

The Courtship Between the Lion and the Lamb: An Analysis of Rape Culture Romanticised in *The Twilight Saga*

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Abstract

The paper aims to study how rape and the stereotypical notions of gender get perpetuated in society as part of its popular literary discourses. It shines light on the ways in which selected fiction series glamorizes and sexualizes violence against women. Sexual violence is often ignored, excused, condoned, and even encouraged throughout the world. This paper analyzes the development of rape as a cultural phenomenon branching from deep-rooted sexism and misogyny that extends towards rape myths, locker-room talks, victim shaming etc. It gives special attention to treat rape as a social crime that breeds through psychologically, morally and ethically built cultural tools where violence against women is normalized. It tries to emphasize the importance of a gender sensitive approach in popular literary discourses. *The Twilight Saga*, initially released as a novel series, and later through movie adaptations with the same name, has a massive fan base especially amongst young-adult audiences. This investigation raises consciousness regarding the various problems of toxic masculinity, misogyny, consent, violence, trauma etc. portrayed in the series.

Keywords: gender, popular culture, rape culture, sexism, sexual violence, *The Twilight Saga*

Rape culture denotes a culture where rape and sexualised violence are normalised, and sometimes, condoned. In other words, it is “a set of values and beliefs that provide an environment conducive to rape” (Boswell and Spades, 1996, p. 133). In a rape culture, factors like public attitudes, religious beliefs, shared values, and even the very unconscious of the society will be deeply rooted in phallogocentric ideologies so much so that, a culture of rape can thrive there. It “includes jokes, TV, music, advertising, legal jargon, laws, words and imagery, that

make violence against women and sexual coercion seem so normal that people believe rape is inevitable” (FORCE: Upsetting Rape Culture, Glossary section). Since these factors mostly exist as cultural undertones, which make them difficult to decode, they are often ignored, excused, condoned, and even encouraged throughout the world. Considering the social existence of the crime, rape cannot be eradicated when it is approached as an individual crime. According to Susan Brownmiller, “The ideology of rape is fuelled by cultural values that are perpetuated at every level of our society, and nothing less than a frontal attack is needed to repel this cultural assault” (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 389). The existence of collective behaviours like spreading and believing rape myths, normalising stalking, glamourisation of locker room talks and bro codes, lack of basic awareness about consent, fewer concerns about individual space, propagating the idea of women as vulnerable and fragile, patriarchy existing within economic relations, religion, law, military and almost all social and state-sanctioned institutions, end up contributing to the culture of rape.

The reinforced subordination of women and other gender minorities in a rape culture sets gender-based sexual violence as their centre of action. It talks about power that is both material and psychological. The important factor is that the struggle between men of unequal power relations often takes up their manifestations on women’s bodies to prove one’s superiority over the other. The chaste female body symbolizes an object under possession, the loss of which hurts the pride and honour of men who ‘own’ it. Therefore, she bears the burden to submit to the law of men, deviation from which will raise a threat to her existence. The object is thus deprived of an agency, even to conceptualise the violence committed on her body and to understand her own victim position. This discursive enforcement socially and psychologically nullifies her capability further as an individual self and justifies the normalization of gender-based violence by projecting women as “naturally” prone to violation and therefore requiring the protection of men. Here, rape and sexual violence becomes a strategy for creating intelligible gender positions where women constitute the vulnerable other.

As discussed earlier, when violence against women gets integral to a culture, it becomes a culture of rape. Rapes are not just some occasional scandals of physical coercion, happening out of a momentary overflow of lust, or out of deviant sexual behaviour. They are rather a by-

product of nuanced sexism and rigid notions of gender integral to a culture. Sexism is a form of power manipulation that routinely regulates women's subordinate position through the pillars of paternalism, heterosexuality and gender differentiation (Fraser, 2015). In her work, "From "Ladies First" to "Asking for It": Benevolent Sexism in the Maintenance of Rape Culture" Courtney Fraser (2015) argues that

...benevolent-sexist ideologies construct women as creatures devoid of agency, leading men to routinely presume women's consent to sexual activity whether or not such consent in fact exists...Gender norms, and the rigid binary division of gender, must be broken down if the rates at which rape is committed and acquitted are to decrease (p. 141).

