

JUST INSTINCTS: BODY AND RAPE IN MAUPASSANT'S NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

In a short story by Guy de Maupassant *La Petite Roque*, the main character succumbs to his male instincts and rapes an adolescent girl. He saves himself from this guilt by writing a confession. In this paper we are going to discuss the role of confession in liberating a culprit. Also, we are going to focus on the representation of rape in all its manifestations. In the end, we are going to see that the female body itself is the source of men's monstrosity in Maupassant's work.

KEYWORDS: Metaphorical Rape, Culprit, Guilt, Confession, Liberation, Responsibility

INTRODUCTION

La Petite Roque is a short story written by Guy de Maupassant, the famous 19th century French writer. This is a story of a widower who succumbs to the force of his instincts and rapes an adolescent girl. Being the mayor, he is successful in hiding this crime from other. But as the time passes by, the moral guild of raping and murdering a young girl overwhelms him. He is not able to save himself from the recurring and hallucinating images of the girl in the silent and lonely nights. He, thus, decides to confess and die. He narrates this horrendous crime in a letter addressed to his magistrate friend. The act of confession liberates him and he perceives a newborn desire to live. But unfortunately, by the time he changes his mind; the postmaster had already taken his confession letter from the postbox and denies giving it back to the mayor despite piteous appeals. Thus, in the end, the mayor is compelled to end his life.

Woman's body, in Maupassant's work, acts as an object to satisfy the men's sexual instincts. This is an animal flesh which is chased, raped and killed to pacify men's animality. After committing the crime of rape and murder, men often find themselves falling in a state of madness arising from the deep-seated guilt. In this state he wants to die but is not able to garner the courage to do so. At this woeful moment he decides to confess his crime describing every detail. The moment he finishes his confession he feels liberated from his guilt. He no longer wants to die.

We notice that, in Maupassant's work, rape is not only physical but also metaphorical. In this study we will start discussing rape in all its manifestations in Maupassant's work. In the second part, we shall look at the role of confession in physical rape.

RAPE IN THE WORKS OF MAUPASSANT

- Metaphorical Rape of Miss Harriet
- Metaphorical Rape of Berthe

ROLE OF CONFESSION IN PHYSICAL RAPE

- Instincts, Confession and Male Behavior
- Distanciation in Physical Rape

RAPE IN THE WORKS OF MAUPASSANT

Maupassant as a writer chooses to write short stories rather than a novel unlike his mentor. Flaubert, in his works, prefers long description, Maupassant cuts it short. Flaubert communicates with the character; he likes to get acquainted with them.

Here we can compare two characters from the work of these nineteenth-century authors, Madame Bovary from Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Maupassant's *Miss Harriet* from a short story of the same name.

There is a contrasting difference between Madame Bovary's walk with her dog after her marriage to break her boredom and Miss Harriet's walks as described by the owner of the hotel where Miss Harriet and the narrator is staying. Madame Bovary character always looks for something new in nature but does not find any change. She speaks to her dog and finally she retreats from sea breezes that reach her on her dog walks. As she walks with her dog the reader follows her and gets acquainted to know her closely. This is a long walk which Flaubert likes to describe till its retreat. In her loneliness she has a quiet space to herself.

There is lack of such description in case of Miss Harriet. The narrator does not give any personal space to her. Her loneliness is stared at with great curiosity to search something strange in her. The reader merely gets to know that there is a character by this name. Her image is heavily influenced by the negative description of her personality by the hotel owner. The reader is not left alone with her to make his own judgment about her and is thus not acquainted to her fully and is dependent on other's description of her in the narrative. The reader is not allowed to spend time with her alone and get to know her psyche closely. We get to see and know her from a distance. This distanciation is at play in a Paragraph where the narrator is to start a painting at a beautiful valley. He has not seen Miss Harriet that day and suddenly he perceives 'something singular standing on the crest of the cliff...It was she' (Maupassant "Miss Harriet"). On seeing him, she disappeared. The narrator is interested in knowing her but does not really speaks with her and neither do we see the character in communication with her reader. In contrast, the author in *Madame Bovary* gives her total freedom to be herself. He describes her action without intriguing her. The author just follows her without disturbing her. The author is not mendaciously trying to discover her. The author stops being a writer. He keeps his self away from his writing. The reader and the author are at the same level of narration. The author does not hypothesizes about her veiled character as in the case of Maupassant but walks with her as an inoffensive friend with whom Madame Bovary seems to like and share her inner self.

