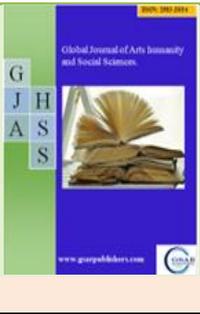


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Rape as a Weapon of War: Historical and Theoretical Insights from Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will*

By

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Abstract

This study explores the history of rape as a weapon of war and the causes that are perpetuating rape as a tool of oppression. This paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of rape to subjugate women in conflicts and genocides. The thorough examination of wartime rape and its consequences on the victims reveal the motivations behind these barbaric acts and their broader consequences for gender relations and power politics. Central to this analysis is Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, a feminist bible that offers crucial insights into the pervasive nature of sexual violence in war and conflicts and its underlying causes. This research emphasizes how acknowledging and documenting the historical recurrence of war rape and forced impregnation can contribute to preventing such atrocities in future and ensuring justice for survivors in the present. The study of Brownmiller's work is essential to confront these harrowing acts and ensure that such crimes are never repeated.

Keywords: rape, victims, war, women

Introduction

This study will throw light upon how patterns of sexual violence against women have persisted across different cultures and ages since biblical times. This research will contextualize these horrifying acts of hatred depicted in these narratives within a broader historical framework. Rapes and forced impregnation during conflicts have been prevalent throughout history, across various cultures. From biblical conflicts to modern-day genocide, such as the Greek genocide, the Armenian Genocide, the Assyrian genocide, and the Holocaust, to more recent events like the Bosnian War, the Bangladesh Liberation War, the Rwandan genocide to the ongoing conflicts in South Sudan, Congo, and Myanmar, sexual violence has been used as a weapon to subjugate women. In Asia, the Partition of British India in 1947 was marked by massive sexual violence against women. The partition led to the creation of India and Pakistan, resulting in inter-communal violence and massive population displacement, with women often being targeted as a means of control and asserting dominance. This was repeated in Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 which saw

another wave of war rapes committed primarily by the Pakistan military and *razakars* who were the collaborators of West Pakistan against the Bengali population. Rape as a weapon of war has left a lasting scar on the collective memory of women and girls who unknowingly became collateral damage in conflicts and genocides.

In this context, Susan Brownmiller's seminal work "*Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*" (1975) is of paramount importance. Her meticulous analysis not only elucidates the persistence of sexual violence but also offers an achievable solution by focussing on its underlying causes. A thorough study of her work is thus indispensable for understanding the historical continuum of war rape and in finding an effective solution. The TIME Magazine described her research work as "startling" and called it a "convincing and awesome portrait of men's cruelty to women" (Cohen). Her research played a crucial role in shifting the discourse around rape from viewing it as an individual crime of men's passion to recognizing it as a political problem rooted in power politics caused by gender inequality. She helped to raise awareness about sexual violence and the need for societal change by bringing the ideas of the feminist anti-rape movement into the



mainstream. The author gives a definitive feminist definition of rape which varies from the patriarchal definition of rape: "If a woman chooses not to have intercourse with a specific man and the man chooses to proceed against her will, that is a criminal act of rape" (18). She successfully identifies the main cause of rapes in the news article "The Sexes: Revolt Against RAPE" as: "One of the reasons that men continue to rape is that they continue to get away with it" (TIME). This seminal work received some negative criticism from feminists of colour, such as Angela Davis and bell hooks, who argued that Brownmiller's treatment of race in relation to sexual violence, perpetuated racist ideas further. Brownmiller compared Emmet Till's harassment of a white woman as a physical assault, effectively concluding that he is guilty of sexism. Till was a teenager who was lynched by a mob in 1955 for whistling at a white female shopkeeper. Davis concurred that Brownmiller's portrayal of Till, reinforced racist stereotypes that black men are mostly sexual predators. Despite these negative criticisms, *Against Our Will* played a crucial role in laying the groundwork for feminist activism against sexual violence. While acknowledging its flaws and the need for intersectional perspectives, the twenty-first century feminists recognize the lasting impact of Brownmiller's work in creating awareness about sexual violence and challenging societal attitudes towards it.

