

RAPE, CONSUMPTION, AND THE 'SARAJEVO WAR COOKBOOK': A REVIEW OF THE FORUM ON WAR, WOMEN AND RAPE

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Multicultural bellies, full of tacos, felafel, and chow mein,
are sometimes accompanied by monocultural minds.

Unthinking Eurocentrism

The cluster of issues examined in this paper have to do with the Western responses to and representations of the issue of 'rape camps' in Bosnia, within the wider context of the representation of war in the 'former Yugoslavia', as a site of age-old ethnic hatreds. Within this framework the mainstream feminist response to the 'rape camps' exposes the ethnocentrism and racism that underpins a particular vision of international sisterhood and the depoliticization of the war by the way the category of gender is mobilised in those discussions.

On March 8 of this year, *Budinski's* theatre in Carlton, Melbourne began its series 'Classroom IIIA', which was staged readings of a testimony by Amira. S, a Bosnian nurse held in a 'rape camp'. The readings were to be performed by various feminist luminaries amongst them Blanche D'Alpuget, Joan Kirner, Jocelyne Scutt and Justine Sanders, each of whom, along with others read the same text day after day.

The date chosen for the commencement of the readings, International Women's Day, was no doubt an expression of 'international solidarity', a 'global sisterhood' if you like, which expressed itself in this instance through the gestures of hearing rape testimonies whilst sipping on wine and nibbling on munchies. The reading was contextualised within the framework of food, Tahir Cambis, the Bosnian director of *Budinski's* emphasised his need to eat baked beans when he was in Bosnia and constantly talked about starvation;

whilst the 'Sarajevo War Cookbook: an Insight' was thoughtfully placed alongside the menus at the table for the audience. It appeared that the testimony and the 'rape camps' were yet another thing to be consumed, as the audience ate, and read bits from the 'Sarajevo War Cookbook', a copy of which can be found at the end of the article.

Echoed in this idea of 'international solidarity' is another gesture of Western 'global sisterhood' to the women of Bosnia, staged by D'Alpuget, when she shipped towards the women of Bosnia tampons, stockings and toothbrushes some two years earlier. The Melbourne reading was preceded by an interview with D'Alpuget on ABC radio, in which D'Alpuget when pressed by the interviewer about her commitment to human rights in the context of her recent visit to Burma, made a revealing comment that she would much rather talk about '... the plight of Afghan women refugee ...' only to be reminded by the interviewer that she was there to talk about Bosnian, not Afghan women. So much for the interchangeability of women perceived as 'not one of us'.

This 'cosmetic' approach by Western women to their non-Western sisters, was further exemplified when at a breakfast at the Sydney Town Hall, held as a forum in which high profile women speakers like Pat O'Shane talked about the plight of their sisters in Bosnia, Cambodia and Rwanda' (*The Australian* March 14 1995) and Clinique packs were handed to the women present. Whilst the report in *The Australian* stated that the women present were outraged by the inappropriateness of the packs, no one bothered to question the appropriateness of the 'cosmetic' packs D'Alpuget sent to the women of Bosnia. The needs of the Bosnian women were not addressed. What is troubling is the way in which forums like the one held at the Sydney Town Hall and the one at *Budinski's* are applauded as being 'progressive' commitments to issues concerning women of different cultural, political and geographical locations who are constantly lumped together under the status of 'victim'. What is problematic in this Western approach to 'global sisterhood' is that it constructs women's agency along the lines of Western women being liberal and agents, and non-Western women being oppressed and victims. This construction further facilitates the notion that non-Western women are victims that need to be saved by their Western counterparts. this was made clear to me in the forum ' "What's Going On Over There – I Mean Here?" War, women and rape', which was held the following week at *Budinski's*. The forum set up the people of the 'former Yugoslavia' as criminals, on trial to be judged. The forum was a panel discussion on the 'rape camps' of Bosnia, which included Ramona Koval of ABC Radio, Tom Morton of *Background Briefing* ABC Radio, Tahir Cambis director of *Budinski's*, Jan Ruff O'Herne author of *Fifty Years of Silence* , Kelly Askin US Attorney and Roz Zalewski Executive member of International

Commission of Jurists.

I want to concentrate on the way in which the category of gender was deployed in the panel discussion particularly within the context of the legal discourses pertaining to the 'rape camps' of Bosnia. The discussion began with O'Herne who made the revealing comment that '... if a European woman speaks out the world would listen ...', as a way of accounting for her own decision to speak about her experiences during World War II. O'Herne's statement, that the world was ready to listen to a white, Western, Northern European woman and disregard the voices of non-Western women (in this context Korean women) pointed to the uneven distribution of power between women of different political, cultural and geographical divides. It contradicted the notion of equal power relations amongst women, a notion central to our understanding of Western liberal feminism. It also highlighted the way in which non-Western women are seen as victims who cannot speak for themselves and need to be saved by Western women who are supposedly more 'articulate'.

Kelly Askin following on from O'Herne, argued that 'reproductive crimes' as she referred to the issue of wartime rape, were part of the 'Balkan conflict', making it an inherent and an essentialised representation of the region. The issue of 'ethnic genocide', now very much a part of the way in which the region is seen, and a term reproduced by Askin in her discussion, placed women, particularly Bosnian Muslim women, in the position of 'spoils of war', that men fight over. The emphasis placed on the category of gender by Askin, as a source of the situation in Bosnia, meant that politics, culture and history, issues undoubtedly part of the narrative about Bosnia were depoliticised and not addressed.

