-all-bad> (Accessed: 27/04/2018).

³ Ortner, Sherry (1974) 'Is female to male as nature is to culture?', in Rosaldo, M. Z. and Lamphere, L. (ed.) *Women, culture and Society*. Stamford: Stamford University Press

⁴ Chodorow, Nancy (1978) *The reproduction of mothering: psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁵ Moore, Henrietta (1999) 'Whatever happened to women and men? gender and other crises in anthropology', in Moore, Henrietta (ed.) *Anthropological theory today*. Cambridge: Polity

However, in popular discourse, the acknowledgement of the different experiences of women outside Euro-America has often been portrayed in terms of a civilised West and a savage Rest. For example, in 2001, United State intervention in Afghanistan was presented as a moral crusade, protecting the rights of Muslim women.⁶ Defending these women from the male beasts of their own culture, characterises Euro-American states as saviours, masking the often less palatable political and economic reasons for intervention. Issues such as institutionalised rape produce some of the most evocative images of the bestiality of men. Understandably, one hesitates to grant such perpetrators with even an ounce of humanity; an easier alternative being to brand such actors as beasts. However, while not wanting to deny the horrific reality of such actions, it is also necessary to stress how such practices can be evoked to further one particular political narrative. In Peru, Theidon notes that, during the guerrilla civil war, rape was used as a tool of terrorism by both the Peruvian State and the paramilitary Communist Party of Peru. While the local women first emphasised the impact of starvation, destroyed homes and livestock and the loss of loved ones, international news and the current Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, concentrated on rape as an “emblematic womanly wound of war” and evidence for the savage nature of the Communist terrorists. These men were not men, but beasts, animals in need of being put down by any means. Evidently, this portrayal exploits the emotive image of sexual violence, ignoring the fact that both sides used rape and that rape was institutionalised as a tool of power within the Peruvian Armed Forces, thus, making the perpetrators concurrently victims. This is a limited view of the gendered dynamics of war, supporting an anti-communist political narrative, and one that reduces women to inanimate sexual bodies abused by faceless masses of bestial men.⁷

Such dehumanising language can also be found in the context of gender relations within nationalist campaigns. Time and time again, national rhetoric casts women as damsels in distress in need of protection from the sexual predation of outsiders. Once more, the behaviour of the accused is considered an inherent part of their nature, and so not only portrays the men as agentless, but fuels racial stereotypes.⁸ For example, in the 1890s, African American activist, Ida B. Wells recorded that in around one third of the victims of lynching had been falsely accused of raping a white woman.⁹ The connection between racism and accusations of sexual predation remains to this day, over a century later. In 2011, NRC Handelsblad, a Dutch newspaper, ran with the title “Sexual Problems are Partially Culturally Determined”¹⁰ and in 2017, the German newspaper Bild was forced to issue an apology for falsely reporting that a “rioting sex mob” of some fifty refugees had attacked women in Frankfurt.¹¹ While in the Peruvian example rape as a tool of war sadly indisputably occurs, in this case fictitious accusations have led to an idea that sexual violence is an unavoidable characteristic of certain bestial groups to further anti-immigration campaigns.

⁶ Abu-Lughod, Lila (2013) *Do Muslim women really need saving*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press

⁷ Theidon, Kimberly (2016) 'A Greater Measure of Justice. Gender, Violence, and Reparations', in Lewin, Ellen and Silverstein, Leni. M. (ed.) *Mapping Feminist Anthropology in the Twenty-First Century*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press

⁸ Gingrich, André; Banks, Marcus (2006) *Neo-nationalism in Europe and beyond: perspectives from social anthropology*, New York: Oxford.

⁹ McMurry, Linda O. (1998) *To Keep the Waters Troubled: the Life of Ida B. Well*. New York: Oxford University Press

¹⁰ Kalb, Don, Halmai, Gábor (2011) 'Introduction', in Kalb, Don, Halmai, Gábor (ed.) *Headlines of nation, subtexts of class : working-class populism and the return of the repressed in neoliberal Europe*. New York: Berghahn Books

¹¹ News Corp Australia Network (16/02/2017) Fake news: Mass sexual assault by refugees in Frankfurt ‘never happened’, Available at: <http://www.news.com.au/world/fake-news-mass-sexual-assault-by-refugees-in-frankfurt-never-happened/news-story/1b52bc617051867f9b15e7a0c1dfff0c> (Accessed: 27/04/2018).

