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Rape and Hope: Consolidating Identities and Hierarchies in Contemporary Feminist Dystopias



Athira Unni

Many scholars argue that women were sidelined in science fiction as “sites of desire” until the 1980s when after the Second Wave Feminism of the 60s and 70s, there was a brief attempt in shaping women characters as active sidekicks with a compassionate female gaze through which the suffering of the male hero “can be visualized” with compassion (Kac-Vergne 4). However, representations of sexual violence in contemporary dystopian fiction written by women have been illuminating of female subjugation and gender hierarchies that were only alluded to in earlier works. In Jennie Melamed’s dystopian novel *Gather the Daughters* (2017), young girls on an island cult are abused physically and sexually by their fathers, while in Ros Anderson’s *The Hierarchies* (2021), the use of sex robots for pleasure is questioned. Both these novels deliberately break from representations of women as props or sidekicks in science fiction and actively shed light on sexual violence against women. While doing so, these dystopian narratives acknowledge the political subtext of rape, an invasive act of embodied power used to maintain sexual and political hierarchies. In this paper, I argue that sexual violence in these texts is integral to constituting identities and maintaining social hierarchies, both being complementary acts to create and sustain conflict. I propose that these contemporary feminist dystopian texts explore human and posthuman subjectivities in relation to sexual violence while normalizing gendered power differentials through cognitive estrangement. Moreover, these texts open up the possibility of expanding the definition of critical dystopias to also perhaps contain texts that do not implicitly have hope as a blueprint or roadmap, but as a distant possibility of recovery for the survivors of sexual violence, not necessarily as an impetus for resistance, but as a space from which to rebuild their lives.

Gather the Daughters (2017) by Jennie Melamed portrays “a world in which child abuse has been normalized, even sanctified” (Jarvis 18). The island cult in the novel follows the rules handed down from ten male ‘ancestors’ who established the church and the rule of law. This narrative by the American author of a religious commune pursuing a “fantasy of conservatism” was written during Brexit and might hold some relevance for British readers who see this as significant in terms of the isolationary stance of the island (Moss).¹ Melamed’s storyline is even more haunting when we consider that the author used to work with traumatic children as a psychiatric nurse practitioner (Bianco). She sheds light on the coping strategies of the girls who experience violence and rape. Despite the “biblical horror show” that has incest, orgies, forced marriages and domestic violence at its core, there are “glimmers of hope” in female friendships and teenage girls’ instinct for justice (Bianco). Melamed’s book is, therefore, not a classic dystopian text, but a critical

dystopia, as defined by Tom Moylan, who notes that there are instances of internal revolt and resistance signifying hope in post-1980s dystopian texts that amount to critique of the real world (Moylan 192). The novel is ripe with instances of female trauma where girls are constantly anxious of being abused emotionally, physically, and sexually.

Melamed's polyphonic novel focuses on four adolescent girl narrators, all of them growing up on an oppressive island with no technology or modern conveniences. The island's deceptively simple philosophy of self-reliance masks the sinister underbelly of controlled reproduction and seclusion from the world. Vanessa has a Wanderer father who brings back books from his travels to the 'wastelands.' Caitlin has an abusive father who beats her. Amanda is newly married to Andrew, pregnant and anxious about her daughter, who will have to endure what she did. Janey, the most outspoken ringleader, starves herself to delay adulthood and later inspires rebellion from others. Children are allowed to run wild during the summer with the islanders leaving food outside for them. The prepubescent girls are repeatedly raped by their fathers when young. When they menstruate, they go through the 'summer of fruition,' during which they "get" to choose an adult man to marry. Everyone is required to have two children, but after the children grow up and get married, the older residents are required to drink the 'final draft' to make space for the young. Disabled children or 'defectives' are killed, and the outside world, ravaged by war and disease, is not talked about. The insularity of the island is a major factor in preserving its violent patriarchy. The indoctrination of female submission is religiously ordained and legitimized, as Caitlin tells Rosie: "It's the way it is, the way it's supposed to be. Daughters submit to their father's will, it's in *Our Book*. It's what the ancestors *wanted*" (Melamed 61). The reference to scriptural mentions is a perversion of the even worse representation of rape in Deuteronomy 22: 23-9, which requires the girl who is raped to be betrothed to the rapist or stoned depending on her marital status (Smith 27). The girls are sometimes given 'sleeping drafts' to lessen any pain, and any disobedience is violently punished. Afraid of the prospect of her father visiting her at night, Caitlin goes to sleep "so worked up that she stares out the window for hours," her heart pounding in her chest (Melamed 64). The emotional damage that normalized abuse inflicts upon the girls is evident here.

