"God Should Have Made Girls Lethal When She Made Monsters of Men": Personal Reflections on Representations of Rape and Women's Rage in Rape and Revenge Films

by

Rachel Ludwin

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Approved :	Dr. Michele Byers. Supervisor
Approved :	Dr. Meredith Ralston. Examiner
Approved :	Dr. Lindsay Macumber. Reader
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Abstract

The rape and revenge narrative is a not a new sub-genre of film, but rather has appeared throughout Hollywood for decades. However, the emergence and recognition of more progressive methods for depicting this narrative in film is a recent development. As a rape survivor and a personal consumer of rape and revenge films, I approached this research with the intent to explore and challenge my own response to this narrative. This thesis examined the following seven films: *Ms. 45* (1981)*, Promising Young Woman* (2020), *American Mary* (2012)*, M.F.A.* (2017), *The Accused* (1988), *Violatio*n (2020) and *Revenge* (2017), with a specific focus on their portrayals of rape culture, female agency, trauma, consent, rape, and consequences of revenge.

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Introduction

A woman has just been given her diploma declaring her to be an official Master of Fine Arts. She stands at the podium, delivering her valedictorian speech to a crowd of fellow graduates. This day of celebration quickly becomes tainted when she is arrested for the murder of four rapists, one of whom was her own attacker. A second woman, dressed as a nurse and wearing a pastel rainbow wig, walks into a bachelor party with one goal in mind: to take revenge against the groom to be, who is responsible for raping her best friend. However, the groom to be kills our second woman before the end of the film. A third woman stands by a pool, gun in hand, drenched in blood that is not her own. She hears helicopters flying overhead and understands that soon all those on board will bear witness to the devastation she has caused. She turns to the camera; her once blonde hair is now stained brown by blood and dirt, for she has just killed three men, one of whom was her rapist, and all of whom tried to kill her first. These three scenes are taken from three film narratives centered on rape and revenge: the rape and revenge narrative echoes through Hollywood's history and is a film narrative that has always sparked my interest.

The three scenes described above are sampled from three (out of the seven) films I analyzed in this thesis: *M.F.A.* (Leite, 2017), *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020), and *Revenge* (Fargeat, 2017). The rest of my film data set included *Ms. 45* (Ferrara, 1981), *American Mary* (J. Soska & S. Soska, 2012), *The Accused* (Kaplan, 1988), and *Violation* (Sims-Fewer & Mancinelli, 2020).

Rape and revenge is a sub-genre of horror that I have grappled with a lot over the last five years. As a victim of rape, my interest in this topic began through my own attraction to rape and revenge films, igniting my desire to examine their narratives more closely. Witnessing the shift of a once fragile female character into a person who can cultivate insurmountable mental,

emotional and in some cases physical strength to destroy her rapist(s), was intriguing. These films allowed me the satisfaction of watching a character I could relate to act out the anger and rage I felt. The juxtaposition of my resistance to watching rape and the appeal of catharsis each revenge scene brought, led me to choose the rape and revenge narrative as the research topic for my undergraduate honors thesis. This project is a continuation of that work.

My previous research (Ludwin, 2020), considered both the empowering and harmful components of the rape and revenge narrative as demonstrated by three films written and directed by women; films that had previously ignited within me a sense of empowerment. Yet my perception of the rape and revenge narrative as unflawed was quickly challenged during the research process. I explored multiple arguments that tackled which elements in these films advocated for female empowerment and how other aspects perpetuated harmful stereotypes. The results from my film analysis, however, were inconclusive.

My current project continues my research and exploration of rape and revenge films. In chapter one of my analysis, I grapple with *Ms. 45* (1981), *Promising Young Woman* (2020), and *American Mary* (2012), and their narrative decision to kill their protagonists, a decision I argue is a form of punishment. Killing these characters or having these characters kill themselves perpetuates the concept that to be raped is equal to death, that the damage of rape is unrepairable and healing is unavailable. Chapter two explores *M.F.A.* (2017), *The Accused* (1988), *Revenge* (2017), and *Violation* (2020), and I examine the way these films portray women's sexuality and consent. These narratives expose how flirtation and women's sexual freedom can be used to attack and victim blame those who have been raped. Although a complex subject to navigate, I was pleasantly surprised that each film successfully portrayed rape as wrong, regardless of how its' female characters dressed or behaved.

My theoretical framework for this project was built upon the concepts of rape culture, and I used feminist critical discourse analysis as my method for analyzing my data set. For this research, rape referred to non-consensual penetration by cisgendered (an individual who identifies with the sex assigned at birth) male perpetrators of cisgendered female victims. Each of the films I selected for study situated rape, rage, and revenge in a largely white context, with every leading character written as heterosexual women, who were middle-class (mostly). The perpetrators in the films were positioned similarly, as white, heterosexual men. This is not exclusive to these seven films, but rather is a pattern in many rape and revenge films; a pattern Ferreday (2017) refers to as "white feminism," where the white women's experience of rape and rage are the only ones depicted (p. 269). This problem of overrepresentation and omission requires an acknowledgment of the women excluded from these forms of representation, particularly racialized transwomen and BIPOC women. As a white, middle-class woman, I am aware of my own position as a researcher and find it crucial to problematize my response to the rape and revenge narrative and my perspective to the subject of rape and rage on and off screen. Problematize in this context, refers to my understanding that any feelings of catharsis I experienced from these films may have been due to my ability to feel represented in the roles of the women who were featured. Hence, the reaction to the rape and revenge narrative will shift for viewers, depending on their perspective and position.

Rereading this project, I acknowledge I could have chosen to organize my data in a variety of different ways. I could have analyzed how the gender of the writers and directors impacted the film's depiction of rape and the protagonist's approach to revenge, or how genre can impact a film's portrayal of rape and revenge, or debated whether rape should even be depicted on screen (to name a few), and any of these approaches would have resulted in equally

relevant and interesting research. However, for this thesis, I had to narrow my research focus and limit the number of perspectives I could thoroughly analyze and complete by this project's deadline.

Films are meant to entertain us, challenge our beliefs and sometimes satisfy our craving for catharsis. I entered this project excited to lean into this unique opportunity to explore the subtle and not so subtle messaging within these films that I felt drawn to and / or appalled by. Whether themes or patterns were accurate to the director or writer's original vision or in juxtaposition to it, I enjoyed the process of critically analyzing each film narrative and its' approach to rape and revenge.

Literature Review

My literature review is divided into three sections of discussion: 1) Portrayals of rage and revenge in film: men are heroic, strong and dominant, are women still passive, evil or just sexy? 2) Rape culture and women's rage: inescapable and undeniable, and 3) Depictions of rape in film: exploitative or educational?

Portrayals of Rage and Revenge in Film: Men are heroic, strong and dominant, are women still passive, evil or just sexy?