By arguing against the use of terms such as beast and predator, I do not mean to deny the cultural factors, the power of the collective, to influence the actions of the individual. The association between sexual violence and societal influences can be seen Snajdr's study of domestic violence in Kazakhstan.¹² Here, the author found that police officers partially excused sexual assault, at times even resulting in homicide, due to the misconception that violence was partly natural, an unavoidable characteristic of men. While the perpetrators were at times arrested, no efforts were made to address the frequency of domestic violence, as its naturalness was evoked to cast doubts upon the efficacy of any possible intervention. Sanjdr recounts how one Russian attorney quoted a traditional proverb to explain the prevalence of domestic abuse; "The one you love is the one you beat." Men were accepted as beasts, loving their wives in the only way they knew how and thus, perpetuating a cycle of violence. Thus, societal influences shape the way by which different individuals approach gender relations. In order to improve gender relations, it is clearly imperative to encourage social change. However, I argue that this is best achieved in Euro-America through the emphasis on the individual and the autonomy of their actions, thus, breaking the reproduction of such ideas that sexual violence is inevitable.

Finally, I wish to highlight that by presenting men as beasts or predators, women are cast as prey; powerless damsels in distress and passive objects. As campaigns such as #metoo have successfully demonstrated, this is anything but the case. During 2017, the power and solidarity of women was seen on a global stage with Women's Marches occurring on every continent such as in Washington in the US, London in Britain, Nairobi in Kenya, Kolkata in India, Lima in Peru and Melbourne in Australia.¹³ However, returning to feminist themes of the 1970s, solidarity should not be mistaken for a commonality of experiences and an assumption that western women can speak for all women. This can clearly be seen with the debates over Islamic veils which have captured the attention of public opinion and state legislation in recent years, considered by many as an embodiment of patriarchal control. However, Abu-Lughod exclaims "Do Muslim women really need saving?"¹⁴ arguing that while many Muslim women may be the subject of oppression, others are empowered by their religion and their choice to wear certain religious signifiers. Rather, such rhetoric again only serves to justify western intervention in the Middle East.

In way of a conclusion, Rebecca West's bold statement that all men were beasts aligned well contemporary academic discourse. The liberating climate of the 1960s and 1970s witnessed the first real engagement with gender politics in Euro-America. Emphasising the responsibility of all men and their privilege from institutional sexism was a necessary step in addressing gender disparities. However, in the age of #metoo, we need to move away from abstract notions of the patriarchy. Presenting men as beasts, while on the one side acknowledges the repugnant nature of their actions also acts to distance the individual from their actions. Further, stereotyping a collective of men as beasts is often tied to nationalistic descriptions of outsiders, justifying anti-immigration laws or western intervention in other countries. Moral crusades mask the less savoury motives behind Euro-American action. Finally, if men are beasts or predators, women can be cast as prey, universally subordinated and helpless to men. This is evidently anything but the case. Notions of the individual resound well with Euro-American concepts of the self as can be seen by the

¹² Snajdr, Edward (2007) 'Ethnicizing the subject: domestic violence and the politics of primordialism in Kazakhstan', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13(3), pp. 603-620.

¹³ Curtis, Tanner (2017) Pictures From Women's Marches on Every Continent. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/21/world/womens-march-pictures.html>. Last accessed 04/03/2017

¹⁴ Abu-Lughod, Lila (2013) *Do Muslim women really need saving*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press

individualistic tone of the United States' "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." While campaigns for change undoubtedly need to address the social factors which influence the way men interact with women, we need to exploit the social importance granted to individual agency, to emphasise the choice behind male actions. No man is born a beast, and while societal influences may encourage his transformation, we need to ensure that he is fully human to be held completely accountable for his actions.