

Life after Rape: Narrative, Theory, and Feminism

RAJESWARI SUNDER RAJAN

Texts do not lie outside the circuit of sexual politics but are implicated in them. It is this mode of implication, particularly as it results in the constitution of the sexed subject, that the feminist critical method uncovers. Rape is a term central to the poetics of narrative as well as a crucial area of feminist politics: the raped woman functions as the subject both *of* narrative and *in* feminism. How are rape, narrative structure, and feminist politics imbricated? How may we contest the claims of universal or global validity advanced by feminists and narrative theorists on the grounds of rape or of desire? By indicating the historical and specifically contextual limits within which the terms operate in their mutually constitutive roles, a comparative approach offers an empirical check and a reference point.

"Sirai" ("Prison," 1980), a short story in Tamil by Anuradha Ramanan which quickly and ironically plots the narrative of a raped Brahmin (upper-caste) woman, serves as an exemplary "third world" woman's text against which two master texts of "first world" literature and their criticism can be measured: *Clarissa* (1748) and *A Passage to India* (1924), works whose central episodes turn on the rape of their female protagonists. In addition, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1971), Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1982), and Jonathan Kaplan's film *The Accused* (1988) may serve as representative contemporary American "feminist" narratives of rape. Because these texts occupy heterogeneous historical, cultural, racial, and gendered locations, they foster an exploration of different ways in which rape and the raped woman enter representation as the subject of narrative, as well as of the different politics they engender within feminism.

Anuradha Ramanan is a prolific writer of fiction, both short stories and novels, for popular mass-circulation Tamil magazines (published mainly in the state of Tamil Nadu in south India). "Prison" first ap-

peared in one of these magazines as the prizewinning entry in a short story competition; it was subsequently filmed and included in an anthology of Ramanan's short stories bearing the same title.¹

"Prison" is a post-rape narrative concerned with showing how the female protagonist, Bhagirathi, survives the fear and humiliation of her rape by a stranger and her subsequent abandonment by her husband. Bhagirathi comes to a small village in Tamil Nadu as the eighteen-year-old bride of the temple priest Raghupathy. She catches the eye of Anthony, the rich and rakish village landlord, who immediately plots to catch her alone. The story begins with his easy, insolent rape of Bhagirathi, in broad daylight, at a time when the priest is offering prayers at the temple.

Bhagirathi, shocked and frightened, seeks her husband's protection. He spurns her in anger and walks out of the house, never to return. Bhagirathi wanders the streets, becoming a byword as a fallen woman. Then she reaches a decision: she goes to Anthony's house, announces she is going to live there, and forbids him to touch her again even though he has already ruined her. Anthony is stunned and remorseful. At her insistence he arranges for Bhagirathi to have her own living quarters and her own cooking utensils. After some years he remonstrates with her at her confined existence and offers to find her husband for her. She mocks his naïveté, and insists that he too must share her punishment: her continued presence in his house will be his bane. They spend thirty years in this fashion, living in the same house, hardly talking to each other. She proudly goes every day to the river to fetch her own water, braving the villagers' taunts. Anthony leaves more and more of the management of his lands to her, and she is meticulous in her dealings. He is a Christian and she a Brahmin, but she places flowers every day at his shrine to the Virgin Mary. Her presence in his house inhibits his drinking and womanizing.

Finally, Anthony lies ill. When he goes into a fit of coughing and gropes for a basin to spit into—there is no attendant—Bhagirathi hears him and offers him the basin, speaking her first direct words to him in all their years together. He is moved at her offer of service but considers himself unworthy of her attentions. Anthony dies shortly after, leaving her his house and enough money to live on comfortably. The rest of his wealth goes to orphanages. At his death Bhagirathi realizes that he has cared more for her than the husband who made his marriage vows to her. She takes off her *thali* (the symbol of marriage worn around the

¹Anuradha Ramanan, "Sirai" (Prison), *Kunguman*, June 15, 1980; rpt. in Anuradha Ramanan, *Sirai* (Madras: Kanimuthu Pathippagam, 1984); all translations are my own.

neck) and places it on the butt of Anthony's gun. Better to live as the widow of Anthony than the wife of Raghupathy, she decides. She lies down weeping to mourn him.

The question that irresistibly offers itself is: What impels Bhagirathi's social and sexual rebellion? If I choose to read "Prison" as a feminist text, I do so in spite of a complete absence in the story of any feminist "solution" to the issue of rape. Among the possibilities that the story presents on behalf of Bhagirathi—vagrancy, suicide, return to her rapist, or reclamation by her husband—there is not even a suggestion of recourse to women's groups and their strategies of resistance. Ramanan does not consider that an activist women's group might provide Bhagirathi with legal aid to prosecute her rapist or seek out her husband and claim maintenance from him.² Nevertheless, a certain "feminism" (here, Western liberalism and a "liberated" sexual code) is implied in any attack on religious orthodoxy in the Indian social context. In this situation Ramanan leaves the initiative and resources for coping entirely to Bhagirathi, though she is a product of a culture that largely negates any meritocratic individualism and envisages an entirely subordinate role for women. Needless to add, Bhagirathi's rebellious celibacy has little to do with modern sexual liberation. But destitute and socially outcast though she is, Bhagirathi still retains her identity as a superior caste subject, and she deploys it to intimidate her rapist, first into accepting her in his house, and then into leading a life of chastity with her.