Askin's legal discourse relied on Western liberal notions of feminism, in which war is seen as a masculine sphere, not one in which women have and do participate. Askin's discussion of war was confined to ideas such as war as a breakdown of law and order, where alcohol and guns prevail and wartime rape is therefore an inevitable event. Notions like that of Askin's feed into current representations of the situation in Bosnia as an example of 'social breakdown' characterised by chaos and mayhem. Askin's liberal and narrow view of war, in which men as 'natural' aggressors and women as 'natural' victims, leaves no room for the articulation of women's agency within the context of war, and secondly war as a site of revolutionary struggle and change. The issue of 'human rights' in Askin's discussion of the Bosnian 'rape camps' was relegated to places outside the West, it was constructed as being part of a 'natural' history of places like Bosnia (and other regions like 'Asia' for example), and not Western countries like Australia and North America, both of which have long and detailed histories of human rights abuses.

Tom Morton in his discussion argued that the 'rape camps' of Bosnia were an instance of crimes against women, that had 'nothing to do with ethnic groups'. He argued that nationality was not an issue, it was gender that was at stake. It would be absurd to speak of gender as Morton did, as an isolated category, one that is devoid of intersecting axes such as ethnicity and race; such a strategy denies the cultural and political space that Bosnian women occupy both in the local and international context, thus setting up gender as an essentialised category based on ideas of a shared biology by all women, rather than a category that is fused with political implications. Morton maintained that rape in Bosnia was a policy – systematic and widespread. He managed to relegate wartime rape as an issue to the Balkans alone. His representation of the 'rape camps' displaced tough questions like women and wartime rape to a stage outside the West, in this instance the spectacle of the 'rape camps' of Bosnia. It becomes a non-Western problem and located 'over there' and not 'here'.

It appeared that throughout the discussion, that gender was used as a category which criminalised the 'former Yugoslavia', and seemed to point to the practice of wartime rape as part of a non-Western site. When people like myself asked questions about the politics of the forum, i.e. why issues like East and West divides were not being addressed and the issue of Western engagement with the 'rape camps', none of the panel members responded. Both the panel and the audience members were more comfortable with the idea that we could talk about gender, but not in conjunction with politics, even though direct political links were being made about the region and the rape camps. At the end of the forum the audience clapped, congratulating themselves on yet another thing they had done for the women of Bosnia.

WAR COOKBOOK FROM SARAJEVO: AN INSIGHT

APPETISERS:

Cheese a al oga finci

4 demi-tasses of milk powder (bought at the black market)

1 demi-tasse of oil (from humanitarian aid)

1 demi-tasse of water (boil it first!)

0.5 demi-tasse of vinegar

1 small spoon of garlic powder (present given by a good friend)

Mix it all with a plastic spoon which could be found in the USA lunch package. The mix will thicken immediately, just like a pudding. All should then be taken to your balcony, where the temperature is -10C; you can as well leave it in the kitchen, where it is only -8C. It should get hard. This dish has to be served cold. Enjoy!

A SIDE DISH:

Pommesfrites

1 cup of cornflour

1 cup of white flour

1 spoon of bicarbonate (use the vinegar to neutralise)

Mix all the ingredients with lukewarm water. Make a dough and cut it in the form of pommesfrites. Fry in hot oil.

Mayonnaise with no eggs

1 soup spoon of milk powder

4 spoons of flour

1 dcl of oil

0.5 dcl of water

1 small spoon of lemon juice or use vinegar

Mix milk, flour and water and cook until it becomes thick. Let it cool and then gradually add oil and seasonings if you can find them. Keep it in a cool place before serving.

MAIN DISHES:

Wine leaves, or some other tasty leaves, stuffed with rice

History: Once upon a time this dish was made of beef, or a mixture of beef and lamb, with very little rice: this was stuffed in cabbage, wine or sour cabbage leaves. Today: 30 leaves, some onion (or chives from the balcony pots), rice — as much as you need — salt and pepper, and fresh or dried mint. Blanch the leaves, cut the onion and saute it in oil. Add the rice, mix it with onion and then add salt and seasonings. The mix should be placed on the end of the leaf. You should twist the side parts and form a roll. Place the rolls in an oily pot, cover with water and cook on a low fire.

SWEETS:

Halvah

1 cup of flour

1 cup of oil

1 cup of sugar

2 cups of water

a bit of powdered sugar or sugar vanilla

Heat oil in a deep skillet until it boils, add flour and mix constantly, for it must not burn. Flour should get a caramel colour. In the meantime, boil water with sugar and add this mix, sherbe, to the flour. Mix until halvah thickens and then form small cakes with spoon. Toss with powdered sugar. (Halvah is a very popular delight known since medieval times.)

NON-ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES:

Birch juice

Young birch trees should be drilled. In the hole a few centimetres deep, one should install a tube. Leave it for forty-eight hours, while the juice is being collected in a tin. During April and May one gets 8 litres of juice during 48 hours. Juice can be mixed with sugar, yeast or lemon and then left to ferment. This process demands several days.