According to Mondello (2014), Hollywood's film industry has historically been a place where young boys learned "how to make things right, the way John Wayne did in so many pictures, with fists or a gun" (p. 2). Actors like Humphrey Bogart, inspired ideals of "sacrificing for the greater good…in *Casablanca* (1942)," Spencer Tracy from *Inherit the Wind* (1960), advocated for standing firm "against injustice," and Sidney Poitier in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961), encouraged his viewers to "stand up for yourself" (p. 2). Films allowed audiences (and still do), a unique perspective to live vicariously through characters on screen, characters who had the

power to influence, empower or devastate. Hollywood films, in a sense, were an instruction manual for young men to observe how to "be a man" the American way, where the importance for men to never appear soft was always highlighted: "American men greeted each other (with a handshake, not with European kisses on each cheek)" (p. 3). Since the era of silent films, men have held dominant roles in film, according to Mondello (2014): silent films "used a kind of shorthand for American behavior – women were almost always domestic, delicate and passive, while men were outgoing, strong and active" (p. 4). However, men's representation shifted around the 1960s from the strong, family man to more vulnerable and nuanced characters; men had become "incapable of being like the men of old Hollywood…Woody Allen demonstrated the change in comically literal terms by conjuring up Bogie to help him man up in *Play It Again, Sam* (1972)…and Dustin Hoffman became a huge star, playing a total slacker in *The Graduate* (1967)" (p. 8-9). Male characters were no longer viewed as icons, but rather as average men; they were relatable. According to Wilson (2013), the late 1970s and 1980s introduced into cinema superhero characters that were heroic *and* human. The most notable example is Superman / Clark Kent (Christopher Reeve) in *Superman* (1978); the superhero who is both the average, nerdy man (Clark Kent) and the beloved and respected superhero (Superman). It is worth noting the narratives for many popular superhero films originated from comic books written between 1930 and 1960; *Superman* (1938), *Batman* (1938), *Spiderman* (1962) and *Iron Man* (1962), to name a few. Yet their cinematic recreations have evolved throughout the decades, transforming these superheroes into heroes who Mondello (2014) refers to as "super heroic. Men of Steel, Men of Iron" (p. 12), aligning more with contemporary standards of masculinity. The "old American ideal" Bowden (2018) argues, "Of succeeding through cleverness, virtue, and grit is absent, as is the notion of ordinary folk banding together to

overcome a threat" (p. 9). Hence, Hollywood progressed away from ordinary men and moved toward men who were indestructible (Mondello, 2014, p. 12). From strong John Wayne to stronger Iron Man, "they're icons both, standing tall, fighting for the greater good and their manly in a way that may not be entirely human" (p. 12-14).

Women's history in Hollywood tells a different story. According to Loreck (2017), the unfamiliarity and discomfort attached to film depictions of violent, strong or intimidating women is seemingly a Hollywood issue. Films made in France dating back to the 1920s, for example, depicted female characters who by today's standards would be considered feminist; female characters who were unafraid to be violent: "One of the earliest heroines who aspired to violence can be found in a silent film from 1923, *La Souriante Madame Beudet.* The titular character is a bored housewife who despises her boorish husband. So great is her dislike, in fact, that she fills a handgun with bullets in the hope he will accidentally shoot himself" (p. 4). For Hollywood, however, the historical depictions of women were muted and mostly mundane; what Antone et. al refer to as "whatever neat category men of one era or another have assigned them: the trophy wife, the ice queen," the evil stepmother (sister, wife, friend), or the "man stealers;" women who pursue men who are already in a relationship (p. 2-5). As Erin (2013) writes, passive female characters are familiar to most audiences: they are everywhere, arising commonly in "classic princesses from fairytales to modern action flicks" (p. 3). Just as Hollywood depictions of strong men laid the groundwork for young boys to replicate the idealized image of American men, this same influence is true for female audiences, according to Mondello (2014). This influence is why "weak" or stereotypical representations of women in film are considered harmful: "these types of passive heroines reinforce old notions about gender roles and relationships that aren't healthy," they promote an ideal where "good" women are women who cater to others (Erin, 2013, p. 3).

The same can be argued for stereotypes described by Antone et. al: the evil woman (a classic portrayal in fairytales, in the form of an evil (unattractive and old) witch), or the sexually inappropriate women.

However, actresses like Sigourney Weaver in *Alien* (1979), Whoopie Goldberg in *The Color Purple* (1985), Queen Latifah in *Set It Off* (1996), Jennifer Lawrence in *The Hunger Games* (2012), and Charlize Theron in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), (to name a few), demonstrate the empowering side of Hollywood; female characters who are unafraid to be unhinged, powerful, intimidating, and violent. It is characters like these, Rabu (2022) argues, that offset decades worth of weak and helpless female characters (p. 4). "Women who were previously pictured as weak are now portrayed as strong and capable of defending themselves (p. 4). Though the films listed above have diverse representations for female characters, there remains deep rooted tropes in Hollywood that still appear, even with the industry's progression toward more diverse roles for women. These tropes have proven to be unavoidable and are present among many strong female characters, according to Ballard (2016), and often fall into one of two categories: female characters who only gain power by exhibiting masculine characteristics, or female characters who solely rely on their sex appeal and attraction to gain power (p. 9). Rabu (2022) echoes Ballard's research: converging masculinity with the feminine or vice versa is not the issue, and it is important to understand gender identity and expression reside on a spectrum, "but this character trope repeats the same mistake as its predecessor; it depicts women in a one-dimensional character trait. Being feminine does not equal being weak, and being masculine does not equal being strong" (p. 6).

With pressure on the film industry to produce more films that feature strong female characters in recent years, it is easy for these female characters to become one-dimensional,

devoid of any nuances that women in real-life have (Rabu, 2022). Examples of these characteristics, Gardner (2019) writes, include a complete lack of emotion or empathy, often display tough exteriors, and are usually "fighting in combat" (p. 6), characteristics which Gardner (2019) argues are typical displays of masculinity. According to Gardner (2019), the word "strong" is often equated with physical strength, and strong female characters, like their male counterparts, are represented as lacking kindness and empathy (p. 11). Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) commands attention through her "cold," and authoritative personality, which supports the trope Gardner (2019) outlines; positioning strong female characters as unemotional, and sometimes cruel.

Gardner (2019) continues: "The idea that rejecting femininity makes you strong creates an antithesis in which other, more feminine, characters are presented as weak… we don't need characters who rebel against femininity, but rather characters who rebel against roles that would usually be assigned them, that aren't merely there to support the protagonist" (p. 2-11). Emma Stone in *Poor Things* (2023), is the perfect example of this. Stone's character, Bella Baxter, loudly embraces her sexual promiscuity, and masturbates frequently. Stone's character does everything to reject the stereotypes that have clung to women's sexual expression. However, critics like Al-Khasib (2024) claim *Poor Things* is "a male's version of feminism" (p. 1). Considering the director of the film, Yorgos Lanthimos, refused to label his film feminist, Al-Khasib (2024) argues this rejection to the feminist label further proves this film is merely a story told through the male perspective: "It would have been refreshing to see Bella (Emma Stone) learn more about the world; its wars, racism, poverty, the hierarchy, the patriarchy, dance music, culture, all the things that make up a person, their worldview, and their opinion. If female liberation through sexuality was the goal, then menstrual cycles, contraceptives, body hair, and

such should've been mentioned, if not, the main focus" (p. 15-16). Hence, this film and its graphic (and numerous) depictions of sex, can arguably be considered only replicating yet another trope: women as the sex object (Ballard, 2016).

When it comes to displays of violence, depictions of male violence have never been challenged, according to Hopkins (2020). In fact, violent and vengeance-seeking male characters have been habitually portrayed as heroic, with their rage being a characteristic that is offered for the admirations of other characters and audiences alike. This justification and admiration of male violence, Hopkins (2020) argues, perpetuates toxic masculinity; an expression defined by Salem (2019) as the act of "suppressing emotions or masking distress, maintaining an appearance of hardness, (and) violence as an indicator of power" (p. 1). Because of the association of violence with (male) power, Hopkins (2020) argues that the normalization of male violence on screen replicates our societal normalization of male violence as a justifiable response to rage, shame, or hurt. He writes: "In crime, action and thriller films in particular, the man-of-action protagonist can be represented through both positive (hero) and negative (antihero) behaviors, but both depend upon stereotypes of men *in control* through violent action" (p. 4). Kelly (2014) offers an example of this trope found in the film *Taken* (2008), which follow's Liam Neeson's character, a former government operative who seeks revenge for his daughter who has been abducted into human trafficking. Kelly (2014), analyzes this classic image of a good American man, highlighting the role of male toxicity in the plot: "While on its surface *Taken* is the story of a father willing to do anything to rescue his daughter…the film uses an icon of feminine virtue to excuse the use of force against uncivilized men and invites popular audiences to sympathize with extreme acts of cruelty" (p. 404). A father saving his daughter is represented as noble and heroic, and in the context of this film it is also used to normalize the use of torture and violence. As

Hopkins argues: "Even action narratives which are essentially formulaic stories of a heroic man protecting or avenging 'his' (kidnapped, raped, murdered) women, convey the message that spectacular violence is the ultimate solution" (p. 5). Furthermore, representations of heroism attached to violent, dangerous men offers a clear example of the societal entanglement of masculinity, violence, rage, and dominance. "These fictional narratives of popular film still teach and tell stories about angry men and their relationship to violent retribution which overlap with everyday gender politics" (p. 6).