There are two ironies here. The first is that a Brahmin is male by definition; a Brahmin woman is not formally initiated into the rites of castehood, nor does she follow any separate practices of Brahminhood except as they relate to her connection with the male Brahmin. A Brahmin is born into his caste, a Brahmin woman is born his daughter. "Brahmin woman" is a derived identity. The second irony is that in today's Tamil Nadu, Brahminism has been stripped of virtually all its traditional material and political claims to power—the religious supremacy of the priesthood and its monopoly over learning—in large part as a result of a vigorous Dravidian (non-Aryan) political and cultural movement in this century.³

²Ramanan revealed to me in conversation that her covert purpose in the story was reformist: she hoped to establish the need for the rehabilitation of "fallen women."

³Two political parties, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), have emerged from this movement, opposed by the Brahmin Association. The anti-Brahmin movement has made its consequences felt largely in the related spheres of education and employment, where massive reservation of places for "backward" classes and tribes by the Dravidian parties in power has kept Brahmins out of prestigious state-run educational institutions, bureaucratic jobs,

Yet it is through laying claim to one of the standard practices of Brahminism—ritual purity—that Bhagirathi secures her safety. On the grounds that she would otherwise be contaminated, she demands her own living quarters and her own cooking utensils, and fetches her own water. She ideologically dominates Anthony, more powerful than her in every other way, by asserting her superior caste status. The semiotics of purity bear further scrutiny. Bhagirathi invokes one standard of purity (caste) to modify or displace another (female sexuality) by claiming for the former a greater validity and broader social import. Taking into account the complexity of the social procedures by which both caste and female chastity are invested with power, Bhagirathi plays off one against the other.

Why and how does her strategy work? The most important of the reasons is the supremacy that “Brahminism” as a cultural and ideological value still retains in contemporary Tamil Nadu. In spite of successfully curbing institutional Brahmin influence in the region, the Dravidian political parties have failed to forge a counterculture. Their early ideological struggles for atheistic rationalism and a reformist language policy aimed at de-Sanskritizing the Tamil language have largely lost their force. The upward class and caste mobility of non-Brahmin groups has instead been directed toward, precisely, Sanskritization.⁴

But where is the locus of these superior values? Not in the Brahmin male, marginalized in the economic and political spheres: it is precisely *his* emasculation that the rape of his wife emphasizes. Instead the Brahmin *woman* now assumes and deploys “Brahmin” values in the context of an identity crisis. The separation in “Prison” of ideological value from political and economic power, analogous to the separation of the Brahmin woman from the Brahmin man, dramatizes a crucial historical warp.⁵ A realignment of gender positions is inscribed through the crisis in caste identity.

and political appointments. A significant diaspora of Brahmins has occurred to other states in India as well as to countries in the West. Since education and administration had been the traditional preserves of the Brahmin community, its social role and function have been severely diminished. At the same time, the Brahmin priesthood is no longer attended with divine sanction or political influence; Brahmin priests are now merely poorly paid performers of temple rituals and private worship in a few households. In response to decreased demand, fewer traditional Sanskrit institutions teach the Vedas, or religious texts.

⁴Sanskritization is the process of evolution among caste groups toward adopting upper-caste customs in areas such as dowry, religious ritual, and temple worship.

⁵This argument is reinforced by a popular and controversial Tamil film, *Vedam Puthidu* (The new Veda), which articulately and intelligently attacks the caste system. But here, too, Brahmin values (vegetarianism, ritual purity, Sanskrit learning, nonviolence) are val-

It is only the confluence of Brahminism and femininity at this specific historical juncture that allows Ramanan to grant Bhagirathi access to the power of asserting caste status. Nothing in the traditional content of Brahminism—or Hinduism more broadly—would encourage Bhagirathi's negotiation with her sexual violator in this way. She ironically recalls the legendary figures of Ahalya and Sita from Hindu mythology, women raped or abducted who are forced to establish their chastity through miraculous tests or prolonged ordeals.⁶ As traditional narrative models, these legends propose purification for the violated woman through symbolic death (transformation into a stone, passage through fire) to resolve the crisis of rape or attempted rape. These tests and ordeals through which women must pass in order to qualify for reentry into "society" give Bhagirathi no reason to suppose that she can defy sexual mores with impunity.

Nevertheless, the "rewards" of these processes of sexual violation, test or ordeal, and survival are great for the women who undergo them. Ahalya and Sita become triumphant and enduring cultural symbols of *pativrata*, or husband worship; their legendary and heroic chastity retains a powerful ideological hold on the Hindu imagination. Thus, in a narrative that is structured as a series of escalating shocks aimed at the Hindu bourgeoisie—first the victim's return to her rapist, then the Brahmin woman's cohabitation with a lower-caste Christian—the greatest blow lies in the story's ending, when Bhagirathi blasphemes *pativrata* by casting off her *thali* and draping it over the butt of Anthony's gun (an equally transparent symbol of physical and sexual power).⁷ Confounding marriage and rape, she sees marriage as a prolonged sexual domination by the male and rape as a momentary violent aberration; but each is compensated by and entails the man's responsibility for the woman. The familiar and somewhat clichéd polemic against sexual double standards also involves Bhagirathi in a more complex judgment of the two men: "The man who lived with me for six months cast me off in an instant. And here is this man who com-

orized and shown to exert ideological influence; here the embodiment of such values is the Brahmin (male) child.

