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## Book Review: Female Sexual Slavery

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## BOOK REVIEW

**FEMALE SEXUAL SLAVERY.** By Kathleen Barry.<sup>1</sup> New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1979. Pp. 274. \$10.95.

Reviewed by Hilde Hein<sup>2</sup>

Kathleen Barry designates as sexual slavery all those practices, conditions and situations which place women in a position of sexual abuse, exploitation and oppression *from which they cannot extricate themselves.*<sup>3</sup> The latter claim, though difficult to demonstrate, is crucial because Barry means to exclude real or potential circumstances in which a "perverse" sexual choice is genuinely and voluntarily made. However, since women generally are socialized to believe in their own impotence and absence of alternatives, such autonomy is rarely exhibited. Freedom exists only where options are viable and accessible.

Among those institutions which confine women to sexual slavery, Barry includes prostitution—on the street or in brothels—marriage with battery, forced marriage, veiling and seclusion, incestuous family life, traditional genital mutilation, and the sanctioning of rape and pornography. While some of these are less obviously institutionalized practices than others, they are associated as patriarchal prerogative, and that is the basis of her renunciation of them.

After lengthy discussion of each of these practices, amply documented with evidence of its widespread prevalence and the violence it imposes upon women, Barry links them together as manifestations of male sexual power used to colonize, exploit and oppress women. Rape is the "primordial core" (p.34) of all such expressions of male power, and it occurs wherever sexual intercourse is coerced—with or without overt violence. She goes on to show that even where such practices are explicitly prohib-

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1. Ms. Barry is a feminist and sociologist who has worked as a university Women's Advocate. She has lectured widely on women's rights, taught in women's studies departments, and is a contributor to national magazines and feminist publications. She is currently teaching Women's Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

2. Ms. Hein is Associate Professor of Philosophy, College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Mass., and has taught classes on the philosophy of law and the philosophy of women.

3. (Emphasis added.)

ited by law there is a conspiracy of male-bonded endorsement of their perpetuation, including even the complicity of police and other official authorities. The refusal of police to intervene in "domestic discord" (wife beating) and their leering harassment of rape victims are well-known phenomena. Barry describes in detail the legal structures designed to punish and humiliate prostitutes while leaving their violent clients and pimps untouched, laws which return runaway victims of incest to their guilty parents, and customs and traditions which first render women vulnerable to assault by men and then make escape from violent husbands, pimps and "protectors" impossible.

Barry might have articulated the complicity of men in the protection racket with even greater clarity and conviction than she does. She discusses the tyranny of fear under which women live, knowing that they are defined by male standards—be it as whores, madonnas or whatever. Given that knowledge, women understand that "protection" is awarded to those and only to those who suit male stereotypes, and that it is swiftly withdrawn from women who defy or appear to defy or are suspected of defiance of those norms. Barry cites instances of women out of doors who are taken as streetwalkers, of rape victims accused of being provocative for extraneous reasons, of female witnesses whose testimony is discounted because they are women—Patricia Hearst serving as a pre-eminent example—and of countless women whose coerced invisibility and silence in the face of male oppression is then taken as tacit consent.

She also indicts the moralistic paternalism of "well-intentioned men" (p.20), citing for historic illustration those associated with Josephine Butler in her struggle against institutionalized regulation of prostitution in 19th Century England. Referring with irony to the heroics of Alfred Dyer, Quaker reformist, and of W. T. Stead, a crusading journalist, she points out that these men, heedless of the injury caused to the women and children they exploited, campaigned vigorously and ineffectively for what they proclaimed as the corruption of the sweetly innocent. The moralism of men who prescribe one morality to women while indulging in a double standard for themselves has always been a source of pain and frustration to women. This is not merely because of its inherent injustice, but also because those very men define both standards and are their enforcers

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(and violators).

All women are thus dependent upon the good will of men who define and judge them. Hence the frequent treachery of women's silence, motivated by fear and impotence, which renders them vulnerable to discreditation, to collusion against other women, and to outrageous exploitation.

Given the enormity of the charge which Barry lays at the feet of men and the near universality of their alleged responsibility, one is necessarily moved to inquire why so many should be so guilty of crimes of such measure. While Barry does address herself to this question, her answer is tentatively stated:

Why do men do these things to women? Because, in part, there is nothing to stop them. Norms and sanctions are rarely applied against female sexual slavery. And so, like the child who tests every limit he or she discovers until there is adult interference, there are men who will trample on every human value, every standard of human decency, every vestige of respect for human life, beyond almost every taboo. (p.215)

It is only incidentally and in passing that she notes what appears to be the fundamental answer to which all men and all women in patriarchal society are socialized; that men have a natural (god-given) right to sexual service. Since rights generally entail obligations on the part of someone other than the persons to whom the rights are owed, women are the likely candidates to fulfill male sexual rights. Since it is also the case that sex is a means not merely to pleasure, but also to procreation and hence to the survival of the species, it is not difficult to comprehend how an argument persuasive to women might be (and has been) formulated. Women are a necessary instrument to the propagation of humankind and they are instrumental to pleasure—sometimes their own. Therefore their sexual compliance in both necessary and desirable. Hence follows the alleged obligation.

