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the unsafe sex: the female binary and public violence against women

Nalini Natarajan, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2016, 200pp., ISBN: 978-0-1994-6310-7, \$47.50 (Hbk)

While discourses of development construct the category of 'progressive' India, the upsurge of violence against women in public spaces projects a contradiction that is rooted in a regressive patriarchal system that still governs average Indian lives. Locating this violence against women's bodies within the binary of private and public, Nalini Natarajan's *The Unsafe Sex* draws from anthropology, myths, literature, films, history and feminist theories to explicate issues of safety and security of women in public spaces, especially when rape is used indiscriminately to perpetrate sexual coercion and abuse. As violence subsumes itself into everyday experiences of women, forms of violence invite scrutiny to comprehend the volatile conditions of contemporary lives. Natarajan takes the 'ongoing visceral war waged by men against women' (p. ix) to task through her intense analysis of the 'body blows'—especially of rape as the 'most extreme cases' (*ibid.*) of violence—that lurk for women in public places in India.

Mobilisations following the Nirbhaya gang rape case in December 2012 activated political and legal systems while initiating enquiry of public spaces, which exposed an extant culture of permissability of gendered violence. To ponder on the intricacies of gendered public violence, Natarajan draws on interdisciplinary insights targeting 'the general reader, not the academic' (p. x), thus directing her attention towards a public change of opinion. She looks into mythological, historical and filmic perspectives at different historical moments, relating public violence against women to the binary of home and world. She explores the otherness, endangerment and unsafety of females by drawing upon Simone de Beauvoir's work in *The Second Sex* (1949) to 'define the specific alienations of women from their very being' (p. xi) and Barbara D. Miller's *The Endangered Sex* (1981), which draws on the environmental discourse of man's capacity to endanger both nature and women. Safety becomes a concern as the danger increasingly becomes 'nameless, unplaceable, and unlocatable' (p. xii) ideas perceived through the paradigms of the 'anonymous predator' (p. xiii), the 'upper-class predator' (p. xv) who asserts territorial supremacy using lower-class women's bodies, and of the mass rape of Indian women during ethnic rioting. The author analyses the complexities of women's unsafety in public spaces by reading war histories that render safety as privilege and cultural transitions which threaten constructed boundaries of gendered identities, thus creating counter-narratives of male vulnerability. In the process, she tracks the ideas of war, peace, militarisation and conjugal control as important in understanding Indian society's demarcation of public and private spaces and the treatment of women therein.

The opening chapter explores Romila Thapar's definition of myth as 'the self-image of a culture' (p. 2) by focusing on Draupadi's disrobing in the *Mahabharata* and Sita's abduction and

Surpanakha's mutilation in the *Ramayana*, which are critically navigated to trace the genealogical roots of public violence. Both epics, marked by war and militarisation, depict women as vulnerable. The marked paucity of women characters in these epics leads to the construction of the binary of 'good' woman at home and 'bad' woman outside the *lakshmanrekha*, which allows reinterpretation of the mythical narratives as critique of the patriarchal cultural reasoning behind the construction of this binary as one that renders all women unsafe by permitting free access for the victorious men.

Chapter 2 analyses the effects of militarisation on public spaces by invoking the wife/*tawaif* duality within the pretext of the Great Indian Revolt of 1857. According to Natarajan, as the Revolt subsumed men into the army, giving them avenues of stable income, it consequentially led to a devaluation of women at home. Contrarily, the courtesan (*tawaif*), who by and large fled exploitative homes, could be seen as empowered females with steady income from the military. Yet the binary of the *purdahnasheen* (veiled) wife versus camp courtesan still rendered public spaces unsafe for women, as sexual purity of all women was at risk with men away at war. This, however, led to another division: the elite educated women facing 'nationalist seclusion' (p. 48) were shrouded from Western influences and protected from the public, while the lower-class 'available' women, with no rights, became exposed to colonial reforms. Thus, although public spaces manifested contrary movements of empowerment for women who occupied it, they were replete with exploitative characters for women through the 'separate sphere' ideology of the street (*baazari aurat*) and home (*grihalakshmi*), which strongly impresses the notion that public spaces are unsafe for women.

In Chapter 3, Natarajan introduces Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's notion of 'purity' in women as a cosmic maternal force that cannot be devalued by base conjugal sexuality or any bodily abuse such as rape. Gandhi invokes political participation of men and women in a desexualised environment that, however, excludes prostitutes whose partaking in sexual activity for monetary exchange renders them 'impure'. This metaphysical purity, quite unlike the concept of virginity in the patriarchal world, still reiterates the wife/prostitute binary when it fails to capture the atrocities of partition violence and everyday instances of women's bodily abuse, thus making it quite unconvincing. In Chapter 4, Natarajan then analyses Basu Chatterjee's *Swami* (1977) and Nicolas Klotz's *la Nuit Bengali* (1988)—filmic versions of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's short story *Swami* and Mircea Eliade's 1933 autobiographical narrative *Bengali Nights*, respectively—to understand how Westernisation generated latent gender violence towards daughters at the hands of a patriarchy that felt threatened by the changes brought on by Westernising influences. Natarajan's penetrating understanding of mainstream Bombay movies uncovers 'Bombay cinema's progressive sexualisation of women' (p. 103), and how it consolidates the public/private divide and upholds an image of 'ideal' womanhood in the public sphere. In the book's last chapter, the author revisits the condition of indentured women who are exposed to patriarchy's predatory sexual ideologies. While the 'other' woman gains economic agency by reclaiming her sexuality in a foreign land, there is a flipside to this in that it exposes and makes her vulnerable to violence by both coolie men and colonial masters.

Natarajan's 'Epilogue' not only summarises her project of locating sexual violence against women in the 'female binary' of private/public spheres, but also it recalls how the 'good' woman/'bad' woman binary is reinstated by the Nirbhaya rape case and such recent acts of gang rape of tribal women in public spaces. In these scenarios, victims become constructs marked as 'bad' and hence 'available', thus reinforcing the

idea that women are prone to victimisation of violence in public spaces, which have accumulated the infamy of being unsafe for the sex marked 'other,' vulnerable and female.

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<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41305-018-0116-9>