⁶Ahalya, wife of the sage Gautama, is raped by the god Indra, who comes to her in the night in the form of her husband. Turned to stone by her husband's curse, she is restored to human form only years later when the god Rama steps on the stone. In the epic *Ramayana*, Rama's wife, Sita, is abducted by the evil king Ravana and held captive until Rama rescues her. Before she can be restored to him, public opinion must be satisfied; she undergoes an ordeal by fire to prove that she has remained chaste.

⁷Ramanan's story and the film based on it created an uproar. The Brahmin Association launched a protest both at the "dishonor" of a Brahmin woman's rape and at the notion of her repudiating the *thali*, invested with a profound mystique.

mitted a moment's folly, and has cherished me ever since without any expectation of return!" So long as the identity of "wife" allows Bhagirathi to maintain as well the identity of "Brahmin woman" and thus create a zone of safety, she holds on to it. But with Anthony's death she can repudiate that identity and become "Anthony's widow," a woman without a man. Wife/widow, Brahmin/not-Brahmin, protection/autonomy are alternating and opposed states and identities which Bhagirathi adopts as circumstances warrant, with the goal at one level of mere survival but at another of social interrogation and critique.

Bhagirathi's foregrounding and deployment of her caste and marital identities are not, however, built on a transcendence or obliteration of Anthony's sexual violation. Instead, Bhagirathi presents herself to Anthony as the woman he has raped: "The woman who stood before him gazing so fiercely . . . Was that a woman's gaze . . . How was it he hadn't fallen before it earlier? . . . No woman he had raped had ever come to stand at his door like this before, with a gaze that pierced like a spear." Within Ramanan's frame, the female victim of rape narrative becomes the subject of a second narrative, scripted by her, one that escapes past models offered by male narratives ("no woman . . . had ever. . ."). Bhagirathi never allows Anthony to forget that the defining act of their relationship is his rape of her. Her insistent thrusting of her fallen status upon Anthony results in that foregrounding of the "sexual differential" that Gayatri Spivak has emphasized in her discussion of the raped woman, the protagonist of "Draupadi," an act that turns her for her enemy into "a powerful 'subject,' " "a terrifying superobject."⁸

The identity of a raped woman which Bhagirathi embraces is not based, it must be emphasized, on a conventional acceptance of the *loss* of chastity, and thereby the diminution of "full" womanhood. Ramanan allows Bhagirathi to make an appropriative, revisionary reading of the religious texts of Hinduism to apply to her situation. As Raghupathy, the priest, returns home from the temple, he is murmuring the opening invocation from the Upanishads: "Purnam adah, Purnam idam, purnat purnam udacyate / Purnasya purnam adaya purnam evavasisyate" (That is full and this is full. Out of that eternal whole springs forth this eternal whole, and when the whole is taken from the whole, there still remains the complete whole.)⁹ This description of godhead as a metaphysical plentitude is transferred by Ramanan to a description of human, including female, selfhood; she finds sanction in it to repudiate

⁸Gayatri Spivak, trans., "Draupadi," by Mahasweta Devi, in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 387.

⁹*The Upanishads*, trans. Chitrita Devi (New Delhi: S. Chand, 1973), 1.

the metonymic social definition of chastity (as women's precarious "possession" which can be lost or as a "component" of sexual integrity).¹⁰

Although the identity that Bhagirathi retains or adopts after her rape—as superior caste subject, as another man's wife, as raped woman—is constituted within the boundaries of her religion and culture, there is room for her to grow, improvise, and assert herself within her "prison." For instance, she daily places flowers at the feet of Anthony's statue of the Virgin Mary: whether construed as an act of worship, a gesture of female solidarity, or a dignified concession to and recognition of Anthony's god, it is deliberately and freely performed. Another space of development is her growth into the role of manager of his property. As Anthony delegates power to her, she comes to handle all the produce and sale of his land, and when he dies she inherits part of his wealth. This inheritance ultimately prevents Anthony's death from becoming a second abandonment. She is compensated for her loss of social and caste status by acquiring economic power, as "Anthony's widow."

Anthony's role in the "charade" is in part a response to rules set by Bhagirathi; in part the model for his active reformation comes from his own religion. A strong if sentimental sense of sin leads him to piety, penance, and charity. His celibacy is dictated by his characteristic conversion of the woman he has raped into a sexless maternal figure, the type of the Virgin Mary. Bhagirathi's relationship to the Virgin is not, of course, one of identity. The Hindu models of female chastity available to her are not sexless figures but heroic and "innocent" married women. The dialectic between two sets of religious values, Hindu and Christian, as mediated by their norms of female purity is complex. Anthony's Christianity, we must note, is also encoded by Ramanan in social, as opposed to merely religious, terms. Indian Christians, especially in rural south India, are for the most part converts from lower-caste Hindu groups. Ramanan tacitly reinforces the stereotype of rapacity associated with their "original" caste identity as non-Brahmin men, even as she grants them the "redeeming" values of their new religious identity as Christians.¹¹

It is clear that the ideological structures that the story both operates within and strains against in its construction of the raped woman as subject are shaped by the realities of its social, religious, and cultural limits; but included in these realities is a certain liberalizing, modern-

¹⁰Personal communication from Ramanan.