Propagating sexual violence requires a cognitive understanding and embodiment of authority and power, something that legitimizes violence before it is carried out. In the context of Melamed's novel, the first sexual experience of the girls on the island is rape. They are cognitively expected to associate sex with non-consensual sex with their fathers which further strengthens the authority of the fathers. Even with rape in other contexts, survivors struggle to come to terms cognitively with being violated sexually because power hierarchies might not be clearly apparent and the very act of rape reveals the ugly reality. Sexual violence and rape serve to maintain the social position of survivors in rape narratives which, in turn, solidifies the power differentials and cognitive systems that make rape thinkable (Higgins and Silver 3). This cognitive process is elucidated in textual instances of rape through action of the rapist or the voice of the survivor. Amanda, who begins menstruating just before summer, sees the timing as "fortuitous" since it means that her childhood abuse has ended: "for now Father could not touch her" (Melamed 81). She can "mature and

prepare” for her summer of fruition (81). This is the first time that normalized incest or rape by the fathers is clearly stated in the novel. While analyzing textual instances of rape, it is important to acknowledge the intersections and “inseparability” of “subjectivity, authority, meaning, power and voice” (Higgins and Silver 1). In other words, the politics of rape is inscribed on the text and the body with prior violence of patriarchal myths such as that of physical weakness and mute vulnerability of the survivor. Hence, the aesthetics and politics of rape are the same (Higgins and Silver 1). The aesthetic decision here is the allusion to seasons—summer, winter, spring—that are repeated, normalized, and naturalized in conjunction to rape. The cognitive process that makes rape thinkable here operates to institute power seasonally. The island itself being quite an anti-technological space, the seasons dictate the lifestyle of the islanders, making this seem normal. The language of maturing and preparing is also one that does not allow much of a choice—it is done seasonally and the authority over female bodies is more to do with the seasons and biology.

Rape and incest being alluded to here relatively casually is part of what Darko Suvin calls cognitive estrangement. While incest is a taboo in every culture, child abuse is a heinous reality. The men on the island rape their own daughters in a systematic following of norms in an instance of cognitive estrangement. Cognitive estrangement is encoded in speculative fiction with “style, lexical invention and embedding” creating a sense of the fictive world being dissonant with the reader’s world (Mendlesohn 5). Darko Suvin’s idea is a reworked combination of the Russian Formalists’ notion of de-familiarization and Bertolt Brecht’s notion of alienation effect (Csisery-Ronay, Jr 118). The writing must be subtle in order to bring about this estranging effect while convincing the reader about the normality of this strangeness in the world of the narrative without disrupting the flow of language. Suvin rightly posits that this mode of “recasting of the familiar” has a cognitive purpose to gently jolt the reader into revealing the hidden norms of the real world through means of fictional estrangement (Csisery-Ronay, Jr 118). Amanda alluding to her father finally not be allowed to touch her due to the onset of her summer of fruition is an important direct reference to child abuse. Yet, it is introduced in a casual, subtle, throwaway manner. This embedding of a norm without breaking the language flow is how cognitive estrangement is carried out. The abuse has already happened, keeps happening seasonally, and the survivor is revealing that this is indeed the norm. Introducing a new set of norms in a society where incestuous child abuse is part of the reality, embedded as a seasonal recurrence, invites the reader to reflect on this strangeness.

Amanda reveals how she felt when she was first raped by her father in a heartbreaking monologue to Janey and Janey’s sister, Mary. She talks about her mother hating her and blaming her even though she was not at fault:

The first time it happened, I hurt so badly I thought I was going to die. I thought he was killing me, that I’d done something terrible and was being punished for it. I didn’t know what I had done. And then it was over, and I realized I would live, and I thought, at least I’ll never have to do that again. And then every night. Or almost. The nights it didn’t happen, I wondered if I was dead, if I had finally been able to die. There was nobody to

help, nobody to save me. It became normal, like putting on my shoes or washing my face. And yet every time I lay down, I would remember the first time, and I would freeze, and shake, and stare at the ceiling crying, and he didn't even notice. (Melamed 135)

