

# Rape: a crime

Reprinted from the Georgian

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## Men, Women and Rape

By Susan Brownmiller

New York, Simon and Shuster

This is a book for which the feminist movement has been waiting for a long time. It was well worth the wait.

To categorize any work of art or scholarship as definitive is perhaps a foolish and futile gesture, but in this case it cannot be helped. This work has a strength of mind and body which makes it an overwhelming experience. The prose is always clear, tight and compelling. Her analysis never ceases its forceful, determined assault on the reader's intellect.

The book toils to vanquish the myriad of myths which enshroud and obscure the act of rape. The standard liberal perception of rape is that it is a sign of the times. Women are raped and brutalized, just as our land and cities are raped and brutalized.

Brownmiller does not accept this easy and soothing rationalization. Rape comes first. It is not a reflection of how man perceives and dominates his environment, but of how he perceives and dominates woman. "Rape is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation but which all men keep all women in a state of fear".

This is the point of departure for Brownmiller's, and the feminist analysis, of rape. It is not an easy one for most people to accept and consequently, I suspect that most will not even try. Her argument is so cohesive, however, that anyone who makes a serious effort to come to grips with it cannot help but have their perception of human sexuality profoundly altered.

## OPEN SEASON ON RAPE

Her analysis begins with a conjecture on the origins of the paternal family — which by definition is synonymous with the oppression of women: "Female fear of an open season on rape, and not a natural inclination toward monogamy, motherhood, or love, was probably the single causal factor in the original subjugation of women by man, the most important key to her historic dependence, her domestication by protective mating".

Historically, the experience of marriage and rape have been inalterably bound. The evidence is on every second page of the book of ages — from ancient tribal times to as late as fifteenth century England, men acquired their wives when the need arose through forcible abduction and rape.

Once the goods had been damaged, the abductor simply paid the woman's father for the loss of his goods and the transaction was complete.

In all cultures at all times women have been viewed as the property of either their fathers or their husbands. This attitude was inextricably written into the law of the land, whether it was the Talmud, the bible or Napoleonic code.

Therefore rape was equated with theft and the concept of rape within marriage was and is, considered preposterous. How could a man possibly be charged with stealing his own goods? This precept, that gave and still gives men the inalienable right to their wives' bodies, "gives the lie to any concept of equality and human dignity . . . A sexual

assault is an invasion of bodily integrity and a violation of freedom and self-determination wherever it happens to take place, in or out of the marriage bed."

## NATIONAL TERROR

Much of the first half of the book is a methodical reenumeration of the origins and historical incidence of rape during wars, revolutions, colonialism, slavery and racist programs. The tumultuous state of war provides an excellent opportunity to surmise the true meaning and nature of rape. During a war men are freed from the confines of the law and social convention and are able to act as they feel. They almost always strike out at women as a means of attacking their enemy. The rationale is that if you can't satisfactorily attack the real enemy, then you rape his wife, his sister, his daughter — his property.

"When a victorious army rapes, the sheer intoxication of triumph is only part of the act. After the fact the rape may be viewed as a part of a recognizable pattern of national terror. I say 'after the fact' because rape does not need a sophisticated political motivation beyond a general disregard for the bodily integrity of women. But rape in warfare has a military effect as well as an impulse, and the effect indubitably one of intimidation and demoralization for the victim's side."

In war the deep-rooted brutality of man and the subconscious contempt with which he views woman becomes painfully apparent. He rapes with a vengeance; whether he be victor or loser, as long as he is on somebody else's territory and therefore on somebody else's women.

The book deals honestly and unflinchingly with many highly sensitive areas, not the least of which is inter-racial rape. The act of rape between black men and white women has long been a source of great controversy in the United States, particularly in the deep south. Hundreds of blacks were hung, lynched or shot in the century which followed the civil war, for rapes or alleged rapes of white women.

## BRUTALIZED BLACKS

To civil libertarians inter-racial rape was a myth created by racists to keep blacks in line. While this was often true, Brownmiller points out that women, both white and black, are the one essential element of inter-racial rape (and all rapes) to whom little thought is given.

Although black women were systematically raped

by their white masters during slavery, when Brownmiller went to a library of black history to research this the male librarian was quite put-out. He suggested that she begin with the experience of the black male. When she insisted that she was interested in the experience of black women, he retorted that "to black people rape has meant the lynching of the black man."

This sort of attitude gives rise to the likes of Eldridge Cleaver, who in his book "Soul on Ice" chronicled his career as a rapist. He decided to wage war on his oppressors by raping their women. A vicious form of street theatre to revenge the historical state of impotence — slavery — in which black men were held by white men. Among the various indignities and brutalities black men suffered under slavery was the cruel blow to their masculine pride of having to helplessly watch their women being abused.

## FEMALE SUBMISSIVENESS

The nature of rape of black slave women by a white master and of white women by a revolutionary-criminal like Cleaver, is that of a political act, played out by and for men. This is identical to the constitution of rape during war. Says Brownmiller: "The body of a raped woman becomes a ceremonial battlefield, a parade ground for the victors trooping of the colors. The act that is played out upon her is a message passed between men — vivid proof of victory for one and loss and defeat for the other."