The presumption of unmitigated male right has never been seriously questioned. Even those who rail most ardently against sexual indulgence, mostly theologians, do so not on the ground that men lack the *right* to sexual enjoyment, but rather on the

premise that men are destined to higher things. Sex, even where it results in offspring, is an "unworthy" pastime, inferior to other activities specifically because it involves traffic with lesser beings and because it entails a "letting go," however momentary, a loss of control over one's own faculties and a descent to the condition of the inferior. It is for this reason that where sex is proscribed, it is not men who are admonished to withhold their hand or gaze, but women who must be secluded, shaved, veiled or swathed in purdah. Men's lust is not merely unquenchable, but righteous. The solution is the removal or degradation of its object.

But even assuming the truth of the claim to the universality and intensity of men's sexual desire, it does not follow that they have a right to its fulfillment. Nor would it follow, if one were to concede the desirability of sexual satisfaction, that the obligation to provide such satisfaction should rest upon some or all or even any women.

At best, one might make a case for the responsibility shared by men and women of the present toward future generations. This would lay a basis for environmental protection and conservation so that our grandchildren might enjoy the world we left them; but it does not follow that we are obligated to bear them. If ever the biblical imperative to be fruitful and multiply was a universal imperative to women, it can no longer be defended as such in today's overpopulated world.

The proposition that men have a right to sexual satisfaction and a claim upon women to provide it is therefore nonsensical. Yet it has held unquestioned authority in all cultures throughout history. And from that certainty have stemmed all the forms of sexual coercion, violence and degradation of women that Barry describes.

In her chapter on pornography, Barry traces a sequence of naturalization of what she calls *cultural sadism*—characterized as "a distinct social form that consists of practices which encourage and support sexual violence, defining it into normal behavior." (p.174) As she points out, this history amounts to an ideological justification of the perpetration of the sexual enslavement of women. Advancing (?) from the Marquis de Sade to

Freud, to the latest doctrines of sociobiology, she shows how the utilization of women as instruments in the discharge of male sexual urges is warranted first as being "in accordance with nature," then as inevitable libidinal expression and finally as genetically determined—in all instances a part of the grand economy of nature. As she also notes, Nature is defined from a male perspective.<sup>4</sup> But even supposing this haploid naturalistic account of sexual dominance to be accurate, it would not follow from this condition that it was right or defensible. Even men, with notable exceptions, have maintained the falsehood of the doctrine tht Might makes Right.

Nonetheless, it is hard to see any other basis for the pervasive sexual enslavement of women. While Barry's book is possibly enlightening as to the detailed strategies of procurement, the sinister deceptions of the international white slave trade, and the general deprivations upon and profiteering from the misery and ignorance of women, it does not significantly augment our understanding about what is going on in the world. The piling of case history upon case history deepens our depression and reaffirms the generality of the victimization of women, but does not explain it.

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4. A second and more political justification of sexual slavery is given by Barry in her discussion of Lyndon Johnson's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, appointed in 1967. Reflecting an area in which little disagreement could be discerned between Democrats and Republicans, the Commission made its final report to President Nixon and the Congress in 1970. It concluded that there was no evidence indicating that exposure to pornographic (i.e. sexually explicit) material was conducive to sexually delinquent or criminal behavior among youth or adults. Furthermore it advocated the repeal of all restrictions upon the sale, exhibition or distribution of such material to adults. Some of the members of the Commission even went so far as to point out the utility of pornographic materials in the education of young people and the correction of sexual deviancy. (It is a glaring contradiction to maintain on the one hand, that exposure to pornography has no notable behavioral effect, and on the other, that pornographic materials are useful for educational purposes and even in "therapeutic" intervention in cases of sexual inadequacy and deviancy.) Citing her own counter-analysis of the data used by the Commission, Barry concludes:

With mandate and money from the United States Congress, the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, through its voluminous research, created both sanction and tolerance for cultural sadism. It opened the way, through pseudo-scientific legitimization, for the escalation of violence and a wearing down of values. It did this consciously and with forethought by studying and knowing the effects of pornography and by using it as a model instead of a caution. (p.204)

Barry cautions, however, against making the assumption that women are invariably defenseless victims. She criticizes the tendency of "left liberal politicians" to impose the mentality of victims upon women. Women cast in that institutionalized and impersonal role are as devoid of human dignity and worth as women denounced morally as whores and sluts and carnal creatures—so debased for the utility and pleasure of men. In place of the status of victim, Barry endorses the status of survivor. She characterizes effective survival, as distinct from mere survival, as an active state of self-conscious doing. As women strive to liberate themselves from sexual enslavement, they must organize together in mutual support to break down the conditions that have enslaved them. In order to accomplish that task, it is imperative that we have some understanding of how those conditions came to be, and Barry offers some clarification of what those conditions are, how they are interconnected and how they are culturally protected.