We do not see the same preoccupation with Maupassant. He seems to be constantly aware that he is telling a story. In the beginning itself he declares that Miss Harriet is very strange and he wants to know about his odd character. It is his curiosity that draws him towards her. The author moves with certain objective. Each description (negative in the case of Miss Harriet) has a message which pronounces the author's opinion about her. The author sharp analysis obscures Miss Harriet identity and her spontaneity. She is silenced. Madame Bovary, on the other hand speaks and thinks. The author let her live as she likes. Thus the reader engages in communication with the character. Maupassant is too

precise and abrupt. Miss Harriet is thus forcefully analyzed. This force is evident, women feel uneasy of this voyeur author.

Thus Maupassant engages himself in this metaphorical rape of woman body committed with uncontrollable passion which arouses from a distance touched upon by observation, analysis and intriguing words only to negate and shun her sexuality.

Metaphorical Rape of Miss Harriet

Author's word constantly pursues Miss Harriet making her uneasy giving her illusion of love which leads to her death. Throughout the story her body is criticized because it is not young. Her behavior is scrutinized as she is living her own life. Her religious ambitions do not match with the dominant group and thus all, the author and the villagers unite against her and tries to nullify her presence. She is constricted to sexual being reduced to her flesh. She wants to be beyond this. She enjoys nature and is very religious but is condemned for being so.

The metaphorical rape of Miss Harriet results from a restless and impulsive mind who wants to search the unknown. The vagabond narrator, in his terseness reduces this character to an old flesh which asks for mockery.

Metaphorical Rape of Berthe

This is a story of a girl with slow intelligence. Maupassant again finds himself complicit in a metaphorical rape in a narrative where his preoccupation remains to search what goes on in this girl's mind and to cure her objectively and methodically, in the process, he continuously denies her liberty to live as she likes. Her sexuality is under experimentation when she is married only to examine the results of maternity on her intelligence. The whole idea of treating a woman's intelligence with a method like in a laboratory is impulsive. The story of Berthe is reduced to an observation, analysis and experimentation of woman's mind, body and her sexuality. This is once more a forceful act and thus is a metaphorical rape of a "madwoman".

Maupassant's madwoman is mad because she is odd/ old/ unknown/ vulnerable/ silent / hysteric and is thus interpreted as mad. The author chooses to rape metaphorically a madwoman. Female's desire is read by the male zone.

Miss Harriet is hysteric. Hysteria in 19th century is linked with prostitution, deviant sexuality. John Ireland discusses this in his article A Speculum in the text: Freud's "Kathrina" and Maupassant's "Le signe". In 19th century, according to Charcot's experiments, hysteria and prostitutes arouse the same reaction in men. And moreover "(...) there is a new demographic confusion surrounding prostitution. There is confusion between good woman and bad woman. The boundaries between the good woman and bad woman seem to be collapsing as the new class which has emerged could no longer be contained or readily identified"(John Ireland).

This lack of difference between the two identities stimulates further the male desire to female sexuality. Maupassant chooses to view rather than listen to the woman character. This view is sadistic and sarcastic.

Maupassant's hysterisation of female body is a stereotypical representation of woman in 19th century. Miss Harriet is judged heavily by her materiality of her body. She is mainly treated as biological being with no or minimum social attributes. She is criticized for this particular reason. The narrator on the other hand is more in command of himself and his acts and is more stable person and therefore heard and believed in the society.