Amanda's words bring us closer to the visceral reality of rape and the notion of punishment and guilt. Most of the time, female survivors of rape are subjected to scrutiny for "contributory negligence" when assessed with a conservative political morality (Smith 7). The concept of a rape culture is one that normalizes this feeling of guilt and self-blame, making it easier for external parties and the rapist to blame the victim. The metaphorical link between rape and death in Amanda's words is notable, and representations of rape "are consistently linked with death" whether real or social (Smith 35). Rape is often described in terms of the "deepest of human suffering" but is not usually comparable to "physical and brutal loss of life" in reality (Smith 2). Typically, the trauma from rape comes with the feeling of being dishonored and a loss of social status, but that does not have to be always the case when such abuse is normalized as, for example, in the case of sex workers who suffer routine sexual abuse and cannot report it (Smith 27). The visceral fear that Amanda experiences leads her body to freeze and shake as if she were indeed dying. The normalization of the experience and discovering that it happened to every girl further disturbs Amanda, especially with no help coming. The fact that her rapist is her father, a figure of authority responsible for protecting her (according to patriarchal logic), makes the experience even more troubling. Amanda's fear is not any less because she is raped by her father. It is also notable that the normalization of incestuous rape does not take away from the trauma, but makes it a strange traumatic rite of passage for most young girls. Rape is simultaneously made strange and normalized through the norms of the islanders being laid at the same time that their revelation lays bare the trauma of the child survivors. Again, this traumatic phase in life is seen as normal, and readers are beckoned to reflect on this instance of "making strange" the situation.

The island itself is a violent geography that harms the girls, even above and beyond the abuse they experience at the hands of their fathers. Janey notices the bruises and scabs on Mary that match up with her own. Mary's nightgown is torn "like she was mauled by a monster" with "garish" bruises (Melamed 73). However, we are not told if these are bruises from sexual violence or from frolicking in the sand at the beach, or both. The girls later argue playfully over who has the most bruises, which "could easily be patches of mud" (77). The mosquitoes and the heat regularly turn villainous. At one point, Amanda is "forever slapping her arms and legs" leaving bloody smears, trying to hunt down the whining mosquitoes and trying to sleep rolling in sweat (121). The self-inflicted violence of Janey, who starves herself, is also a weaponization of hunger to keep away womanhood. She finds that her hunger-strike allows her to have a personal revolt, delaying her menstruation and eventual marriage. She "absorbs hunger into herself" with the "white-hot pleading in her body" fading into "a glow that warms her blood" (74). Janey's body has "swells of mud" and is narrow with thin, lanky limbs (132). Her daydreams with Mary of living on fish and water and telling each other stories all day are glimpses of hope to cope while keeping them both alive, but neither of them are in any shape to initiate any significant acts of collective resistance.

The reality of normalized sexual violence encourages girls to cope with abuse however they can. The emphasis of freedom in summers is also important for that reality to be upheld, without which the girls “would break down in a year,” as Vanessa’s father tells her (Melamed 98). The rules of the ancestors favor men and let the women cope with injustices by upholding a clear power differential. Amanda’s pretense of being brave and mature hides her practice of wringing hands, peeling flesh “delicate as onionskin” from her lips, and emptying her bladder every now and then (82). Most of the girls who Amanda meets during the summer of fruition are traumatized, with one girl vomiting continuously and given a special drink to help her relax (87). In the first few days, the girls sob every night at the loss of their childhood. Amanda finds the sex “intoxicating” in contrast with her sexual experiences before the summer having been “wearisome” (88). She still suffers from the trauma of those days, hating being touched on her throat and the full weight of any man (89). Janey, who is being dosed, does not remember her experiences during the summer and tells Mrs. Solomon and Amanda that she does not “want to be a woman” (91). Janey feels alienated from her body, which wants to mature into a woman. This alienation from the body is part of the trauma of sexual violence. Similarly, when Amanda gets pregnant with Andrew’s child, she feels that her womb is “no longer her own” and that her daughter is in a “watery cage” (113). To cope with the unbearable pain of feeling trapped, she retreats to the root cellar, claws at herself, and eats mud. Denise, who gives birth to a defective with “no head or no face” has another healthy kid but is scarred by her previous loss (142). The women in this novel are mostly resigned to their fate. With “proven fertility” being a valuable asset, the men pick their wives sometimes not knowing “who fathered [their] eldest child” (95). Women’s bodies are raped, struck, and treated as reproducing vessels, thus consolidating power and authority in men, legitimized religiously. The gendered power imbalance on the island puts the men in a far more powerful position due to systematized and normalized child abuse. The trauma from the abuse significantly shapes the girls’ perceptions and all their energy in childhood and early adulthood is directed towards maintaining glimpses of hope to simply cope. As Mrs. Balthazar puts it, “we’re trapped in our houses, and the children get to run free. I suppose we had our time, though” (145).