If anything, Barry is weak in stressing the universality of guilt for the enslavement of women which must be shared even by men who do not directly and literally take part in that offense. All men, for example, whether or not they are rapists, profit from the fact that there are rapists. For that reality terrorizes women, induces them to turn to (some, other) men for protection, and puts them at a disadvantage relative to men in their readiness to be enterprising and to undertake risk. What is courageous for a man is foolhardy for a woman; and normal female prudence is excessive timidity by male standards. Insofar as male standards of virtue and excellence predominate—as they do in all patriarchal societies—women are necessarily judged inferior by them. In all of those areas of efficiency and expertise, where women are increasingly competing with men, no matter what their compensatory qualifications, women are initially handicapped—and all men profit from that disadvantage.

Barry does not offer specific solutions to these problems. She advocates broad re-evaluations such as the substitution of sexual intimacy for sexual aggression, and a redefinition of perversion that focuses on degree of harm done to another rather than on the particular choice of partner or position. She calls for a resensitization program to counteract the fraudulent sensation mongering of the past few years; and she denounces the "value-

less individualism" (p.223) of recent decades as ardently as the narrow and coercive value system of a prior era. She makes a few tactical proposals for interim measures—centers for escaping prostitutes and their children, shelters for wives and run-aways from which they will not be returned to their oppressive homes. She favors the decriminalization of prostitution together with strictly enforced sanctions against pimping, procuring and involuntary servitude. But these are only stop-gap measures, insufficient in themselves to bring about the radical social change that would put an end to sexual slavery. For that to come about, fundamental changes in the thought patterns and social practice of human beings are required; and so we need more and better theory along with truly imaginative utopian thought.

In contemplation of the practical question, "What is to be done?" some considerations of interest to women with special legal skills might be noted outside the context of Barry's book. First and foremost of these is a re-examination of the laws governing the institution of marriage. Historically, their purpose has been to sanction biological succession, and link it to rights and property. To the extent that such laws have been prejudicial toward women and children both in their consideration of women and children *as* property and in their denial of property rights *to* women and children, the institution of marriage is morally intolerable and politically indefensible. (This is particularly true since in most countries the major part of all other rights and claims to status is contingent upon possession of property.) Other foundations of human community and cohabitation might be legislated, and surely some marriages are *de facto* relationships built upon such premises. But the legal ground of marriage and the familial structure to which it is bound is inherently conducive to the sexual enslavement of women.

A second consideration applicable to women in the legal professions is the issue of women's employment. Marriage and such correlated services as prostitution and child care have been the traditional roles of women. Apart from religious life there have been historically few alternatives open to women other than sexual or domestic labor, paid or unpaid. (Women's advancement to the status of airline stewardess, nursery school teacher or nightclub entertainer is not a very great step forward.) It is of primary importance that women become economi-

cally independent of men, since escape from sexual slavery is otherwise impossible. The availability of equal employment, of job security, of freedom from sexual harassment on the job, and of equal recognition for work accomplished are therefore issues of primary importance. However reformist these objectives might appear and trivial in the light of more pressing matters, they cannot be underestimated. Whatever can be done through legal channels to make women economically autonomous must be done.

Finally, and more broadly, the very concept of rights, which stems from an individualistic rather than a communitarian value system, merits reconsideration. That analysis is a philosophical one, outside the domain of legal inquiry; but insofar as the presumed right of sexual gratification has been accorded to men, with or without explicit legal sanction, the correlative obligation to comply with that right has been enforced upon all women. The legal and cultural consequences for women have been incalculable and largely punitive. Since men have been the benefactors of these consequences, it is not likely that they, however benevolently inclined, will be in the forefront of serious and imaginative structural reassessment. It is therefore incumbent upon women to conceive and bring about the necessary changes. This will be a long term process, probably spanning generations. There is bound to be opposition, much of it violent, much humiliating and much ridiculous.

Many of the contributions that women can make to the ultimate goal of bringing about an end to sexual tyranny will seem small scale and trivial in the light of what is to be done. But since there are centuries of oppression behind us and its forms have penetrated even to the smallest interstices of our personal lives, we will simply have to go about the job patiently and with determination to unravel all that has been and to weave anew, better, more humanly productive and satisfying patterns of living.