¹¹I am grateful to Ania Loomba for pointing this out to me.

izing discourse of "feminism." There is a danger in both story and criticism of idealizing Bhagirathi's feminist individualism.¹² Her choices cannot themselves be valorized as feminist: as a destitute woman, she seeks not independence but male protection; she repudiates her identity as Raghupathy's wife only to take on that of "Anthony's widow"; she enforces Anthony's chaste behavior toward her at the cost of laying waste her own sexual life;¹³ above all, she succeeds in securing her safety and purity only by entering a "prison," as Anthony ruefully points out.

Ramanan explores the concept of the "prison" creatively. Sociologists have observed that Indian women experience social space "in such binary oppositions as private/public, danger/safety, pure/polluted."¹⁴ Ramanan deconstructs these oppositions by blurring spatial designations. Bhagirathi is raped in a "safe" place, her home (paradoxically, no place is considered more safe than a house whose doors stay open), which Anthony enters "as if he owned it." Bhagirathi herself is caught napping, "her head pillowed on the threshold" where Anthony "looms." The threshold, of course, is the open space that confounds the inside of the house with the outside. After her rape, Bhagirathi is literally errant, a homeless woman forced to spend the nights in the porch of her husband's locked house or the temple courtyard, spaces that are both within and without enclosures, marking her own indeterminate subject status. The people of the village pronounce her a woman "of the streets," that terrifying, ejected, antisocial female element, a bogey for "good" girls.

The discourse of crime and punishment invariably foregrounds the concept of the "prison" as incarcerating the individual wrongdoer in the interests of the larger social good. But Bhagirathi's entry into purdah does not fit this moral schema; her reentry into the domestic sphere is performed as an act of violent intrusion, not one of discreet disappearance. Her occupation of the woman's inner rooms designated as purdah is a form of territorial conquest. Purdah in certain Western feminist analyses has been equated with "rape, forced prostitution, polyg-

¹²Some feminist essays on texts by cultural "others" idealize feminist individualism as a solution to women's predicament. See, for instance, King-Kok Cheung, "'Don't Tell': Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*," *PMLA* 103 (1988): 162-74.

¹³Ramanan emphasizes Bhagirathi's passionate nature. The cool porcelain statue of the Virgin contrasts with Bhagirathi's turbulence as she stands before the mirror applying her *kumkum* (the dot on her forehead): "The sweet memories . . . of her married life . . . dissolve in her heart like syrup."

¹⁴Rashmi Bhatnagar, "Genre and Gender: A Reading of Tagore's *The Broken Nest* and R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*," in *Woman/Image/Text: Feminist Readings of Literary Texts*, ed. Lola Chatterjee (New Delhi: Trianka, 1986), 173.

amy, genital mutilation, pornography, the beating of girls and women," as instances of "violations of basic human rights."¹⁵ But in such analyses, as Chandra Mohanty has argued, "the institution of purdah is . . . denied any cultural and historical specificity, and contradictions and potentially subversive aspects of the institution are totally ruled out."¹⁶ In "Prison" the experience of purdah is precisely rewritten in terms of its contradictions and subversive aspects. Segregation works both ways: Bhagirathi's occupation of the inner rooms confines Anthony to the hall—for her only a passage of transit—just as her expulsion from her husband's house has resulted in his disappearance into a perpetual diaspora. Bhagirathi's entry into Anthony's house is a parody of his entry into hers.

Furthermore, Bhagirathi refuses literal imprisonment, risking public exposure every day by going to the river to fetch water. Here Ramanan inserts the private-public opposition into areas constitutive of narrative and subjecthood as well. Bhagirathi becomes a public figure in the small village community, ironically referred to as Anthony's "woman," and the subject of ribald speculation and rumor. What remains private is the truth: their chaste relationship as man and woman. In the modern female bildungsroman the development of an individualistic female selfhood builds on such a polarity of private integrity and public opprobrium. When a woman's consciousness of individualistic identity is forced into existence through social isolation brought on by the stigma of sexual impropriety—as is Bhagirathi's—this development stands in contrast to the politics of feminism. Terry Eagleton has confidently asserted, for instance, that "a modern Clarissa would not need to die" because of the access she would have to help from women's groups.¹⁷

Victimhood in such an argument provides the female subject access to a sense of collective gendered identity based on shared oppression. In the absence of such organized resistance—an absence naturalized by the narrative's setting in a small rural community in an unspecified recent past—a tenuous individualism shapes the female subject's resistance. Ideally this selfhood constitutes for the female subject existential freedom, space for growth and change, a full "inner life," and some access to power, even if the venture ends as a costly one. The exercise

¹⁵Fran Hosken, "Female Genital Mutilation and Human Rights," *Feminist Issues* 1 (1981): 15. Hosken's position is discussed in Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse," *Boundary 2* (1984): 333–58.

¹⁶Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 347.