Studies on literary works that perpetuate/reflect the culture of rape are an efficient tool to understand the deeper gone roots of normalization of violence against women. Dealing with popular media and the issue of rape, Dianne Herman (1989) elaborates on the idea that,

The imagery of sexual relations between males and females in books, songs, advertising and films is frequently that of a sado-masochistic relationship thinly veiled by a romantic facade. Thus, it is very difficult in our society to differentiate rape from "normal" heterosexual relations. Indeed, our culture can be characterized as a rape culture because the image of heterosexual intercourse is based on a rape model of sexuality (p. 21).

The *Twilight Saga*, considering its immense fanbase and the problematic portrayal of a romantic relationship it presents in front of its young adult audience, offers a scope of analysis on how sadomasochistic relationships get its "thin veil of romantic façade" within the arena of popular culture. The novel series by Stephenie Meyer has become a sensation and cult throughout the world despite the regressive anti-feminist attitudes it has, sugar-coated in the name of 'selfless love', that glamorizes and sexualises violence against women.

It is the story of Isabella Swan, a seventeen-year-old girl, who falls into a love triangle between a vampire Edward Cullen, the most desired bachelor of the town and Jacob, the head member of the werewolf community, who swore an oath to protect the town from attacks of bloodthirsty vampires. These two men represent power that is both masculine and supernatural whereas Bella represents human and fragile.

Throughout the series, she can be seen strangled between Edward and Jacob in their ego combat to establish authority over the female subject of their passion. These male characters also forms a dichotomy where Edward represents perfection; the white, straight cis man who is educated, immensely wealthy and well respected in society. He belongs to a heteronormative upper-class family, where the gender-based division of labour prevails and flourishes. On the other hand, Jacob is all that Bella is trying to overcome. He belongs to a broken, lower-middle-class family of a Native American community. Even though Bella identifies with Jacob, considering her familial and economic status, as a woman craving for social mobility where her gender limits her from achieving the same, she ultimately chooses Edward not only for material prosperity but also for the protection and fulfilment that she believes she requires. As De Beauvoir explains (2011),

...the adolescent girl wishes at first to identify herself with males; when she gives that up, she then seeks to share in their masculinity by having one of them in love with her; it is not the individuality of this one or that one which attracts her; she is in love with man in general (pp. 774).

Since the story is presented to us in a first-person point of view, the narrator's thoughts justify Bella's actions claiming them as her conscious choices, thereby blocking the readers from thinking deep into the situation. However, the question of how limited her choices are and how they are discursively produced in the first place is never addressed by the author. Even when Bella asks her monstrous boyfriend to kiss/have sex with her, she is less concerned about the fact that Edward can end up killing her. It is her body image issues that are rather troubling her.

Bella marries Edward just after her 18th birthday; the minimum age required to get legally married. Following this, on their honeymoon on a private island, she constantly tries to seduce her husband and gets disappointed by the probability that she is not 'desirable' enough for him. She thinks of herself as not worthy because women are supposed to be desired by men. This exemplifies the narrowing down of female sexuality to a parameter according to what men want. The feeling of lack in Bella ignites a desperate craving to overcome it by merging with the absolute. Her love for Edward is this path from otherness to the individual. It becomes her central motivation, even though she knows the transformation will be physically painful and that she most probably will have to give up parts of her personality.

Even though there are genuine efforts from the author to portray Edward as a gentle and understanding partner, he often expresses his ability to coerce his power over Bella and his struggles to resist the urge. This scenario is problematic on so many levels. One, it indicates the idea that men are inherently capable of hurting women and they have to make immense effort to resist it. Thereby, naturalizing the power of one gender over the other. Secondly, Edward's 'cravings' for Bella complicate physical intimacy in romantic relationships. For example, Edward often compares Bella to his favourite food. More than a sexual connotation between two intimate partners, Edward's use of this analogy stands out more as an objectification to show how threatening her presence is to him that he has to struggle to control his 'cravings'. At some point, it evokes a sense of gaslighting and victim blaming where women are blamed for inciting violence committed against them just by existing. In another sexually intimate interaction between the two characters, Edward pushes himself back from Bella so forcefully that he will not go on to the extremes of killing his lover. Here, the narration establishes Edward's sexuality as a violent one and romanticises this as a repercussion of his mighty love.