Unsurprisingly, the relationship women share with violence, rage, and dominance both on and off screen is vastly different from that of men. It is important to note that although the literature I review collapses "men" and "women" into very simple, homogenous categories, I recognize as the researcher that rage of different men is *not* read in the same way, nor is the rage (and victimization) of differently situated women—both in real life and on screen.

In the words of poet, Elizabeth Hewer; "God should have made girls lethal, when he made monsters of men" (in Chemaly, p. 123). As illustrated in Hollywood's history, lethal women (when portrayed at all), were usually characters who were villainized in ways men were not. Characters like Glen Close in *Fatal Attraction* (1987), Kathy Bates in *Misery* (1990), Joanna Lumley and Miriam Margolyes in *James and the Giant Peach* (1996), and Bette Davis in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962), were violent and rageful women who served a common purpose: to be hated. According to Alexandra (2018), *Fatal Attraction* (1987) is "at its core…a deeply unsubtle metaphor about professional women's destruction of the traditional family unit" (p. 2), a socially provocative idea during the 1980s. The film is essentially "also part of a blatant cinematic backlash against career women that sent the messages that women were obsessive creatures, utterly incapable of having casual sex, leaving men alone or handling

rejection" (p. 2). Although she is both slut-shamed and assaulted by her married ex-lover, the main character, Alex Forrest (Close), is the one who is demonized and considered unhinged by the other characters (p. 2). By pushing Forrest to the point of "insanity" and portraying the revenge she enacts as so extreme, her actions become impossible to defend, turning her into the villain.

This begs the question: what about the female characters in Hollywood who offer more than these tropes? Characters like Cleopatra "Cleo" Sims (Queen Latifah) in *Set It Off* (1996), Lt Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in *Alien* (1979) and Furiosa (Charlize Theron) in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015). These three female characters are noteworthy examples; their strength and dominance are not diminished by their compassion. According to Brown (2019), Cleo's character in *Set It Off* (1996) is familiar with hardship; she is a character who experiences queerphobia and challenges to her womanhood as an openly queer woman, yet her resistance to falter under these circumstances makes her character an undeniable force (p. 3). She is a character who refuses to surrender to injustice. The same can be said in reference to the other female characters in the film, who all exhibit qualities of strength and resilience in the face of inequality and prejudice (p. 3). Brown (2019) considers *Set It Off* (1996) to be one of the more empowering depictions of Black feminism, arguing it has maintained its power and influence two decades after its release; "Each time, I come away with tears, and anger, and hope. I feel more radical and anarchist, more deeply rooted in my Black feminism" (p. 3). Ripley's character in *Alien* (1979), according to Mackay (2019), is more than just the female lead; "Ripley's gender is exhilaratingly incidental—her assertiveness is not just a novel character trait, but the engine of the narrative and the key to her survival" (p. 5). Ripley's "inquisitive energy is not contained by a love story or a family network," sparing her character from the common trope many

contemporary female leads fall into (p. 6). *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), is based off a car chase following Furiosa, who is attempting to free the five wives of the cult leader Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Bryne), who he's imprisoned to use as sex slaves. Furiosa's character, Gemmill (2020) argues, is an example of a killing machine who also demonstrates empathy; risking her own life and reputation to save these five women (p. 4). "*Fury Road* sees women as fighters and nurturers, idealistic without being blinded by their optimism, ready to work for the good of all over one" (p. 5). Furiosa seeks to enact change "in this post-apocalyptic world, fighting to the death if it means getting closer to achieving a restored balance of power," and her character is a blend between superhuman strength and human compassion (p. 6). Having more female characters in Hollywood like Cleo, Ripley, and Furiosa whose strength and perseverance are not squashed by their displays of empathy and compassion, are necessary for ending Hollywood's perpetuation of negative female tropes and outdated stereotypes.

Rape Culture and Female Rage: Inescapable and Undeniable

When approaching rape culture, a topic that is incredibly large and all-encompassing, I am always reminded of one specific phrase: "Smile baby, you look so pretty when you smile." This is an unwelcomed phrase, that triggers within me (and many other women) a feeling of dreaded familiarity. One reason for this reaction, as suggested by Chemaly (2018), is because women for decades have been told this, and other, similar phrases are playful, harmless; merely a form of lighthearted teasing, yet still elicit feelings of discomfort, violation, and annoyance (p. 121). Why? Because of the invisible and simultaneously blatant presence of rape culture in the society we reside in. As Chemaly's (2018) research reveals: over 60% of women in America have reported incidents of harassment (p. 121), and every day women must fight in an unspoken battle against decades of patriarchal feminine ideals that depict women as decorations to be

admired, whose bodies were meant to tempt men while also remaining pure and untouched (p. 120). Hence, hearing this "playful" and "harmless" phrase; "Smile baby, you look so pretty when you smile," confirms the reality that women are still viewed as objects for men's entertainment. "Girls and women adapt to these intrusions, usually by not talking about them, blaming themselves, or doing their best to ignore what is happening around them," Chemaly argues (p. 128). However, the underlining fear that women experience, the feeling of being surrounded by the never-ending threat of male violence, is something that cannot be comprehended by those who have never experienced it (namely, straight, white men) (p. 130). Chemaly continues: "For the most part, girls' and women's experiences with harassment are still cloaked in silence, and we continue, as a global society, to peddle dangerous advice to girls about 'staying safe.' This isn't about safety…it's about social control" (p. 129-130). Furthermore, the link between harassment and rape is preposterous to some, according to Chemaly (2018); for them, harassment can be viewed as "harmless" while rape is viewed as violence. However, there is a valid reason for women to see street harassment as a threat to their safety: "There is a deep cultural resistance to taking women's fears of male violence seriously. Ultimately, in the face of what is clear social, legal, and political inequality, it is rape that keeps women, women's physical freedom, and women's rage, in check" (p. 130). Because of this, an experience with harassment can actually "carry the psychological resonance of an actual rape threat" (p. 130).

How do we diminish the threat of rape? Ralston (2021) answers this question by situating the de-stigmatization of sex as the first step, and healing and embracing women's relationship to their sexuality as a second. Women's sexuality and pleasure are areas of research ignored by scholars for decades. Ralston (2021) discusses an article published in 2017 that was meant to reassure women who had high sex drives that they were "normal;" merely demonstrating how

little research has been conducted on women's sexuality as few as seven years ago (p. 137). It also "explains why drugs for women's low libido (unlike blood flow drugs for men) have not been effective" (p. 137). If more research were to be done, it would not be surprising to discover that high sexual desire in women only results in more satisfying and enjoyable sex lives (p. 137); opening the door to the importance of prioritizing the female orgasm; a component to sex that Ralston (2021) argues has been neglected in mainstream pornography *and* in real life sexual experiences.