¹⁷Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality, and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 94.

of choice clearly cannot be a sufficient condition for a woman's freedom when her choices are few and severely determined.

I have tried to show how the female protagonist of this Tamil short story must deploy her "superior" identity as Brahmin woman and also foreground her abject destiny as raped woman; how she is complicitous in a politics of caste as well as isolated by the brute reality of rape; how she *chooses* her prison as well as chooses a *prison*. The claims of a certain "realism" do not permit more than this evenhanded distribution of gains and losses for the oppressed female subject within the short story's narrative mode. Nevertheless, the politics of the story—its ironic polemic against sexual morality, its overt purpose to *épater les bourgeois*—results inevitably in a valorization of Bhagirathi's individualistic, even antisocial, will to survive. A feminist critical enterprise is therefore obliged, even as it is constantly aware of the story's balance of forces, to privilege strategically its incipient utopian gesture toward the reclamation of the raped female subject.

In Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748) and E. M. Forster's *Passage to India* (1924), as in "Prison," rape serves as an allegory for other political encounters. In *Clarissa* the main characters are also antagonists in a deadly class struggle; in *A Passage to India* they are racial opponents in the colonial conflict. The female protagonist becomes the victim of rape as much because of her membership in her caste, class, or race as because of her sexual identity; one might even say that she is less the object of sexual desire than the scapegoat in a struggle of larger forces.

In the two novels, however, the complex identity that is constructed for the female subject undergoes a curious transformation at the point of rape. Clarissa's cry "I am but a cypher" expresses a raped woman's perception of total annihilation of self following on physical subjugation, coercion of will, and psychological humiliation. Questions of volition, so central to the constitution of the individualist humanistic subject of the novel, are significantly in abeyance.¹⁸

Clarissa Harlowe's self-extinction is compensated by her spectacular absorption into her author's sympathies after her rape, figured within the text by the solicitude of her lover's friend Belford, and replicated in critical practice by the partisanship of a host of critics. A heroine so totally taken over by authorial and critical sympathy has no scope or need to develop any self-assertive dimension. In contrast to Richardson's takeover of Clarissa there is Forster's fastidious repudiation of

¹⁸Eagleton considers her choice of illness only "a tragic option for self-extinction" (ibid., 87).

Adela Quested after she produces her account of the supposed attack on her. She drops out of the narrative after the event, only to reappear much later as a reduced and disoriented witness for the prosecution. Forster's limited interest in Adela Quested is replicated by most critics of the book.

For Forster, it is the feminine sensibility of Mrs. Moore that has the best chance for developing interpersonal relations in the colonial situation; but because of female *sexuality* (Adela Quested's) these relations can also be jeopardized. The split in femininity between sensibility and sexuality results in the surrogacy of Mrs. Moore's function after the Marabar Caves episode. She suffers a trauma in the caves very similar to Adela's, falls ill, is infected by a cynical misogyny, dies, and is apotheosized in a series of developments more appropriate to the raped Adela.

The reification of female victimhood is a familiar procedure in the fiction of male novelists (one has only to think of Hardy's *Tess* or Galsworthy's Irene Forsythe in *The Man of Property*). All that is really left for the raped woman to do is to fade away: Adela, doing the decent thing, retracts her charge and returns to England; Clarissa, transcending her body's humiliation, falls ill and dies.

Paradoxically, at the same time that she becomes an existential "cypher," the raped woman also turns into a symbolic cause. She becomes the representative of her social group, the very embodiment of its collective identity. The assumption of embattled positions around a raped woman's cause often marks an identity crisis for a group, as historical examples amply prove.¹⁹ The woman's newly recognized identity—which may be more properly described as her function in an economy of sexual propriety and property—becomes an emotional war cry and the prelude to the virtual disappearance of the concerns of the woman herself. Although Clarissa has been alienated from her family for much of the novel, once she dies her cousin rushes to avenge her in defense of the family's honor. In *A Passage to India* Forster shows British officialdom and its wives gathering around Adela Quested in an upsurge of sentimental patriotism (which is trivially shifted to the more appropriately symbolic railway official's wife: "This evening, with her abundant figure and masses of corn-gold hair, she symbolised all that is worth fighting and dying for").²⁰ Ironically, Adela's project *not* to be an Anglo-Indian results only in the confirmation of her colonial identity,

¹⁹See the connections traced by Hazel Carby between "lynching, empire and sexuality," in "On the Threshold of Women's Era: Lynching, Empire and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 262–77.

²⁰E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1924), 181.

sentimentally acclaimed by her fellow Anglo-Indians and savagely asserted by Forster.

I intend these observations on the subjectification of the raped woman in the two novels to serve as a contrast to the consolidation of the female self in "Prison." The successive assumption, deployment, and repudiation of superior castehood by Bhagirathi herself, her thrusting of her raped condition upon her rapist, and her determined self-fashioning, indicate the birth and development of feminist individualism in circumstances of necessity and survival. Although Bhagirathi seeks her solution in terms of what I call for convenience feminist individualism, this "liberation" bears no resemblance historically to the individualism of the humanist subject at the center of Western literary genres such as tragedy or the novel (consider King Lear, or Hardy's Michael Henchard). This subject position, when offered to *female* protagonists such as Clarissa Harlowe or Adela Quested, breaks down under the assault of rape. Bhagirathi's "selfhood" is instead a "palimpsest of identities,"²¹ both constituted and erased by history, so that in the gendered subject, religious, caste, class, and sexual attributes are foregrounded in succession according to the exigencies of the situation. Choice and necessity become indistinguishable in such identities in flux.