Twilight more than often celebrates male aggression by inextricably merging it with the idea of love and protection. The main motivation for all the battles and conflicts in the novel was formed as part of protecting Bella or her daughter but never for other moral causes. In a conversation where Edward and Bella confront their love for each other, Edward says that "and so the lion fell in love with the lamb" (Meyer, 2017, p.296) comparing himself to the lion and Bella to a lamb. Just like in the poem of William Blake, the symbolism of the lion and the lamb forms a dichotomy where one represents the all-powerful, violent, and authoritarian and the other represents innocence, purity and powerlessness. This is reminiscent of the discursive reproduction of intelligible genders, disguised as an innocent remark as it is romanticized. For Courtney Fraser (2015),

The process of gender differentiation generates both "benevolent" and "hostile" effects: on the one hand, reverent attitudes toward women as pure and good, and on the other, the violence or abandonment that can occur when a woman abdicates her status as a "lady" by stepping outside the lines of proper deportment (p. 149).

The violations done to the normative “lady attributes” by another character Rosalie, a shallow, haughty woman who desired her fiancé only for his material wealth, somehow make her deserving of the rape that was committed on her while she went out alone at night. This strategy is double-edged. Firstly, it sets the idea that women are fragile and thus need the protection of men and secondly, it blames the same women on whose bodies the violence was committed. In the first part of the book series, “Twilight”, Bella nearly gets raped by a group of men as she was walking alone along a street at night. Edward, using his supernatural abilities saves Bella from trouble and blames her for the ‘reckless’ action. Even the author, through the first-person narration, blames Bella for ignoring the codes of gender conduct. Such victim-blaming attitudes, readily available in real-life patriarchal social equations, burden the gendered other to always be cautious as if they are always at a point of threat. This uneasiness causes them to be restless in their own flesh and body, thus the compulsion to seek protection from the absolute, the men. This reveals how we as part of a culture of rape tactically displaces the responsibility of a crime from the culprits to the victim when it comes to gender-based violence.

By sexualizing violence and sexuality as violent, The Twilight Saga promotes the culture of rape even to a fetishist level. For example, Edward is never blamed for hurting Bella during the act of sex. His actions are rather justified as involuntary and inevitable. Stephenie Meyer also pays special attention to ‘whitewash’ the Cullens by describing them as vegetarians, as they choose to predate only over animals, establishing a superiority or purity on them over their other vampire companions. However, the Cullens coexist with the rest of their vampire community, tolerating them and making peace with them, just like men cooperate with rapist men. Mayer makes a deliberate effort in the novel series to ‘angelize’ Edward while celebrating his abstinence and portraying him as a predator of sexual offenders. Edward used to prey on rapists and sexual offenders for blood before he turned into a so-called vegetarian vampire. However, the important point to note here is that the now civilized, modest vampire, does not make any efforts to stop sexual harassment ever since his blood thirst is satisfied.

The novel begins with Bella moving to Forks, Washington, from her mother who is separated from her birth father Charlie. This separation from her compassionate mother and reuniting with Charlie whom she

barely knows places Bella in a position of anxiety, displacement and a quest for a place of her own. Charlie is a police officer, whose authority over Bella represents the authority of the state. Bella is more of a cook and a housekeeper in her father's house. Charlie, even being a police officer, keeps Bella under house arrest when she gets attacked, rather than legally reporting it. The failure of the system to find a proper solution for gender crimes without withholding the rights of the victim is further naturalized in the name of protection in this novel. Bella fears Charlie to object to her relationship with Edward because he is a potential predator. This is ironic because she denies questioning the consequences of that relationship on her own. Even though it can be justified as an individual choice, the feelings of a minor, towards a hundred- and fifty-year-old vampire cannot be understood as an informed choice, especially when the society she lives in systematically compels her to submit to the law of men.