Sex, according to Filipovic et. al (2019): "(has been) painted as something that men *do to* women, instead of as a mutual act between two equally powerful actors [original emphasis]" (p. 18). Filipovic et. al (2019) argues there is a normalized perception in our society that heterosexual sex begins with penis penetration and concludes with male ejaculation, with no consideration of female pleasure nor active participation (p. 18). This exclusion of female pleasure has situated it as unimportant and unnecessary, illustrating sex as something men do to women and can take from women. Positioning female sexual pleasure as unimportant, Filipovic et. al (2019) claims has become a normalized standard for sex, placing judgement upon female sexual exploration and curiosity, while positioning male sexual promiscuity as something to be respected and admired (p. 19).

Only a hundred years ago, according to Ralston (2021), "women were called nymphomaniacs if they desired sex at all, either with a partner or in terms of masturbation. The term: 'nymphomaniacs' is defined as excessive sexual desire by a female" (p. 137), yet there is no label for men who exhibit the same desires (p. 137). Integrating porn culture into the conversation, only deepens an already deep hole. Cameron (2018) argues, standards for sex (as displayed on the majority of mainstream porn sites) are completely contingent on heterosexual

male fantasies and achieving sexual pleasure: "Rather than liberating women to pursue sexual pleasure on their own terms, porn culture just replaces one oppressive standard ("nice girls don't") with another ("cool girls do whatever men want")…in both cases, the fear of being on the wrong side of the line spurs women to police their own sexual behavior" (p. 82). This normalization of male sexual activity and continued shaming and monitoring of female pleasure and enjoyment is, essentially, the birthplace of rape, and yet these patterns continue.

The discussion of rape culture would be incomplete without incorporating women's anger; according to Chemaly (2018): of course, women are angry; they should be and men should be angry too (p. 152). Rape culture is worthy of revolutionary rage, hence the pull toward "feminine rage" films. According to Hudson (2023), these films offer a portal for women to experience catharsis from their anger. The three main components to feminine rage, as illustrated by Hudson (2023) are as follows: 1) rage against the patriarchy or men, 2) general violence, and 3) self-inflicted violence (p. 6-7). The draw of these films, Hudson (2023) theorizes is because: "The unfamiliar subversion of the expected role of women as meek, kind and caring is entrancing. In these texts, women are now agents of the story, in control of what happens. They make the striking move of being objects, rather than subjects of violence" (p. 13). However, according to Nolan (2023), the relationship women share to their own rage can impact how they react to witnessing portrayals of other women as violent and rageful (p. 6). Nolan uses her own experience watching the original *Carrie* (1976) as an example: "I was fixated on the horror Carrie (Sissy Spacek) feels when her menstrual blood flows out from within the deepest part of herself for everyone to see, to judge, to scream at" (p. 9). Nolan attributes her attraction to the movie *Carrie* (1976) as stemming from her own experience when receiving an abortion, where she (like Carrie's character) felt exposed, for everyone around her to see, judge and scream at (p.

6). According to Hudson (2023), witnessing the rage of other women can evoke feelings of envy, wishing they had the capability of acting out the rage they see demonstrated on screen, or feelings of judgement, where their own shame associated with expressing anger is transferred onto the characters (p. 15); and like Nolan (2023) herself experienced, there is also room for empowerment. As someone who felt drawn to rape and revenge films because of their displays of feminine rage, I relate to Nolan's reaction to *Carrie*. Chemaly (2018) and Hudson (2023) applaud female rage and the portrayals of rage on screen, regardless of how messy or extreme they may appear. Chemaly (2018) states: "A society that does not respect women's anger is one that does not respect women – not as human beings, thinkers, knowers, active participants, or citizens" (p. xxii). Hudson (2023) supports this sentiment: "It is exhausting to keep seeing women have to be good in the face of constant violence. It is freeing to see them be heinous. Let them rage on" (p. 14).

However, Nolan (2023) argues that portrayals of feminine rage are not without consequences; there is room for exploitation: "There's something about being told your anger is good because you're being of use that seems to circle back to the original problem of women not being afforded the space to live without constant justification" (p. 16). Nolan's (2023) argument is worthy of further examination. Considering our culture's historical (and contemporary) treatment of women's rage and anger, Nolan's (2023) argument is more understandable. According to Chemaly (2018), we all experience anger as an emotional response to sadness, fear, or displeasure, yet the roots of the emotion were once tightly bound to traditional associations of masculinity. They arguably, still are. Centuries of societal association tying masculinity and anger together, has normalized society's acceptance of men's use of anger, while women's use of anger is still at risk of being labeled "irrational outbursts;" hence transforming the emotion when

applied to men into a positive masculine trait, and for women, a negative unfeminine one. There are several reasons for these associations, according to Chemaly (2018), most notably being the suppression of women's anger that sprouted from false historical assumptions that claimed women were less angry or volatile than men because of "natural" and "biological" differences between the two sexes (p. xxii). Traditional feminine ideals valued women who exhibited docility, delicacy, and who willingly would submit to male authority. This helps explain why angry women have historically been labelled illogical, over-emotional, and unstable.

Women can even diminish their own anger, using words like "frustrated" or "irritated" in place of "angry" (p. xxii), as the unspoken urge to stray away from anger—the word and the feeling—is undeniable. Chemaly (2018) states: "We contain ourselves: our voices, hair, clothes, and, most importantly, speech. Anger is usually about saying "no" in a world where women are conditioned to say almost anything but "no" (p. xxii). Women also perpetuate these negative stereotypes and target their judgement toward other outspoken or angry women, which Chemaly argues is a systemic issue: "Before we reach puberty, we learn, as girls, to police other girls' anger. As women, we need to learn resistance to a fundamental lesson of misogyny: that other women are untrustworthy and deficient and that, in anger, they are dangerous" (p. 280 – 281). Integrating Nolan's (2023) argument back into the discussion, the judgement of other women as described by Chemaly (2018), can be viewed instead, as women's inability to relate to the image of rageful women as something to strive for.

In conclusion, according to the literature reviewed, one can position the complex relationship women share with their anger (whether they desire to express it or feel unable to express it), as one possible reason audiences are drawn toward films that portray rageful women: we have a reason to be angry, according to Chemaly (2018): "Understanding (our anger) and

learning to think about its methodical uses in response to threats allow women to move from passivity, fear, and withdrawal to awareness, engagement, and change. And if we smile, it should be because we want to" (p. 152).

Depictions of Rape in Film: Exploitative or Educational?

Rape has been portrayed in film throughout the industry's history, according to Projansky (2001), author of *Watching Rape*. In her book, Projansky explores representations of rape in American popular culture by examining film and television dating from 1930 to the early 2000s. Projansky claims that as early as the 1930s, scenes of rape were being incorporated into American films, decreasing in the mid-1930s, only to increase again by the 1960s. Rape has since been depicted frequently on screen.

Depictions of rape in the context of rape and revenge films, has its own history: "From being devices for men to realize their femme fatale fantasies to becoming about women taking control of their narratives," Palit (2023) writes, this evolution has resulted in more female filmmakers being represented in the genre (p. 8). According to Palit (2023), more women are directing and writing contemporary rape and revenge films, and their method for depicting rape scenes is through a progressive lens; some directors have even chosen to not show the rape at all. In this context, the focus is centered on female agency and revenge rather than rape. For a long time, Palit (2023) notes, the rape and revenge genre was dominated by male writers and directors, resulting in a very different portrayal of rape: "Men were the ones making rape-revenge films, and more often than not, missing the entire point of giving agency to the revenge-hungry victim" (p. 6). Palit (2023) uses Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* as his example of poorly written (and exploitative) depictions of rape: "the scene of the assault is lengthy and the victim's character has no personality beyond being attractive and flirty" (p. 7). This was an

unfortunate, but also common occurrence, and, according to Hawbaker (2023), was a part of most early rape and revenge films: "These movies glorify the assault against their (almost always female, always beautiful) protagonist to such a degree, her resulting vengeance spree is less an act of catharsis than the retro equivalent of playing *Grand Theft Auto*" (p. 9).