A feminist "thematics of liberation," as Teresa de Lauretis has cautioned us, is insufficient to counter the force of masculine desire which invests all narrative.²² This is why feminist texts of rape must also engage in textual strategies to counter narrative determinism. Such negotiations are achieved by and result in *alternative* structures of narrative. One means to this end is the structural location of the rape incident at the beginning of a woman's story. Narrative beginnings differentiate closures. In "Prison" the positioning of the scene of rape at the beginning preempts expectation of its late(r) occurrence. Not only is the scene of rape diminished by this positioning, but it is also granted a more purely functional purpose in the narrative economy, and narrative interest becomes displaced onto what follows. Ramanan is not alone in designating the narrative function of rape as the initiating moment of women's "knowledge." In both *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the de-

²¹For an elaboration of this notion of female subjectivity, see Zakia Pathak and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "Shahbano," *Signs* 14 (1989): 573.

²²See Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 103–57. De Lauretis endorses Roland Barthes's position that narrative is "international, transhistorical, transcultural"; but she specifies that "subjectivity is engaged in the cogs of narrative, meaning, and desire," and further that "the relation of narrative and desire must be sought in the specificity of a textual practice" (106).

velopment of the female subject's "self" begins *after* the rape and occupies the entire length of the narrative.

Furthermore, "Prison" is marked by a laconic narrative mode which abbreviates an account of thirty years into a few pages, alternating between a terse past-tense narrative of representative quotidian events and a present-tense account of only four exchanges between different pairs of characters. The brevity of the story subverts the narrative model of desire built on the prolongation of suspense and the postponement of climax. *The Color Purple* is similarly innovative in its narrative devices: it creates generic instability by mixing history with utopian romance, causality, and wish fulfillment. As a result, Celie's story, which begins with her rape by the man she thinks is her father, ends with the restoration of her family, her economic independence, and her creation of a community of equals. These endings, as Christine Froula points out, are "all the more powerful in that they emerge from Celie's seemingly hopeless beginnings": "Celie's beginning could have been a silent end," but instead "her ending continues the proliferating beginnings that the novel captures in its epistolary form, its characters' histories, and the daily revelations that Shug names 'God.'" ²³ Angelou achieves a similar liberation in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by framing a narrative within narrative: the fantasy of the raped child is enclosed within, and her silence "rescued" by, the memoir of the adult writer.

Clarissa, in contrast to "Prison," develops the action over a relatively short period of time—a matter of a few weeks—into one of the longest novels in the language, through an excruciatingly realistic transcription of events. In *Clarissa*, as in *A Passage to India*, the moment of rape is virtually the exact structural center of the narrative, so that the plots describe a graph of climax and anticlimax around that point. Having made the scene of rape central to their structures, the novels cannot altogether avoid on the one hand a certain tension, not unlike sexual titillation, and on the other a certain relaxation of tension, resembling postcoital boredom, around that point. The additional implication of a narrative structure which finds its center in the representation of rape is that it must then seek a further (postcoital) erotic goal: this, as we shall see, is offered in the "trials"—the death or disappearance—of the raped woman.

But, famously, at the center of these narratives lies only absence. Nei-

²³Christine Froula, "The Daughter's Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History," in *Feminist Theory in Practice and Process*, ed. Micheline R. Malson et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 156, 161, 155.

ther novel actually represents the scene of rape, and this only partially for reasons of delicacy or sexual prudery. In his investigation of *Clarissa*, Terry Eagleton argues that rape itself is unrepresentable because "the 'real' of the woman's body" marks "the outer limit of all language."²⁴ This claim is part of the male mystique built around rape (as around childbirth); such narrative theory fetishizes rape as a limit of narrative to be tested over and over. Eagleton implicitly opposes woman as "real" or "nature" to man and language. Richardson offers an ostensibly simpler explanation: neither actor in his epistolary drama, Lovelace or Clarissa, wishes to record the event of rape, a reluctance that is natural enough, given the novel's commitment to psychological verisimilitude. Wishing to guarantee female purity and absolve male responsibility, Richardson represents Clarissa as drugged and Lovelace as in a frenzy, "not himself," when the act is perpetrated. For these "reasons" the act is "unrepresentable" in *this* text. But so suggestive is this mimetic absence that ingenious critics have asked whether Clarissa Harlowe was "really" raped.²⁵

In *A Passage to India* the authorial reticence about the rape is part of the indeterminacy of meaning, the blur of events by means of which Forster hopes to convey the "mystery" and "muddle" of India. So while he accompanies the accused doctor Aziz on his itinerary to the caves closely enough to provide him with an alibi, Adela is left to wander the caves alone. At the end of the "Caves" section Aziz's friend Fielding makes a weak attempt to ascertain the "truth," only to be met with Adela's indifferent: "Let us call it the guide. . . . It will never be known. It's as if I ran my finger along that polished wall in the dark, and cannot get further."²⁶ The omniscient author, so much in evidence elsewhere in the novel to explain matters and settle issues, never tells us what "really" happened. *A Passage to India* pronounces, virtually and legally at least, that no rape was attempted on Adela Quested.