Bella calls herself clumsy, thin and a 'trouble magnet' and thinks of herself as merely capable of owning her existence. She is constantly in search of somebody to belong to. Whenever Edward is absent from her life, she goes to Jacob to fill the void that Edward has left her with. Edward at times reminds Bella of how weak she is and always takes up the responsibility of 'protecting' her. There are many instances in the text where he uses his physical/supernatural abilities to save Bella from trouble. The irony here is that the very man who is concerned about her safety is the same man who ends up killing her. The situation is not any different with Jacob. Jacob has the potential to become a werewolf within the outrage of passion so he has to control it vehemently. Both Edward and Jacob want to save Bella from each other but both of them, in several instances, end up hurting her. According to Susan Griffin (2015), "In the system of chivalry, men protect women against men.... Indeed, chivalry is an age-old protection racket which depends for its existence on rape" (p. 11). By posing women as vulnerable to rape and other such violations, the society of men sweeps away her agency and invalidates it. It is a discursively produced historical violence against women. In this text, both Edward and Jacob are portrayed as rational beings as they are always in control of themselves whereas Bella is allowed to be emotional and reckless at times because she has the shielding of the men. The vicious tradition of patriarchy to establish men as saddled with the responsibilities of safeguarding women from assaults/injuries that men themselves perpetrate and also with the pain

of prohibiting themselves from committing it takes up its manifestations throughout this novel. The power dynamics here are reminiscent of the Whiteman's burden to civilise his colonies.

Susan Brownmiller (1975) describes rape as something that has “played a critical function” in society since prehistoric times. For her, rape is a tool, “a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear” (p. 15). In the Twilight Saga also, the control over Bella's sexuality, sexual choices and the fear and insecurity evoked in her, put the protagonist entangled between the male forces acting around her. Many of the male characters in her proximity, including Edward's brother-in-law try to attack Bella, an attack that symbolises rape since the very process of a vampire preying on his victims can be read parallel to rape. James Twitcher's work (1980) “The Vampire Myth” explains that “as the vampire takes blood, he is also inseminating his victim with evil. Rape is played out through the gauze of fantasy” (p. 87). They do it violently, without consent, and also in a predatory manner. In the text, Bella is in a constant quest to escape from unwanted attacks by Edward's rival vampires so that her purity, honour and chastity can be maintained. This fear in her helps and justifies the men in action to retain their control and superior position over the inferior other.

Stalking is also a normalized practice in this novel. Edward persistently stalks Bella while she is asleep, inside the privacy of her own house. When Bella finds it out, she does not report it to the police or even share it with her father for she perceives it as Edward's way of expressing love. Bella is very much consumed with the idea of love so that, as Beauvoir (2011) says, from her early adolescence, she is

...used to seeing him as a sovereign, with whom equality is not permitted...her dream of surpassing her being toward one of those superior beings, of becoming one, of fusing with the sovereign subject; there is no other way out for her than losing herself body and soul in the one designated to her as the absolute, as the essential” (p. 773).

Bella wishes to attain the status of a supernatural entity, a supreme being through Edward as she cannot do it on her own. She is neither an earning member of her family nor does she have a college degree. According to Courtney Fraser (2015), “women whose freedom is already imperilled by the condition of economic dependency, agency is further

stripped away as they tolerate marital abuse that they might otherwise feel empowered to reject” (p. 153). Bella’s immediate pregnancy after the marriage with Edward later ties her to the sacrificing mother figure. She had to give up her life as a human to give birth to her vampire baby. Bella’s rebirth as a vampire comes after the birth of her child, indicating her rebirth in life as a mother, thereby acquiring the sense of fulfilment through motherhood that she failed to gain earlier. In her work “Possession: Erotic Love in the Law of Rape”, Ngaire Naffine (1994) details that in the Western philosophical tradition,

Man is the procreator, that sexual production-reproduction is preferable to his “activity” alone, to his “project” alone. Woman is nothing but the receptacle that passively receives his product, even if she has pleaded, facilitated, even demanded that it be placed within her. When a woman is swept off her feet, when she loses herself in love’s swoon, she serves to reveal the potency and sexual autonomy of man. While she is eclipsed by his erotic power, he finds himself affirmed: as the one ‘of fame,’ of ‘perpetual action,’ the productive one. ‘She is most immediately and dramatically a woman when she lies beneath a man, and her submission is the apex of his manhood (p. 7).

Therefore, women become a chattel, an object or a possession that can only be possessed by men. In the Twilight saga, the control over Bella’s death and life after that are left with Edward while she just lies there motionless, symbolic of her stagnant agency. It is he who decides whether Bella should be left to die or continue to live by becoming a vampire.