But does Maupassant choose to write on marginal women to confirm the stereotypical madwoman or is he trying to simplify his own complex state of hysteria/ nervosa which he is unable to understand or control. In his anxiety the narrator commits a metaphorical rape. His attempt to understand/ discover the feminine subject fails as well as his desperate attempt to know himself. His body, language and mind is unable to perceive the contextualized subject who can seek pleasure and is not always reduced to body who can be explained by her desire for men/ her fantasy. In the process he fails to understand his self and his question “am I mad?” remains unanswered.

Or can we say that his own uncontrolled bodily maladies are the cause of his preoccupation with the feminine body. His own body demystifies him hence he leaves his own body to search the other.

The narrator in his work never has to apologize for metaphorical rape. He is portraying a fin de siècle culture in his own style. But does Maupassant ever make men in his story express remorse for the act of physical rape? The rapist does confess his crime. But what is this confession meant for? How important is the confession and what changes does it bring?

ROLE OF CONFESSION IN PHYSICAL RAPE

Instincts, Confession and Male Behavior

Does confession really wipes the horrendous crime of rape? Is confession capable of healing the victim? The answer is no. On the contrary the confession is an act of healing for the culprit, it is a way to remove the guilt within, and it is way to be accepted again in a society which has certain rules. The narrator in the short story confesses his crime and feels liberated.

Can we discuss here the role played by catholic confession with a priest in forming the male heterosexual behavior and legitimizing the coercively aggressive sexuality as deliberated in an article Sexuality, Masculinity, and Confession written by Larry May and James Bohmen. They argue that the tradition of catholic confession has equalized the all other sexual sins with the sin of rape. The priest forgiving all the time all types of sexual sins also conveys the message that all types of sexual sins are expected and not fully controlled by men’s will. Thus it can easily be forgotten and it is important to move on.

In the story, **La Petite Roque**, the rapist/ narrator seems to be doing the same thing to himself. After confessing his crime in a letter, he seems to come out of the guilt of murder which had seized him and tormented him. The culprit cleans himself from the crime of rape by merely writing a letter of confession. He feels that he will succeed in suppressing all the memories related to this crime and will continue to enjoy his life.

Does this act of confession not reiterates and reconfirms the acceptability of act of rape in a societal norm without asking the rapist for a moral transformation?

Maupassant seems to be restating the same male sexual behavior as set by the societal norms in his expression of metaphorical and physical rape in his works.

If the culprit frees himself from the moral guilt of committing a crime like rape by the mere act of confession, than whom should we hold responsible for the crime? This is a complex question which needs to be answered here. Maupassant in one of his short stories **La Mere aux Monstres** describes about a woman who gives birth to monsters. She gives birth to monsters as she has committed an immoral act. Thus Maupassant discovers the origins of monstrosity in

a female body. The inherent immorality of the female body also posits all the responsibility of the sexual aggression with the woman victim, the male perpetrator remaining innocent.

Distanciation in Physical Rape

In Maupassant's work the distanciated view which we see in metaphorical rape earlier gets repeated in physical rape as well. He fails to delve into the inner trauma of the rape victim. It is something which does not go beyond the body. Maupassant thus excludes the women subject and thus her subjectivity. She remains an object to be examined or seen objectively and consequently she ceases to be human. Her experiences as a woman have no place. Even physical rape is not able to take Maupassant into the realm of women's subjectivity. She is all the time excluded from her own self.

CONCLUSIONS

We can conclude that the rapist in Maupassant's work is 'liberated' in the end because of the following reasons:

- He committed a crime but he does not seem to be responsible for this crime
- The situation/ the other/ the female are responsible

Thus we can say that the nineteenth century women is marginalized and defined as sexual, biological and vulnerable being who commits mistake and is herself responsible for her own plight, ironically her position remain more or less same in the post structural time. Feminine body remains marginal and is not addressed directly. Here Foucault's notion of body comes into picture where he defines body as an entity, totally made by the societal norms. It is formed as a result of the influence of the surroundings. The individual has no role to play in it. In the end we can say that Maupassant when he 'lets free' a rapist does not limit his works to literary expression only but become a political discourse and have political repercussions too.

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