What are the implications of this silence at the heart of the text? *Clarissa* is a great proto-feminist novel, and *A Passage to India* is a major testament of liberal humanism; both, therefore, are works that might be expected to be unequivocal about an act of male sexual aggression against a woman. But their reliance on, and doubts about, the woman's

²⁴Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa*, 61.

²⁵See Judith Wilt, "He Could Go No Farther: A Modest Proposal about Lovelace and Clarissa," *PMLA* 92 (1977): 19-32, cited in Eagleton, *Rape of Clarissa*, 61.

²⁶Forster, *Passage to India*, 263. Oliver Stallybrass states that in Forster's early drafts there was, in fact, an assault; see his essay "Forster's 'Wobblings': The Manuscripts of *A Passage to India*," in *Aspects of E. M. Forster*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (London: Edward Arnold, 1969), 153-54.

"unsupported word" as to her ordeal suggest a deep underlying male fear that rape could be a female lie or fiction. How a "normative narrative" may subvert even a feminist "thematics of liberation"²⁷ is illustrated by the implications present in Jonathan Kaplan's film *The Accused*, the powerful true story of Sarah Tobias's attempt to indict her rapists legally. In an effort to replicate the court's search to discover whether the rape "really" happened, the film succumbs to the device of the flashback, a device available only to narrative, and never to any court of law, however sedulously it may try to recreate the scene of crime. By replaying the scene of rape, the film once again makes it central to the narrative, the "climax" of the graph of its linear structure. If the absence of the scene of rape at the heart of a narrative (as in *Clarissa* or *A Passage to India*) serves to *mystify* its actual occurrence, the brutal naturalism of its cinematic representation in *The Accused* provides a *confirmation* that enforces the same conclusion: the "unsupported word" of a raped woman cannot represent rape.

Rape is often treated as a female fiction or fabrication in another sense as well, one that suggests the complicity of the woman, particularly in social and cultural situations that permit "free" man-woman relationships based on "romantic" love. Historically *Clarissa* reflects a period marked by changes in family structures, when marriage based on the partners' choice was beginning to prevail. *A Passage to India* is the product of a postwar period that witnessed the first major movement in women's sexual liberation and the emergence of the "emancipated" woman (of whom Adela Quested is the type). Additionally, *Clarissa* and Adela are involved with men outside their social spheres; the situations are fraught with possibilities of misknowing, mixed signals, wrong timing, false interpretations, and projections of desire. In such changing and historical phases of sexual relationships, sexual consummation may convincingly be represented as an event that is premature and skewed rather than gratuitous, and therefore not "really" rape.

Female choice itself is debased by association in hypocritical confusion about involuntary desire. *Clarissa*'s self-blame is also based on the construction of an immutable "male" nature (the "brute") and a "female" nature (the "lady"). Thus, when a woman is raped, "who was most to blame, I pray? The brute, or the lady? The lady, surely! for what she did was *out* of nature, *out* of character, at least: what it did was *in* its own nature."²⁸ It is not surprising either, to find that in *A Passage to India*—in which Aziz indisputably did not rape Adela—

²⁷The phrases are from de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, 156.

²⁸Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa* (London: Everyman, 1968), 3:206.

Adela should feel an obscure guilt, endorsed by Forster, for a certain sexual laxness on her part toward Aziz, based on no more than her preoccupation with her impending marriage to Ronny: holding hands with Aziz while climbing the rocks, a tactless question to him regarding the number of his wives, and a passing mental admiration of his physical beauty.

In contrast, "Prison," set in contemporary India, still records a society where marriages are arranged, and where all extramarital relationships between the sexes are inhibited, if not entirely prohibited. Anthony's rape of Bhagirathi is a routine exercise of *droit du seigneur*, not the index of a relationship gone awry. Bhagirathi's "responsibility" lies in allowing herself to have been seen by Anthony, in making a "spectacle" of herself: "Foolish Bhagirathi on the first two days had walked to the river four times to fetch water where Anthony was sitting alone on his porch." The victims of familial rape in *The Color Purple* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* are children, initiated into sexual knowledge by these early encounters, and though they internalize guilt in a complex way, they are unequivocally "innocent." In both these novels, as in "Prison," the fact of rape—even if not its graphic representation—is acknowledged in stark, brutal terms as the very *premise* on which the narrative is built.