However, films like *Promising Young Woman* (2020), which I discuss later in this thesis, and *Speak* (2004), are examples Palit (2023) uses to demonstrate how rape can be portrayed in ways that are not exploitative: "Showing the impact (of rape) instead of the actual event is a genuinely impactful way of addressing trauma caused by a harrowing experience" (p. 4). This strategy can be useful for rape and revenge films moving forward, especially for filmmakers targeting audiences who want to avoid watching rape, but also desire the catharsis by watching the revenge. According to Brookshier (2019), scenes of rape most directly impact those who have previously experienced rape: "Regardless of their (scenes of rape) purpose within specific media outlets, the widespread use of sexual violence as a plot point negates the complicated, lived experiences of victims" (p. 39). Films that incorporate this "complicated lived experience," Lazic (2018) argues, have the potential to help raise awareness of the true impact rape has on survivors (p. 4). They write: "Merely presenting an act of rape without exploring its consequences on the victim should no longer be good enough" (p. 4).

Newer rape and revenge films are slowly shifting the once problematic rape and revenge narrative. Hawbaker (2023) references *Revenge* (2017), another film I discuss in this thesis, as an example of strong female characters in the genre: "How liberating it is, to witness Jen's transformation. She reclaims her body as a source of power. Skin is lacerated and torn, sun-ravaged and bubbled by blistering pockets and burns. She is still beautiful, but this beauty is not for the men" (p. 30). Where Jen is first presented as the ideal beauty for men, Jen's beauty by the

film's end is for women, a stark difference from other rape and revenge narratives where the character's attraction is only for the men. Hawbaker (2023) argues that: "For women in a patriarchal society…the female body itself is a thing to fear, to suppress and oppress. We must mold it to the liking of the men in charge, then fear what they might decide to do with it" (p. 29). For Hawbaker (2023), Jen successfully breaks this pattern of sexualization and objectification: "Out there in the brutal savagery of the desert, away from societal norms, Jen is freed to be candy for no eyes" (p. 31).

Exploitative scenes of rape, however, also reside outside the rape and revenge genre, with horror films at the top of the list as most likely to include scenes of rape, according to Schwarz, (2022). *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), *Evil Dead* (1981), *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) and Rob Zombie's remake of *Halloween* (2007) for example, all depict graphic scenes of rape that are incredibly disturbing to watch. In a recent study published last year, Schwarz (2022) reveals the aversion many horror fans feel toward watching scenes of rape. Considering rape and revenge films also include graphic displays of violence (some more than others) found in horror, it is interesting to include Schwarz's (2022) explanation as to why an individual can watch (and sometimes enjoy) gruesome depictions of violence but find rape too difficult to watch. For decades, according to Schwarz (2022), scholars have attempted to dissect the attraction of horror movies and society's pull toward watching films that evoke uncomfortable emotions, like fear and even repulsion, emotions which we aim to avoid in real life (p. 672). Schwarz (2022) boils this down to distancing: "This is the idea that, when we consume works of horror, we 'distance' ourselves from the scary things depicted, and this 'distance' allows other mechanisms to kick in that lead to an overall enjoyable experience" (p. 672). Hence, Schwarz (2022) argues rape scenes merely represent the horrors of real life, taking the fantasy away that is often experienced during

more outlandish depictions of violence (p. 679). However, Myers (2024) argues not all horror fans respond the same way, and not all horror movies promote gruesome sexual violence. A particular fan of B-movies, Myers (2024) defines a B-movie (produced most commonly in the horror genre) as an "independently produced film that lacks professional production value" (p. 4). B-movies, according to Myers (2024) have the freedom and ability to push the boundaries of filmmaking because they are almost always independently created: "Since there is no company overseeing the production of the film, the resulting films are often more authentic and off beat, and truer to the creators' original idea," allowing B-movies to depict topics that may be avoided by Hollywood blockbusters (p. 5). Romano (2017) supports Myers (2024) claim by arguing "the horror genre has long been ripe for social commentary precisely because it subverts the idea of what is 'villainous' by allowing us to subtly empathize with the thing we fear while exploring why we fear it (p. 4). Films like *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019), written and directed by Jordan Peele, brilliantly portray the true horror of racism and classism through the perspective of a truly classic horror film (Romano, 2017, p. 3). Romano (2017) positions *Get Out* (2017) as: "A movie laden with standard horror tropes—creepy suburban artifice, mind control, and bizarre medical experiments…what keeps those tropes from being rote is that Peele uses the modes of horror to make viewers *feel* what daily life is like for real Black men and women [original emphasis]" (p. 3).

I situate the appearance of rape in Hollywood comedy films as more problematic than the appearance of rape in horror films; positioning assault as something to be laughed at is deeply troubling. *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984), *Breakfast Club* (1985), and *Superbad* (2007), according to Metz (2018), are just a few of the films that depict scenes of sexual assault used specifically for comedic purposes: "The comedic framing interests me because intentionally or not, it does

the work of normalizing – de-horrifying, really – sexual assault to such a degree that we are lulled into not seeing what's actually there" (p. 5). Metz (2018) references actress Molly Ringwald, who revisited her experience on the set of *The Breakfast Club* (1985) in an article she wrote for the *New York Times* (Metz, 2018). In that piece, Ringwald discusses the iconic scene where "bad-boy character, John Bender" hides under Ringwald's desk and looks up her skirt. The camera follows, positioned between her legs, and exposes Ringwald's underwear on screen. "Though the audience doesn't see, it is implied that he touches her inappropriately" (Metz, 2018, p. 2), yet this scene is portrayed as a humorous moment within a text that has many dramatic, angry, and sad ones.

Theory and Methods

Theory

This project is based on the analysis of seven films, and I approached my analysis with a theoretical framework built upon the concept of rape culture. The term "rape culture" was first coined during the second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s; what Johnson & Johnson (2021) refer to as "the cultural theory of rape" (p. 71), or "rape myths," as described by Burt (1980), rape culture is the product of "attitudes such as sex role stereotyping, adversarial sexual beliefs, sexual conservatism, and acceptance of interpersonal violence" (p. 217). Utilizing feminist theory and a sociological perspective, Burt's 1980 definition continues to resonate with my contemporary understanding of what rape culture is. Burt defines "rape myths" as consisting of the following: 1) women who are raped are sexually promiscuous, or "bad," 2) rape can be resisted if one tries hard enough, 3) women use rape as an excuse to imprison or punish men who have wronged them, and 4) those who are rapists are simply "sex-starved, insane or both" (p. 217). Published in 1980, it is disturbing to recognize Burt's rape myths as reflecting narratives

surrounding rape that are still current 44 years later. Although the language has shifted, rape myths still silence survivors or are used as ammunition to discount and trivialize their experiences. I chose these four rape myths to focus on as they align best with what I discuss in my film analysis.

It is important to note, however, Burt did not situate her rape myths through an intersectional lens, but rather situated women as a monolithic category. According to Coble (2022), rape myths impact women differently depending on their social locations, yet this is not addressed in Burt's rape myths. Coble (2022) argues, an issue with feminist discourse and activism that only centers gender, is "it often presumes a White, middle class, heterosexual woman as its subject (p. 13); to which Burt is an example. In the 44 years since Burt, scholars (like Coble) have acknowledged rape myths themselves need some nuance in order to address the complexities of women's multiple identities. One reason I believe Burt's rape myths worked well in this research is because the women represented in the films I analyzed, adhere to the monolithic idea of womanhood that Burt is talking about. Hence my responsibility as a researcher, was to continuously examine the films at the center of this project through an intersectional lens, since they focused on white women's experiences. In order to create a societal shift towards equality and away from rape myths is recognizing the erasure and silencing of queer, trans, and / or BIPOC women who survive (or who do not survive) sexual violence.