In this Novel series, Stephenie Mayer never mentions an adult involved in a conversation with the teenagers regarding sex and consent. Charlie, Bella’s father, is hesitant to talk to her openly about sexual matters. Before her marriage with Edward, Charlie wanted to know whether Bella was a virgin but didn’t bother to educate her on matters like consent, safe sex, etc.

Education, both in school and of the general public, is perhaps the most direct route to changing public perceptions of gender stereotypes, sex, and rape.... in addition to expanding official school curricula, it is crucial that parents take an active role in helping their children learn about consent and communication. Even in interactions where

sex is not mentioned at all, children are absorbing information and lessons—about gender, communication, respect, boundaries, and self-assertion—that they will one day apply in the course of a sexual exchange (Fraser, 2015, p. 199).

Neither the school nor the parents provide the teenagers in this text with basic sex education. Rather, the sexual policing done on Bella's body, by both Edward and Charlie further complicates the situation. The woman trying to exercise her sexual freedom is always under surveillance by the men in her immediate surroundings in this series. The surveillance often goes to the extremes from damaging her truck to stalking Bella at times so that it will restrict her mobility.

Female objectification has repeated occurrences throughout the Twilight Saga. Charles Cullen, the vampire father of Edward Cullen, looking for a beautiful bride for his son, turns Rosalie into a vampire just because he finds her pretty and fit to be Edward's wife. The imprinting mechanism that happens within the werewolf clan also objectifies women by portraying them as "things that hold men" to earth. When Jacob forcefully kisses Bella in one instance, she tolerates it and later, the narration portrays Jacob as a sad victim of romantic rejection. Bella feels sorry for him because she could not reciprocate that "love". The trivialisation of some major violations of personal boundaries and consent, makes the plot line regressively complicated. According to Brownmiller (1975), rape (here, sexual violation) has further significance as conquering women acts as "the vehicle of his victorious conquest over her being, the ultimate test of his superior strength, the triumph of his manhood" (p. 225). Therefore, Bella becomes a mere tool for Jacob's attempt at ascension to superiority. The violent sexual acts of Edward, that leaves Bella in pain are also justified in the text as an extension of his power rather than a flaw or limitation. Portraying men's sexuality as violent and violence as sexy is another problematic aspect of the work.

Heteronormativity is a key aspect of a rape culture. It pushes other sexualities to the margins and therefore builds a society that is run by the law of cis men. There is no representation of queer identities in the Twilight universe. All couples existing in the novel are heterosexual, establishing the heteronormativity it represents. The traditions like weddings and high school proms along with familial institutions are all included in this book in a way that they stay within the bounds of

normative gender relations. While Courtney Fraser (2015) argues that “dominant norms can be (should be) challenged by advancing subversive uses of those norms, there is a way out from under the prescriptive gender stereotypes that help perpetuate rape culture: as a society, we must make room for more alternative renditions of gender” (p. 190). Also, the emphasis on the extremely pale white skin of the vampires that shines like diamonds under sunlight as a point of attractiveness binds the narration to undertones of racism. There are no black/brown vampires in the text. The animal-like descriptions given to the werewolf clan who are already marginalized for their ethnicity as an indigenous Quileute tribe, are also questionable. Even within the werewolf clan, there is only one she-wolf.

The compilation of Essays by Emilie Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher, and Martha Roth (1995) titled “Transforming a Rape Culture”, describes rape culture as

A complex set of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm (p. 11).

The recreation of the concept of man as saviours of women who gives them the gift of protection through forcing obedience is one of the key aspects of a rape culture. It propagates men’s sexuality as naturally violent while simultaneously encouraging the notion that women enjoy being violently dominated by men. This dichotomy envisages specific social roles for each gender that ultimately traps women in the protection racket. This particular paper analysed how the selected text has been contributing to the normalisation of sexism and rape culture to an alarming level. In the *Twilight* saga, the components of a culture of rape are deeply intertwined with its narration, symbolism, plot and even through the very construction of a romantic hero who is a monstrous predator. The culturally imposed division of sexes is maintained throughout this work of fiction so that it makes the social responsibility and gender sensitivity of the author questionable. To conclude, it can be stated that cultural sexism, which is “the conscious form of female degradation designed to boost the male ego by offering ‘proof’ of his native superiority (and of female inferiority) everywhere he looks”

(Brownmiller, 1975, p. 389) is not only present but also romanticized in this text.

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