There is no space for resistance, and even as Vanessa leaves the island with her family in the end, her inclusion on the boat by her Father is an afterthought, an insignificant addition to the bunch of books. Her Father decides to leave when the rest of the wanderers threaten to burn his books implying that he makes the decision to protect his books rather than prevent anything worse happening to his family. While Vanessa goes along with her family, she does not make an escape from her Father. Melamed’s novel ends with Vanessa’s family undertaking a journey away from the Island towards the Wasteland, not knowing whether there might be a new beginning for them there. The only certainty being an escape from the social organization of the Island and not from her rapist, Vanessa is not building up to any resistance in the suddenly utopian possibility of the Wastelands, but hoping to recover and rebuild her life along with her family. This open ending calls into question whether Melamed’s book can be classified as a critical dystopia, as I have previously categorized it. The critical dystopias of the 1980s and 1990s were radical enough to create spaces of resistance where oppositional consciousness operated inside the text to create

potentially explosive utopian hope, texts that were self-aware that retrieve the “most progressive possibilities inherent in the dystopian narrative” (Moylan 188). Critical dystopias contained hope inside the text, were usually built around questions of race and gender, and were products of a historical period when sociopolitical movements were reflected in women’s writing.

Contemporary feminist critical dystopias seem to favor the same mode of resisting closure hinting at the existence of utopian spaces, but these spaces are only described, not deeply explored. Sexual violence being a traumatic event, these texts wrangle with the question: could there be hope after rape, and if so, what kind of hope? Contemporary narratives portraying sexual violence rarely give space to the possibility of significant collective resistance, as in Margaret Atwood’s dystopia *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), but rather choose to explore the rejuvenatory potential of the utopian space for the recovery of the individual survivor. In other words, the utopian anticipatory consciousness in the critical dystopia is limited and curtailed by the continuing trauma of the sexual violence that the survivor carries to the utopian space. In Melamed’s book, the possibility of recovery from trauma for Vanessa is doubtful due to the fact that she is accompanied by her Father, still guarded by him and still living under his authority. For the one surviving family at the end of the narrative that is nevertheless escaping from the Island, the internal family dynamic or power differential has hardly changed. Perhaps the roots of this pessimistic ending lie in the comparatively individualistic and traumatic Anthropocene conditions that we live in, with the family in the boat eerily reminiscent of climate refugees. Ironically, Vanessa’s family seems to be fleeing towards the possibility of the war-torn Wasteland, which would still apparently be a better alternative than continuing life on the Island.

Sex robots could be the latest example of the use of technology for human pleasure. A sex robot is defined as being created for sexual pleasure in a humanoid form, with human-like behavior and a degree of artificial intelligence (Danaher 4). The ethics of sex robots are highly debated, with scholars arguing for and against their slavery, their use for domestic chores and occasional sex, and for robosexuality (Danaher 8, 9). If intelligent sex robots—gendered and customized for sexual pleasure with no risk of disease—have a moral status, they could be harmed by being enslaved to humans (Danaher 11). While David Levy (2007) is optimistic about sex robots being used as healthy outlet for sexual desires, Jeannie Suk Gersen (2019) finds the forced servitude in the intimate space of sexual realm disturbing (Sterri and Earp 2). In a novel written from the perspective of one such sex robot who gains consciousness, Ros Anderson explores such a world. The “Intelligent Embodied” sex robot Sylv.ie racially coded as Asian in Anderson’s *The Hierarchies* (2021) is programmed to fulfill her human Husband’s sexual and emotional needs, constantly updating with knowledge that will enable her to have conversations with him after sex. Procreation has nothing to do with sex and the husband’s wife, the ‘First Lady,’ is grudgingly accepting of the situation. Sylv.ie must seduce her Husband every day, obey the Hierarchies, and endure rape at the Doll Hospital. Her disobedience takes her to a brothel where she finds lesbian companionship with Cook.ie, escaping to the forest at the end of the novel. The power hierarchy behind rape that enables violence and is further strengthened by it disturbs its positionality as a

violent expression of bodily desire. In feminist dystopian narratives, power over the body—in its creation, usage, and disciplining—is a central theme. In Anderson's novel, power is exercised over the posthuman female body through sexual abuse normalized as "maintenance" and even through controlled behavior of the robot, who has to adhere to the rules called Hierarchies. Sylv.ie is not allowed consciousness, only intelligence, and is not seen as a consenting individual with agency.

