

Amia Srinivasan *The Right to Sex*

Feminism in the Twenty-First Century (Bloomsbury 2021)

Preface

feminism: a political movement, not a theory

Feminism is not a philosophy, or a theory, or even a point of view.

It is a **political movement to transform the world beyond recognition**. It asks: what would it be to end the political, social, sexual, economic, psychological and physical subordination of women? **It answers: we do not know; let us try and see.** xi

‘sex’

Feminism begins with a **woman’s recognition that she is a member of a sex class**: that is, a member of a class of people **assigned to an inferior social status on the basis of something called ‘sex’ – a thing that is said to be natural, pre-political, an objective material ground on which the world of human culture is built.** xi

‘sex’, this supposedly natural thing – a cultural thing posing as a natural one

We inspect **this supposedly natural thing, ‘sex’**, only to find that it is **already laden with meaning**.

At birth, bodies are sorted as ‘male’ or ‘female’, though many bodies must be mutilated to fit one category or the other, and many bodies will later protest against the decision that was made.

This originary division determines what social purpose a body will be assigned. [...]

Sex is, then, a cultural thing posing as a natural one. Sex, which feminists have taught us to distinguish from gender, is **itself already gender in disguise.** xi f.

‘sex’, in another sense: a thing we do with our sexed bodies

‘sex’: sex as **a thing we do with our sexed bodies**. Some bodies are for other bodies to have sex with. [...]

‘Sex’ in this second sense is also **said to be a natural thing, a thing that exists outside politics**. Feminism shows that **this too is a fiction**, and a fiction that serves certain interests. Sex, which we think of as the most private of acts, is **in reality a public thing.** [...]

the rules for all this were set long before we entered the world xii

feminism and sexual freedom

Feminists have long dreamed of **sexual freedom**. What they refuse to accept is **its simulacrum: sex that is said to be free, not because it is equal, but because it is ubiquitous**. In this world, sexual freedom is **not a given but something to be achieved**, and it is **always incomplete.** xii

What would it take for sex really to be free? We do not yet know; let us try and see. xiii

sex as a political phenomenon – beyond the narrow parameters of ‘consent’

These essays are **about the politics and ethics of sex in this world**, animated by a hope of a different world.

They reach back to **an older feminist tradition that was unafraid to think of sex as a political phenomenon**, as something **squarely within the bounds of social critique**. The women in this tradition – from Simone de Beauvoir and Alexandra Kollontai to bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Catharine MacKinnon and Adrienne Rich – dare us to think about the ethics of sex **beyond the narrow parameters of ‘consent’**. They compel us to ask **what forces lie behind a woman’s yes**; what it reveals about sex that it is something to which consent must be given; how it is that we have come to put so much psychic, cultural and legal weight on a notion of ‘consent’ that cannot support it.

And they ask us to join them in **dreaming of a freer sex**. xiii

remake the political critique of sex for the twenty-first century

At the same time, these essays seek to **remake the political critique of sex for the twenty-first century**: to take seriously **the complex relationship of sex to race, class, disability, nationality and caste**; to think about what sex has become **in the age of the internet**; to ask what it means to **invoke the power of the capitalist and carceral state** to address the problems of sex. xiii f.

feminism not as ‘home’

Feminism cannot indulge the fantasy that interests always converge; [...]

Feminism envisaged as a ‘home’ insists on commonality before the fact [...] A truly inclusionary politics is an uncomfortable, unsafe politics. xv

they [the essays] represent my attempt to put into words what many women, and some men, already know xv

The Conspiracy Against Men

false rape accusation – and its cultural charge

Nonetheless, a false rape accusation, like a plane crash, is an objectively unusual event that occupies an outsized place in the public imagination.

Why then does it carry its cultural charge? 3

false rape accusation, my men

very often, it is men who falsely accuse other men of raping women. This is a thing almost universally misunderstood about false rape accusations. When we think of a false rape accusation we picture a scorned or greedy woman, lying to the authorities. But many, perhaps most, wrongful convictions of rape result from false accusations levied against men by other men 4

false rape accusations as a predominantly wealthy white male preoccupation

It might seem surprising, then, that false rape accusations are, today, a predominantly wealthy white male preoccupation.

But it isn't surprising – not really. The **anxiety about false rape accusations** is purportedly about injustice (innocent people being harmed), but **actually it is about gender, about innocent men being harmed by malignant women**. It is **an anxiety**, too, **about race and class**: about **the possibility that the law might treat wealthy white men as it routinely treats poor black and brown men**.

1ex For poor men, and women, of colour, the white woman's false rape accusation is just one element in a matrix of vulnerability to state power.

false rape accusations are **a unique instance of middle-class and wealthy white men's vulnerability** to the injustices routinely perpetrated by the carceral state against poor people of colour. 5f.

the representation is false – but, as ideologically efficacious

That representation is, of course, false: even in the case of rape, the state is on the side of wealthy white men.

But what matters in the sense of what is ideologically efficacious – is not the reality, but the misrepresentation. **In the false rape accusation, wealthy white men misperceive their vulnerability to women and to the state.** 6

Brock Turner case (Santa Clara County, 2016)

'20 minutes of action' – healthy, adolescent fun [...]

quotein a sense Dan Turner is talking about an animal, a perfectly bred specimen of wealthy white American boyhood [...]

like an animal, Brock is imagined to exist outside the moral order. These red-blooded, white-skinned, all-American boys [...] are good kids, the best kids, our kids. 7

Brett Kavanaugh

The solidarity on show from the people who knew Kavanaugh when young – what Kavanaugh calls 'friendship' – was the solidarity of rich white people.

We can't imagine a black or brown Kavanaugh without inverting America's racial and economic rules. 9

'Believe women', #IBelieveHer

Whom are we to believe, the white woman who says she was raped, or the black or brown woman who insists that her son is being set up? Carolyn Bryant or Mamie Till? 9

dismissal of 'Believe women' as a category error

a political response to what we suspect will be its [legal principle of the presumption of innocence] uneven application [...]

Against this prejudicial enforcement of the presumption of innocence, 'Believe women' operates as a corrective norm, a gesture of support for those people – women – whom the law tends to treat as if they were lying. 9

a category error in a second sense

The law must address each individual on a case-by-case basis [...] but the norms of the law do not set the norms of rational belief. Rational belief is proportionate to the evidence [...]

the outcome of a trial does not determine what we should believe 10

why sex crimes elicit such selective scepticism?

The question, from a feminist perspective, is **why sex crimes elicit such selective scepticism.**

And the answer that feminists should give is that **the vast majority of sex crimes are perpetrated by men against women.**

Sometimes, the injunction to 'Believe women' is simply the injunction to form our beliefs in the ordinary way: in accordance with the facts. 10f.

Does 'Believe women' serve justice at Colgate [University, elite liberal arts college; 4.2 per cent of the student body black in the academic year 2013-14; yet 50 per cent of accusations of sexual violation against black students]? 11

Jyoti Singh, 16 December 2012, Delhi

the brutality of the attack on Jyoti Singh was cited by non-Indians as a way of disavowing any commonality between the sexual cultures of India and their own countries. [...]

A first question: why is it that when white men rape they are violating a norm, but when brown men rape they are conforming to one?

A second question: if Indian men are hyenas, what does that make Indian women? 12

the spectacle of the black male corpse, v/ the lack of the spectacle of the black female body

What,' Threadcraft asks, 'will motivate people to rally around the bodies of our black female dead?' 14

the white mythology about black sexuality

portraying black men as rapists and black women as unrapeable 14