Brownmiller quotes Nietzsche's words about his perspective on sexual violence during the war as follows: "Man should be trained for war and woman for the recreation of the warrior" (48). She adeptly invokes the profound insights of the eminent philosopher to illuminate a disconcerting aspect of societal attitudes towards women. Through her astute citation of Nietzsche, she unveils a troubling reality: even among those considered progressive, there persists a deeply ingrained belief that women exist primarily for the pleasure of men, particularly those engaged in the warfare. By leveraging his perspective, she underscores how even the most brilliant minds have succumbed to the cultural narrative that relegates women to collateral damage, easily replaced and disregarded in the grand tapestry of human endeavour. This analysis serves as a poignant reminder of the prejudiced patriarchal norms that enforce violence against women in a perpetual cycle.

Brownmiller opines on the free pass men are given in conflict zones in the third chapter titled "War": "When men are men, slugging it out among themselves, conquering new land, subjugating new people, driving on toward victory, unquestionably there shall be some raping" (31). She cites several examples of incidents of rape used as a weapon of war in the Liberation War of Bangladesh in this chapter. Aubrey Menen, a correspondent paints a harrowing picture of the trauma inflicted upon a young bride by Pakistani soldiers during the conflict in Bangladesh. The methodical and callous way the soldiers carried out the rape, with complete disregard for the victim's dignity, was inhumane. Menen's detailed description of the victim's physical and emotional state, from her unconscious and bleeding body after the rape to her strained and tense demeanour in the rehabilitation centre, highlights the profound impact of the assault on her physically as well as mentally. The rejection she faced from her

own family and the ostracism from her community compounded her suffering while her perpetrators were given a free pass. The young woman's plea for justice, expressed through her insistence on the capital punishment for her attackers, highlights the urgent need for accountability in sexual violence cases. Despite the rejections she faced in seeking justice in her life, her determination to see her perpetrators held accountable was a testament to her resilience. This narrative serves as a poignant reminder of the devastating consequences of sexual violence during wars and the ongoing struggle for justice faced by survivors. These barbaric acts of violence calls for attention to the need for supporting survivors by holding the accused accountable, and then preventing the recurrence gender-based violence.

Brownmiller's account of the sexual violence perpetrated by West Pakistan soldiers during the nine-month war in Bangladesh is highlights the brunt borne by women in conflict zones though they are confined in their domestic spaces. The fact that girls as young as eight and elderly women as old as seventy-five were subjected to sexual violence highlights the widespread nature of the violence even during conflicts. The abduction and forced captivity of Bengali women in military barracks for nightly use is a horrifying manifestation of the systematic and organized nature of sexual violence during the conflicts. The idea of keeping the women naked to prevent their escape further emphasizes the degradation and dehumanization of the victims. Menen describes the distribution of pornographic movies to the soldiers to incite them which reflects a calculated effort to further degrade and objectify the women, treating them as mere objects of sexual gratification rather than human beings. Brownmiller gives another example of employing rape as a weapon of war through the petrifying accounts of Khadiga and Kamala Begum who were interviewed by Berengered' Aragon, a photojournalist in an abortion clinic in Dhaka. The thirteen-year-old Khadiga recounts the atrocities she had to endure as two men regularly abused her every day; others, she said, had to service seven to ten men daily. Kamala Begum's victimisation reflects the tragic reality that no one was immune to the horrors of sexual violence during the war regardless of their age, wealth, or social status. Despite her belief that her age and wealthy status would protect her, she was raped by three men, two Pakistani soldiers and a local collaborator known as a *razakar*. Kamala Begum's decision to send her daughters to India highlights the lengths to which women went to protect their loved ones from the brutality of war, only to suffer the violence themselves. These two accounts highlight the indiscriminate nature of sexual violence during war, where women and girls, regardless of their age and social status, were victims due to their gender.