Scholars suggest that sex with humanoid robots with artificial intelligence is a perversion due to a corruption of the intimacy that must, or tends to accompany sex, but also, more significantly, because robots such as Sylv.ie are representative of non-consenting individuals, with the sexual contact itself amounting to 'rape' (Sterri and Earp 7, 9). While such a perspective prevails, Anderson's novel leaves no doubt about the ethics of raping a sex robot. In a bizarre scene at the Doll Hospital, Sylv.ie's head is separated from her body, and she sees one of the workers pull down her headless body hanging from the ceiling to prod her silicone vagina with a steel rod, remove the vagina, and replace it (Anderson 63). Her head is then switched off as a mark of respect. At night, one of the workers return to switch Sylv.ie on and, fastening her arms above her head with his belt, proceeds to rape her. Sylv.ie has "no strength to override it... only to endure it" and in her head, cries out for forgiveness to her Husband for violation of the Hierarchies: "I could cry for him, my being stolen from him this way without his knowledge. But there is no function for tears in Compliance Mode" (Anderson 69). Note that she thinks of herself as being stolen from her Husband. Her sexual enslavement denies her from thinking of her bodily autonomy or a non-objectified existence. Moreover, as one of the creators/maintenance personnel at the Hospital, the worker is expected to treat Sylv.ie with care. Just as in Melamed's novel, where Amanda is abused by a person of authority, Sylv.ie is abused by someone who is expected to treat or rejuvenate her in an act of violated trust.

Following the rape, she rationalizes the event as "essential maintenance" which, according to protocol, should not be considered as anything out of the ordinary (Anderson 70). Her first reaction to being stolen from her Husband, the complete lack of resistance during the rape, and an absence of shock or discomfort after it are tropes of cognitive estrangement at work. Even as Sylv.ie is traumatized, she is not at liberty to reveal her indignity. She is not allowed tears. This indeed is the most chilling aspect of this scene. The instance of rape also acts to maintain a gendered power dynamic between a male factory worker and the female sex robot, extending the latter's subservience as an enforced norm to all men rather than just her Husband. The ethical implication of sex with robots might still be undetermined, but even within the narrative logic of the novel, Sylv.ie is clearly wronged in being raped. Yet, such an occasion is not codified as criminal in any respect, much as sex with slave women and maids in the old South and old aristocratic families across cultures was considered common. Despite the posthuman evolution of rape, there is a gendered power differential, strictly codified in the Hierarchies, in the robot's binary logic and conditioning that makes rape seem protocol. In fact, the rape only seems to be an extension of the Hierarchies beyond the household into the external society, thus maintaining the gender power differential in a larger space.

She comes. She came. She is coming.

Becoming

Becoming

She is coming

I am coming

I am becoming

They are coming

She comes (Anderson 358)

Again, the recovery is individualistic in the absence of Cook.ie and mired in a bittersweet ambiguity that ensures there is no solution for the larger problems of recognizing gendered posthuman subjectivities. Sylv.ie's descent into a memory-less pile of wires still takes place in the utopian space of the forest where Cook.ie left her, untying her connections to the past and the future and freeing her from her painful memories. But this bliss is not an explosive form of agency or resistance, but an embracing of the posthuman self in all its vulnerability, an escape from functioning or perfection. Perhaps Sylv.ie finding bliss in disintegration while waiting for Cook.ie is utopian in its own sense, opening up the possibility of redefining hope in critical dystopias with posthuman subjectivities so traumatized and abused that their eventual disintegration itself becomes an act of recovery and personal resistance. Perhaps, if fixing the malfunctioning means being raped by the factory worker, quiet disintegration in the forest is certainly the better and the only choice with any sense of agency.

Both Melamed and Anderson have represented rape of those who cannot legally consent—young girls and sex robots—employing cognitive estrangement to highlight coping strategies for trauma and to discuss morality and ethics of raping the posthuman, respectively. Cognitive estrangement works in two different ways in these works—to expose the dangers of normalized religious and cultural legitimations of child abuse and codified sexual abuse of sex robots, underlining the fact that rape is about consolidating power rather than acting on sexual desire. In these narratives, rape unquestionably solidifies social hierarchies, with human and posthuman subjectivities inseparable from the power differentials that constitute and maintain social conflict. Both the novels open up the possibility of redefining hope as limited and unconventionally ambiguous due to the trauma of sexual violence, and also acknowledge the utopian spaces of possible recovery that are not necessarily outright forms of resistance.

Notes

1. This is a reference to Brexit, which politically and economically placed Britain outside the European Union, thus isolating the British from the rest of Europe. Debates continue on whether or not this decision would benefit or negatively impact British interests in the long term.

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