Rape culture as I define it in the context of my thesis echoes Burt's myths, yet I contributed female sexual oppression as the root cause. As touched upon in my literature review, Ralston (2021) argues a sexual double standard that encourages male sexual gratification and suppresses female sexual activity and pleasure is still a prevalent issue; a society where female sexual pleasure is not discussed nor advocated for, where education for healthy sexual practice is

not mandatory, and where female sexual exploration is still tainted by patriarchal virtues of purity, is a society incapable of supporting survivors of rape. According to Ralston (2021), supporting survivors is impossible if we are not able to support women and girl's sexual agency. This is not to insinuate most people support women's sexual oppression nor consciously contribute to it, it merely acknowledges the cultural responses to both women's sexuality and rape are fundamentally flawed. Ralston (2021) further argues, if female sexual expression and pleasure were understood as equal to male sexual expression and pleasure, it could be argued rape culture would fade, instances of rape would decrease, and conviction rates would increase as survivors would no longer be questioned or blamed and all parties involved would be held accountable.

Ralston (2021), whose research explores rape culture with a specific focus on destigmatizing sex work, argues "that to have sexual equity between women and men, society needs to eliminate the main barriers to women's pleasure: socialization to be good girls, lack of explicit sexual education, sexual stigma, and the shame of the body" (p. 23-24). While we live in a society where sex surrounds us—nudity is emphasized on film and TV, sex appeal is used for engagement and popularity gain on all social media platforms, and pornography is a mere Google search away—it is shocking how both sex and female sexuality remain stigmatized. It is not extreme to suggest that even implementing vigorous and progressive policies to shift this response would still lack the power necessary to sustain a permanent shift within our culture. I incorporated rape culture as a core theoretical concept because my film analysis focused on film narratives that portray how those accused of rape are never held accountable by the criminal justice system, hence survivors' pursuit of revenge as their only method of experiencing justice. According to RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), only 25 perpetrators will be

incarcerated out of every 1,000 rape cases (that are reported), leaving an alarming 970 perpetrators walking free. It should be understood by now, a survivor's lack of justice in cases of rape is a film narrative that is not fictitious, nor does it demonstrate an exaggerated reality.

Incorporating resilience as an additional lens helped me further critique narratives that portray violent revenge as cathartic for the survivor, or as something that is even desired. Emily R. Dworkin, who studies the social interactions of trauma survivors and their impact on a survivor's recovery, states in an NPR interview (2018), "it's important for survivors to know that they can regain a sense of power over those triggers, and that the most natural response is to push away the triggers. Self-care isn't about turning off those bad feelings but *feeling* those feelings so that they can subside naturally" (p. 12). Understanding the importance of acknowledging triggering emotions that are unavoidable during any recovery process helped me deconstruct why violent revenge was such a common thread in rape and revenge narratives, when it so rarely depicts the true emotional response and reaction of rape survivors.

Methods

My analysis examined the following seven films: *Ms. 45* (1981)*, Promising Young Woman* (2020), *American Mary* (2012)*, M.F.A.* (2017), *The Accused* (1988), *Violatio*n (2020) and *Revenge* (2017), and their portrayals of rape culture, female agency, trauma, consent, rape, and consequences of revenge. Out of the seven films, six would be classified within the horror, thriller, or drama genres, some are a hybrid combination (e.g. horror/thriller or thriller/drama). *The Accused* (1988) is the one outlier, categorized as a legal drama. My reason for including *The Accused* (1988) even though it was not a horror or thriller film and did not portray violent revenge following the rape, is because its representation of rape and sexual violence at the time of its release was considered radical, and I felt it was an important film to include in this project.

It is also a film most readers would be familiar with, in contrast to the other films analyzed in this thesis, which would be considered by most as more obscure (aside from *Promising Young Woman*).

The main components for all seven films I argued remained the same: each film demonstrated a female protagonist navigating the trauma of their rape and enacting revenge or attempting to do so; some depictions of revenge were more violent than others. For *The Accused* (1988), I considered the conviction of the bystanders as revenge. It is not uncommon for films to incorporate rape indiscriminately, as merely a mundane plot point, or use rape as the only defining characteristic of a female character. Because the plot of rape and revenge films are motivated by rape, it was important for me to craft a film selection that consisted of films where the revenge that follows is as motivating to the plot as the rape itself.

I used a feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze my film data. Having used feminist CDA in my undergraduate thesis, the methodology is one I was familiar with. It positions the researcher to be critical of the subtleties or not so subtle aspects of language (i.e., phrasing, imagery, etc.) that elicit or challenge gendered assumptions or hegemonic power relations in any discourse, whether it is film, written articles, or advertising, to name a few. Lazar (2007) defines the methodology as "critiquing discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order – relations of power that systemically privilege men as a social group, and disadvantage, exclude, and disempower women as a social group" (pp. 144). It serves as a reminder that many social practices are blatantly gendered.

The construction of my data set was comprised of two steps: 1) conduct preliminary film scan, and 2) finalizing my film data set.

Conduct preliminary film scan

I began the film selecting process by conducting a broad search of films on the IMBD website using the keyword rape, which resulted in 6,600 titles. Out of the 6,600 titles, I examined 550 films and excluded any television series that were listed. I recognize that television has actually achieved a more nuanced approach to portrayals of rape and sexual violence compared to film, especially recently,[1] however my decision to focus solely on film was made for two reasons: 1) my undergraduate honors thesis (which my current research is a continuation of) focused on films, and 2) my desire to pursue this research was based on my own interest in and consumption of rape and revenge films, and not the rape and revenge that was portrayed in television. My method for selecting films out of the 550 I examined consisted of four steps. For the first step, I confirmed the film genres were drama, rape-revenge, thriller, horror, mystery, crime, or a combination all six. The genres I automatically excluded were comedy, documentary, sci-fi, war, history, fantasy, animation, biography, and western. I exclude these genres because they bring complexities that could distract from my research focus. Remaining within the realm of rape and revenge, dramas, thrillers etc., ensured that the films chosen for analysis would be more consistent in their depictions of rape and revenge, and would offer narratives that were more easily comparable to contemporary society, rather than scenarios that are supernatural, historical and so on.

For my second step in selecting films, I read the description listed under each film title. If the plot fit my criteria (a film where rape is central to the plot), and was the correct genre(s), I would conduct my third step: searching the title on "Unconsenting Media" (UM, 2023) a website dedicated to informing the public of rape and sexual assault in film and TV. Along with other triggering situations (child abuse, sexual harassment, incest, etc.), UM discloses whether a rape

[1] Examples of television series that navigate rape and sexual violence include: *Unbelievable* (2019) and *I May Destroy You* (2020).

scene is depicted on screen or is heavily implied but not shown. In some cases, timestamps for when rape occurs as well as a short description of the rape's severity will be noted. Utilizing UM was a crucial step for preserving my mental fortitude before watching potential films. My fourth and final step was to skim each film. During this process, I focused solely on the rape and the scenes that followed. My objective was to observe the rape itself, take note of how the characters responded to it, and gauge how the rape impacted the plot. I did this by asking two questions:

1. Is there a noteworthy response to rape in this film? Noteworthy in this context refers to a response that is apparent enough to be analyzed. Examples of this include:
    a. Violent retaliation or revenge against the rapist(s), acted out on behalf of the rape victim or the rape survivor themselves acting out violent revenge against their own attacker(s). This is the response most commonly portrayed in rape and revenge films.
    b. Non-violent revenge, which includes criminal prosecution and conviction of the rapist(s) or persons who contributed to the attack. This also includes depictions of rape victims who respond to their attack by actively pursuing self-healing and growth by achieving a certain level of status or removing/distancing themselves completely from their attacker(s) (applicable mostly for depictions of rape within communities/personal relationships). Acknowledging these narratives allowed me to examine power dynamics and social pressures that are also always at play in real-life situations.
2. Does the rape impact the plot? Rape that is used merely to expose a character's flaws were excluded. I also excluded films with the following criteria:

a. Rape involving characters who never share dialogue with each other or other characters.
b. Rape as a result of incest, pedophilia, serial rapists or killers, and cult or religious based rape.
c. Rape scenes that are without any context; the film does not clearly illustrate why the rape is happening, nor does the plot explain it afterward.