Brownmiller insists on the importance of empowering women to defend themselves against sexual violence. After her comprehensive research on the rape and its consequences for the weaker sex, she comes up with a solution to eradicate rape in future. Brownmiller complains that the societal conditioning and gender norms contribute to the power dynamics between men and women. She reasons that men possess a psychological advantage in such situations which stems from societal acceptance of their

unruly behaviour and their upbringing, such as from a young age, boys are often encouraged to be even aggressive, and competitive, while girls are taught to be non-confrontational, and nurturing. As a result of this difference in their upbringing, women are not prepared to defend themselves physically, as they have been taught to prioritize avoidance of conflict. She highlights how societal conditioning has historically discouraged women from being physically aggressive and assertive while promoting them to be submissive if they wish to be accepted in patriarchal societies. She actively encourages the transformative potential of self-defence training, as evidenced by her own experience of attending such classes. Brownmiller signed up for some self-defence classes as a part of her research and declares the life changing lesson she learnt there as: “Kick him in the balls, it’s your best maneuver” (402). She was appalled that by placing a few kicks and jabs in precision, women can elicit pain in men. Learning self-defence techniques highlights the transformative power of defending. Thus, women can challenge the power dynamics that enable sexual violence and assert their agency by learning to protect themselves. Learning practical self-defence techniques not only equips women with the physical skills to protect themselves but also instils a sense of empowerment. Thus, women can challenge the power dynamics that underlie sexual violence and assert their autonomy and bodily integrity by realizing their ability to inflict harm on potential attackers. The author suggests solidarity among women resulting in collective action is essential in the prevention of rape and dismantling the ideology that perpetuates it. Women should challenge societal norms and advocate for their rights on a global platform. Brownmiller ends her bible on rape with these powerful lines: “Rape can be eradicated, not merely controlled or avoided on an individual basis, but the approach must be long-range and cooperative, and must have the understanding and good will of many men as well as women.; My purpose in this book has been to give rape its history. Now we must deny it a future” (404). Brownmiller’s work challenged deeply ingrained myths about rape and reframed it as an act of control and power by men rather than the uncontrollable male lust. She concludes by saying that women’s freedom is curtailed due to the fear of rape when she declares: “A world without rapists would be a world in which women roamed freely without fear of men” (209).

The re-emergence of gender studies has prompted a substantial increase in literary research focusing on women's narratives related to the Bangladesh Liberation War. Contemporary female authors such as Selina Hossain, Tahmima Anam, and Dilruba Z Ara have garnered global recognition for their contributions to this genre. A thorough examination of their works through the framework established in Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* offers readers a nuanced insight into the enduring victimization of women in patriarchal structures, revealing how these narratives reflect broader patterns of gender-based violence that have persisted through history. In Dilruba Z Ara's *Blame*, the protagonists Laila and Gita are raped by the West Pakistan soldiers and are subsequently deserted by their families and the society, while the perpetrators remain free. Analyzing the novel through the theoretical lens of Brownmiller reveals that the violence inflicted

upon women during wartime is not merely incidental collateral damage but is often driven by deeper, patriarchal notions to forcefully impregnate the women to carry their seed which will ensure their progeny. These instances of sexual violence should be understood as part of a recurrent historical pattern rather than an isolated event. Such patterns of gender-based violence have been observed in a recurring manner, such as the massive violence against women during the India-Pakistan partition of 1947 and again in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. This phenomenon of employing rape as a weapon of war persists in recent times too, in the ongoing Israel-Palestine war and the Uganda crisis, where women frequently bear the brunt of their gender. Further research will aim to offer a comprehensive understanding of the trauma endured by victims by investigating diverse manifestations of rape and its historical antecedents. The findings will contribute profoundly to the scholarly discourse on wartime sexual violence, elucidating its broader implications for gender relations, power politics, and consequent trauma.

This study successfully examined the history of rape, tracing its origins and its utilization as an instrument of terror in warfare and as a means of women's subjugation. This study has proven the recurrence of war-time rape gain and again in history. The research offers a comprehensive understanding of the trauma endured by victims by investigating the historical recurrence of rape in wars and genocides. These findings immensely contribute to the scholarly discourse on wartime sexual violence, elucidating its broader implications for gender relations and trauma studies. Brownmiller’s perspective on rape as a tool of male domination and control over women is brilliant and has become a significant feminist discourse. She confidently challenges conventional understandings of rape by framing it as a social mechanism rather than just individual acts of violence. This study advocates for prevention of rape and the pursuit of justice for survivors by documenting the existence of rape as a weapon of war.

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