Sexist Violence and the Gender-Dependent Experience of Social Upheaval

In both Christina Garcia's novel *Dreaming in Cuban* and Helene Cooper's memoir *The House on Sugar Beach*, the main characters are women who live through a time of violent social and political revolution. The books depict the trials of these women, in Cuba and Liberia respectively, and illustrate that women experienced a disproportionate amount of suffering in these conflicts. This begs the question of whether and why women suffer disproportionately in all cases of armed revolution. At first glance, there are many examples of such upheaval that do not seem to entail this gender-bias. Looking at the Cuban Revolution and the Liberian Civil War, cases where, as the texts *The House on Sugar Beach* and *Dreaming in Cuban* make clear, this did occur, and pondering its causes, leads to the conclusion that many of what appear to be counterexamples to the theme of violence against women may not actually be so. In the chaos of violent hegemonic upheaval, and indeed armed conflict in general, women experience unique and amplified hardship when compared to their male counterparts, and the degree to which this occurs is largely correlated with the cultural attitudes towards women carried by the perpetrators. The greater the degree of female objectification by the overwhelmingly male fighters in these conflicts, and the greater their hatred of their enemies, the more dramatic the trend of misogynistic terror will be. Finally, there will always be some exclusively female-directed violence in chaotic societal shifts involving armed fighters, because there are men who, when given the opportunity afforded by a weapon and lack of consequence, will terrorize women simply because they can.

In both the aforementioned books, the main example of violence experienced uniquely by
women is rape. It is shown to be caused by several main enabling factors, one being the dehumanization of the victim as a result of extreme class and ethnic divisions. Rape occurs when a man (and it almost always is a man) loses or overcomes his inhibition of conscience and fear of punishment. In the chaos of revolution, social systems of protection and justice are seriously weakened. Furthermore, those with new-found power have no one to whom they must answer.

This is demonstrated when Helene recalls:

> These intruders weren't bothering to cloak themselves under cover of darkness. They were brazen. They had nothing to hide from and nothing to fear, and they could come into our yard and into our house and take whatever they wanted and do whatever they wanted to us. (Cooper, 171)

Effectively, they can do whatever they want; their only checks are each other. In *House* and *Dreaming*, rape was (initially) carried out against the targets of the revolution—the “Congo” people in Liberia (descendents of freed African American slaves who colonized and founded the modern Liberian state, and who, prior to the coup d'etat of 1979, controlled most of Liberia's wealth; their counterparts, the “Country” people, were descended from indigenous Liberians), and the wealthy landowners in Cuba. Because they were stirred to revolt in the first place by anger at these groups, the hatred of the soldiers depicted overcame any inhibitions towards rape that they might have had. In Liberia, the women of the targeted group were explicitly singled out by angry demonstrators, who chanted “Who born soldier? Country woman! Who born minister? Congo woman!” (Cooper, 182). This situation eroded personal barriers of conscience, while the chaotic circumstances of hegemonic upheaval followed by a government unable or unwilling to prevent atrocities eroded the physical deterrent of consequences. In Liberia, the conflict eventually devolved to the point where it was no longer defined by Country-Congo distinction but by religious/ethnic divisions, and women from all thusly experienced a veritable hell.
The examples of Liberia and Cuba also support the assertion that cultural attitudes towards women and the degree of female objectification heavily influence their experiences during societal collapse. In Liberia, the society that preceded the violence (one cannot call what existed after the violence began in earnest a “society”) had very strongly defined gender roles and a male-dominant social hierarchy. “Country” women, were “sent off to the Grebo bush when [they] are fourteen to get circumcised and to learn how to be one of umpteen wives to some husband” and “are married off as soon as they come back” (Cooper, 15). Female circumcision represents the idea that women should not engage in sexual intercourse for pleasure, but only to have children. Furthermore, the numerous wives most Liberians had is indicative of the entitlement men felt they had to sex. Indeed, a Liberian rebel leader remarks in the film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* that it doesn't matter how many civilians they kill because when they capture the capital of Monrovia, they will “procreate and replenish the population,” displaying total disregard for the will of those he planned to procreate with (Leymah Gbowee). In a society that treated women as little more than breeding stock, it is not surprising that rape was the go-to tool of terror for rebel, government, and “peace keeping” forces. Though it is not as explicitly examined in Garcia's novel, Cuba experiences similar attitudes towards women. As noted by the American Association of University Women:

> According the U.S. Department of State, human rights advocates report that violence against women is a problem in Cuba, and police often do not act on cases of domestic violence. The press rarely reports on violent crime... domestic violence remains a serious problem. (AAUW, 6)

The AAUW goes on to conclude that “Laws to promote gender equality in the home have also been ineffective in overcoming gender stereotypes” (8). These facts make it clear that underlying societal attitudes towards women played a pivotal role in their disproportionate abuse
Of course, there are misogynists and rapists in ordinary society as well, demonstrating that some people have no inhibitions in the first place and, when given power such as a gun and a revolutionary banner, will commit violence against women simply because they can. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, a major plot element is the rape of Lourdes Puente by two soldiers, who, unlike the soldiers in *The House on Sugar Beach*, are portrayed blatantly as acting out of opportunity:

> The other soldier held Lourdes down as his partner took a knife from his holster. Carefully, he sliced Lourdes's riding pants off to her knees and tied them over her mouth. He cut through her blouse without dislodging a single button and slit her bra and panties in two. Then he placed the knife flat across her belly and raped her. (Garcia, 71)

In this scene, the soldiers were there to seize Lourdes's estate for the government as part of Castro's land redistribution. It is unclear whether the soldiers harbor any particular animosity towards Lourdes out of jealousy of her comparative wealth. It is more likely that, either aroused or emasculated by her defiance the first time they come, they simply raped her because they wanted to, and could. They appear to have no inhibitions against rape to begin with, illustrating that revolution provides not just perceived moral opportunity, but physical opportunity as well. While the soldiers in *Sugar Beach* also appeared to rape Helene's mother primarily because they felt like it, as opposed to out of anger at her opulence, her “Congo” status made was part of what made her an attractive target.

As globally conscious college students, we have the unique opportunity to tackle problems such as violence against women. The first step in this process is understanding the
conditions that precipitate it, which seem to be defined by social tensions, conservative gender attitudes, and some degree of societal breakdown. Understanding this, we must now examine how to best this phenomenon. Should ideas of female inferiority be the subject of efforts to avert misogynistic violence, or should the focus be on social protections? Is the problem of civil disintegration, such as what occurred in Liberia, a more pressing matter, without which this violence cannot exist? These are questions that must be decided, and it is up to us to do so.

Finally, we must tread carefully when attempting to impose our values on others, even if they are something as universal as what we consider to be basic human decency. We take for granted the assumption that the factors discussed above, socially entrenched though they may be in some cultures, ought to be eliminated. It must be remembered that there are many people who would challenge this assumption, and we must have a response prepared for them.
Works Cited