Finalizing my film data set

After conducting these four steps, I selected 19 films from the 550 films examined which met my primary criteria outlined above: *Ms. 45* (1981), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *Promising Young Woman* (2020), *American Mary* (2012), *M.F.A.* (2017), *The Accused* (1988), *Three Billboards* (2017), *Violation* (2020), *Revenge* (2017), *Speak* (2004), *Luckiest Girl Alive* (2022), *Straw Dogs* (both the 1971 and 2011 version), *I Spit on Your Grave* (both the 1978 and 2010 version), *Even The Lambs Have Teeth* (2015), and *Taken* (2008). I then watched all 19 films in their entirety, with the intention of discovering prominent themes. My method for identifying these themes consisted of taking notes during each film, focusing on the larger plot points (how did the film end? What was the situation leading up to the rape? Who took revenge/responded to the rape? etc.). I repeated this process twice, before I felt confident in the five themes I identified:

1) "The protagonist dies in the end." This theme included films where the protagonist died or was killed by the end of the film. Examples of this include *Ms. 45* (1981) and *Promising Young Woman* (2020).

2) "Universities, law enforcement, and court proceedings, oh my!" This theme included films that focused on the mishandling of rape cases by universities, in courtrooms and within law

enforcement. Examples of this include *M.F.A.* (2017), where the protagonist's rape is ignored by her university, and *The Accused* (1988), where the protagonist pursues legal prosecution against her attackers.

3) "Promiscuity is no excuse for rape." This theme included films that I felt depicted the rape as occurring after the protagonist's flirtatious behavior was read by the attacker as an invitation to have sex. Examples of this include *Violation* (2020), where the protagonist kisses and openly flirts with her rapist hours before the attack, and *Revenge* (2017), where the protagonist dances suggestively with her rapist the night before the attack.

4) "When healing is the revenge for rape." This theme included films that I read as depicting non-violent revenge. Examples of this include *Speak* (2004), where the protagonist (a high school student) chooses not to speak after her rape and instead focuses her attention on her enjoyment and growing talent in art class, and *Luckiest Girl Alive* (2022), where the protagonist achieves revenge by using her platform as a successful writer to publish an article detailing her gang-rape in high school and exposing her rapists.

5) "Rape through the male gaze." This theme included films I felt exploited the depiction of rape. Examples of this include *I Spit on Your Grave* (1971), where the protagonist is gang-raped for over 20 minutes of the film, and *Straw Dogs* (19), where nudity plays a large role in the rape of the protagonist.

Once these themes were solidified, I rewatched the 19 films to confirm each film fit into a category. These five themes then became the anticipated five chapters for my analysis: I listed four films under Chapter One, "the protagonist dies at the end": *Ms. 45* (1981)*, Thelma and Louise* (1991)*, Promising Young Woman* (2020) and *American Mary* (2012). I listed three films under Chapter Two, "universities, law enforcement and court proceedings, oh my!": *M.F.A.*

(2017), *The Accused* (1988), and *Three Billboards* (2017). I listed two films under Chapter Three, "promiscuity is no excuse for rape": *Violatio*n (2020), and *Revenge* (2017). I listed two films under Chapter Four, "when healing is the revenge for rape": *Speak* (2004), and *Luckiest Girl Alive* (2022), and I listed the remaining six films under Chapter Five, "rape through the male gaze": *Straw Dogs* (both the 1971 original film and 2011 adaption), *I Spit on Your Grave* (both the 1978 original film and 2010 adaption), *Taken* (2008), and *Even Lambs Have Teeth* (2015).

However, once the writing process began, the anticipated structure of my analysis changed. After submitting the first two chapters (both of which followed their original outlines), I realized that the addition of three more chapters would be an insurmountable feat to finish within the set timeline to complete this project. This led to my decision to merge together chapter two ("universities, law enforcement and court proceedings, oh my!") and chapter three ("promiscuity is no excuse for rape") and cut chapters four and five ("when healing is the revenge for rape" and "rape through the male gaze"). I added the films *Violatio*n (2020) and *Revenge* (2017) (originally in chapter three) to chapter two's film selection, and modified the chapter's title: from "universities, law enforcement and court proceedings, oh my!" to "universities, court proceedings, and victim-blaming, oh my!". With chapter two's focus largely centered on depictions of rape and the navigation of consent (and lack thereof), my decision to eliminate *Three Billboards* (2017) was caused by a misalignment between its narrative and the chapter's focus. Contrary to this, *Violatio*n (2020) and *Revenge* (2017) were easily incorporated into the chapter, as they offered two different yet relatable perspectives to my discussion. Both narratives highlight the weaponization of female promiscuity as a "justification" for sexual violence and represent unique depictions of rape within my data set. The final film selection for

chapter two consisted of the following films: *M.F.A.* (2017), *The Accused* (1988), *Violatio*n (2020), and *Revenge* (2017).

Women Talking (2022), a film that I had eliminated during the first official viewing process due to narrative lack of fit, was added to my conclusion. This addition allowed me the opportunity to explore its alternative (to the other films in my data set) narrative and perspective on rape, revenge, and healing.

After completing the first full draft of my thesis, I decided (after careful consideration) to cut *Thelma and Louise* (1991) from my first chapter. Like *The Accused* (1988), *Thelma and Louise* (1991) is an important film that people are familiar with and at the time of its release, its representation of female friendship and sexual violence was considered radical. But in my final round of edits, I realized it no longer fit in the chapter, and I did not have enough analysis to justify its inclusion. However, because of its popularity, *Thelma and Louise* (1991) has been written about by many feminist scholars over the last three decades.[2]

The final structure of my analysis consisted of two chapters ("the protagonist dies at the end" and "universities, court proceedings, and victim-blaming, oh my!") with a thorough analysis of the following seven films: *Ms. 45* (1981)*, Promising Young Woman* (2020), *American Mary* (2012), *M.F.A.* (2017), *The Accused* (1988), *Violatio*n (2020) and *Revenge* (2017).

To situate myself as the researcher, my own positionality as a rape survivor is important to reiterate as it greatly influenced my reading and analysis of the films. This project was also guided by the following three ethical principles: 1) I believe women (people) when they say they have been raped, 2) the majority of rape is perpetrated by people known to the victim (which 2 out of the 7 films contradict), and 3) rape is a collective issue that is not linear; rape impacts

[2] See Projansky (2001), especially chapter 4, for an in-depth analysis of *Thelma and Louise* (1991).

people differently depending on their other social locations. The ideal victim paradigm is dangerous and harmful (and is perpetuated in six of the films).