If the suggestive desire and guilt of the raped women in *Clarissa* and *A Passage to India* turn them into more complex subjects, after the rape they are nevertheless reduced to unproblematic victimhood. Questions of (female) desire and guilt, intertwined in the explanation for rape in these texts, are reproduced in the self-confessed experience of the (male) reader or critic, as articulated by William Beatty Warner: "The 'rape of Clarissa' as an imagined event which is cruel and uncalled for drifts toward, and becomes entangled with 'the rape of Clarissa' that we enjoy in reading, and repeat in our interpretations." Here Warner equates rape and reading: since reading *Clarissa* is an entry into private correspondence, it involves, like rape, both the guilt and pleasure of "violating a taboo." In both activities there is "guilt at using others for our pleasure."²⁹

These literary representations of rape also have difficulty avoiding the mimetic replication of the act. The fact that the enactment of rape takes place in private and secret places requires the author to conduct

²⁹William Beatty Warner, "Reading Rape: Marxist-Feminist Figurations of the Literal," *Diacritics* 13.4 (1983): 31–32. But even in *Clarissa*—where the subject position offered the reader is that of Lovelace, the secret reader/rapist—an overt alignment between author and female protagonist injects pain as an element into the passive process of being read and being raped, and may conceivably dilute the aggressive pleasures of reading/raping.

his readers into the innermost recesses of physical space. Richardson leads us into the bedchamber of Clarissa Harlowe, Forster into the dark and claustrophobic Caves of Marabar. Or as readers we may be located in the space of the "truth"-seeking spectators in a courtroom, as in *A Passage to India*. The countermovement of novelistic narrative is precisely this emergence into the public light. Having probed the private, the narrative then seeks to *make public* the privileged knowledge gained in the incursion. The female subject is caught up in this trajectory. It is her transgressive wandering (her "error" in both senses of the word) that led in the first place to her confinement or imprisonment, the necessary condition of rape. The incarceration is followed by her reemergence into the public sphere. Richardson narrates the long and elaborate public spectacle of Clarissa's dying and Forster the public trial of Aziz, which is equally, of course, the trial of Adela. The succession of private ordeal by public display could not be more pronounced, nor—as raped women have again and again testified—more traumatic. These too are ordeals, trials like those of Ahalya and Sita, which absolve the raped subject of "guilt" and thereby mark her fitness for reentry into the social or moral domain.

The structuring of private and public fictional spaces; the intrusive, voyeuristic aspect of novel reading; the pleasure of mastery over and possession of the "passive" text in reading; narrative's very trajectory, its movement toward closure which traverses the feminine as object, obstacle, or space³⁰: it is these inscriptions of desire and guilt in narrativity itself which are negotiated in a feminist reconstitution of the female subject of rape. Feminist texts of rape counter narrative determinism, as I have tried to show, in a number of ways: by representing the raped woman as one who becomes a subject *through* rape rather than merely one subjected *to* its violation; by structuring a *post-rape* narrative that traces her strategies of survival instead of a *rape-centered* narrative that privileges chastity and leads inexorably to "trials" to establish it; by locating the raped woman in structures of oppression other than heterosexual "romantic" relationships; by literalizing instead of mystifying the representation of rape; and, finally, by counting the cost of rape for its victims in terms more complex than the extinction of female selfhood in death or silence. Although a feminist "thematics of liberation" may not be a *sufficient* condition for rewriting the female subject and female reader of narrative, it may nevertheless generate the tensions and contradictions that allow the decentering of male desire, and with it the sexual thematics that structure much narrative. There-

³⁰De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, 143.

fore, the structural motors of narrativity are interrupted and significantly deflected by the forms of feminist individualism dictated by a text's history, ideology, and cultural models.

The introduction of a "third world woman's" text into a collection of American feminist critical essays is not exempt from problems even when the comparative method sanctions such heterogeneity. The critic who brings her own "native" text, not available within the canon or even in translation, to such an enterprise appears to be a "native informant" contributing to the "master discourse." She runs the danger of exoticizing her wares, implicitly privileging the text as more "authentic" or more "real" in content than Western texts, idealizing it as an alternative to Western cultural aporias, or offering it as a textual enigma that challenges Western critical theory and its cognitive structures. I have tried to sidestep some of these temptations by my choice of a representative and popular contemporary magazine story rather than a literary "classic." The text's contradictions—its invocation of "universal" concepts, themes, and structures of narrative—rape, and feminism—as well as its implication in specific historical conditions of production (contemporary caste politics, the women's movement in India, religious ideologies)—may allow it to be viewed simply as a demystified cultural product. The comparative method must not seek to relativize difference at the expense of denying a commonality of politics and cognitive structures.³¹ The "extreme relativist position," Satya Mohanty has argued, "is in no way a feasible theoretical basis of politically motivated criticism." If, on the one hand, I have relativized the different "contexts of production of cultural ideas" through the comparative method, I have, on the other, sought to promote the "genuine dialogue" among the feminist positions on rape and the theories of rape and narrative that these different contexts throw up, thus hoping to retain the force of a "political" criticism.³²

³¹In the words of Aijaz Ahmad, "Many of the questions that one would ask about [the third world] text may turn out to be rather similar to the questions one has asked previously about English/American texts." "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text* 17 (1986): 9.

³²Satya Mohanty, "Us and Them: On the Political Bases of Political Criticism," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 2,2 (Spring 1989): 15. Since I wrote this essay several works have come to my attention which have provided welcome reinforcement and elaboration of my arguments. See Brenda R. Silver, "Periphrasis, Power, and Rape in *A Passage to India*," *Novel* 22 (Fall 1988): 86–105; Elliot Butler-Evans, "Beyond Essentialism: Rethinking Afro-American Cultural Theory," *Inscriptions* 5 (1988): 121–34, which discusses Alice Walker's story about interracial rape, "Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells"; Sharon Marcus, "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (London: Routledge, 1992).