Analysis Chapter One: The Protagonist Dies in the End

Introduction

Suffering the greatest consequence, *Ms. 45* (1981), *Promising Young Woman* (2020 – hereafter *PYW)* and *American Mary* (2012), all offer a familiar narrative that is used in many rape and revenge films: the one where the rape victim dies in the end. This is a narrative I planned to disregard before starting this research, as it often left me feeling discouraged and unsatisfied. This type of ending, McAndrews (2020) says, can evoke feelings like that of an "agonizing gas bubble," on the viewer's chest (p. 13). Yet this narrative has proved worthy of further examination. It has challenged me to interrogate both my support of representations of vengeful acts and my feelings of disappointment with each protagonist's death. In this chapter, I approach all three films and my feelings about them through an analysis of two main themes: 1) portrayals of female agency and 2) deadly consequences. Prior to beginning my textual analysis below, I offer a short summary of each film I've chosen for analysis in this chapter.

Film Summaries

Ms. 45 (Ferrara, 1981) follows Thana (Zoe Lund), a mute seamstress living in New York City, who is raped twice by two strangers within five minutes of the film's beginning. These attacks leave Thana traumatized and hungry for revenge, and lead her to kill fourteen men in total and injure several more. A once understated and shy character, Thana transforms into a red lipped, gun wielding woman who hunts men at night, while dressing up for the occasion. Thana's fate is sealed, however, when a coworker stabs her in the back, literally.

PYW (Fennell, 2020), follows Cassie (Carey Mulligan), a woman fixated on avenging her best friend Nina, who killed herself after being raped in medical school seven years earlier. No longer a medical student herself, Cassie works at a small coffee shop by day and by night pretends to be drunk at various clubs to shock and humiliate men who try to take advantage of her. She soon decides to seek revenge against those she feels are responsible for Nina's death. After crashing the bachelor party of Nina's rapist, Al Monroe (Chris Lowell), disguised as a stripper, Cassie confronts Al. Although her intention is to gain justice for Nina, Cassie is suffocated by Al, who later burns her body with the help of his best friend. Al is arrested on the day of his wedding after text messages were sent from Cassie's phone exposing him for murder. These texts also divulge the film's twist: Cassie's death was something she planned (or at least anticipated).

Finally, *American Mary* (J. Soska & S. Soska, 2012), centers on Mary (Katharine Murry), a medical student studying to become a surgeon whose financial struggles lead her to become an underground body modification surgeon. After she is raped by her professor during a private party, Mary takes revenge by transforming her rapist's body into a human canvas she uses to practice different body modification surgeries on. Mary is eventually stabbed by the enraged boyfriend of a previous client and dies from blood loss.

Portrayals of Female Agency

Representations of female agency are a component to rape and revenge films that deserve a thorough examination. These films offer powerful portrayals of female agency, which is where I consider empowerment to be born. The depiction of a woman's ability to take (back) control and regain her power after rape can be impactful, as this is often a time when the desire for power and control is most sought after. I base this off my own experience of rape, where being

out of control of my body (which was under the control of someone else), resulted in my instinctual reaction to reclaim the control I felt I had lost. For me, a method for regaining this control was through changing universities and moving to an entirely new country (Canada). The characters discussed in this chapter also exhibit the desire to feel in control; though the methods their characters use to regain control are quite different, each protagonist demonstrates that same need I felt for control after their rape. Mary and Thana use murder as their method of regaining control, and Cassie uses psychological revenge against men who try and take advantage of her.

Ms. 45 (1981)

Watching *Ms. 45*, I found Thana's most notable display of agency illustrated through the murder of her second rapist, who she kills mid-attack: after hitting him over the head with a red apple paperweight, Thana proceeds to beat him to death with an iron. Killing her rapist mid-attack is a noteworthy detail, as *Ms. 45* is the only film out of the sixteen films included in this thesis to have its central character depicted as immediately, and successfully, fighting back.

I read Thana's murderous act as an extreme example of resistance, but one that also ties the spectacle to the myth that, "rape can be resisted if one tries hard enough" (Burt, 1980, p. 217). This myth, one that associates a victim's ability to "fight back" as a measure of a victim's resistance, is often used to discredit victims' experiences and neglects to consider the various ways fear, disassociation, and shock manifest within the body. An example of this is demonstrated during Thana's first rape experience, where the shock of being dragged into an alley by a masked stranger and threatened at gunpoint, deters her ability to resist. Slumping slowly to the ground after her attacker flees is a physical display that I read as Thana's body shutting down; this is also depicted in her lethargic walk home where her head hangs low. This portrayal of the "raped body" is found across the films examined in this thesis, including *M.F.A.*

(2017), *Violation* (2020), and *Revenge* (2017). In each case, the protagonist's body language demonstrates a physical shutting down from fear, shock, and self-preservation. I situate Thana's murderous response to her second attack as an exaggerated example of the rape myth described above. During this attack scene, the root of the myth is demonstrated by Thana's ability to physically fight back, while also offering some catharsis to viewers when Thana's violent retaliation results in her murdering her rapist, igniting a kind of wish-fulfilment.

Another display of Thana's agency is her choice to murder men at night, a component of the film that I feel shifts Thana away from being positioned as a victim, and opens possibilities for her to be read as a vigilante. Prior to her attacks, we are invited to view Thana through the male gaze, where she is represented as a vulnerable target of men who constantly catcall, sexually harass, and follow. However, after successfully eliminating her second rapist, we see Thana transform into a vigilante: she is a huntress and the men are her prey. I feel this transformation from victim to vigilante is shown most prominently in a scene where Thana is encircled by five men at night, all wielding different weapons. Dolled up with bright red lipstick, Thana smoothly shoots the five men one by one in a matter of seconds, before continuing her walk into the night. There are two main components to this scene that I believe introduce the audience to Thana's transformation to vigilante: 1) Thana's outward appearance and 2) her choice to walk alone in the dark. Beginning with Thana's appearance, her hair is tied back away from her face, her eyebrows are dark, her lips are bright red, her eyes are outlined with black eyeliner, and she is dressed in a fitted black coat with padded shoulders, black sheer tights, and high heels. She is a woman who appears poised, elegant, and confident. Whereas at the beginning of the film, I read Thana as an understated character in her plain white button up shirt, wearing no makeup and her hair worn loose around her face, I read Thana's sudden shift in

appearance as a literal dressing up for the occasion and celebration of her revenge. A character whose motivation to murder men interrupts her victimhood, Thana is repositioned as a character who is no longer trying to blend in; Thana's updated appearance represents her as a woman who is proud of protecting herself and other women from men.

Integrating the myth that a woman's choice of clothing indicates whether (or not) she is "asking for it," Thana's change in appearance can be examined further, considering both attacks against Thana take place prior to her transformation. As stated by Rosen (2019), Thana's attacks are "evidence that you can be raped regardless of how much or little space you take up in society" (p. 6). When Thana is raped, she is without makeup and is wearing a long skirt that falls below her knees, a button up white blouse and a blazer. This is an outfit that is neither provocative nor revealing, yet she is not only raped once but twice. It feels like the filmmaker is deliberately contradicting this myth: a myth grounded in a victim-blaming mentality. Clothing is never the reason behind an assault or rape, it is merely noise to distract from the root cause; power, the patriarchy and misogyny.

According to Steele (2019), "perpetuating the myth of 'she was asking for it' offers a sort of vague approval to the incorrect reasoning. People who espouse such a view only give those who force themselves on others a place to hide. They give rapists a way to try to mitigate blame or justify their actions" (p. 24). *Ms. 45* uses Thana's transformation to critique this myth, by transforming Thana's appearance post attacks. Rosen (2019) argues that Thana is also "well-aware of the stereotypical fact that women don't need to dress revealing[ly] to be attacked by men since all they care about is control and desire for power" (p. 6). If we read the scene where Thana shoots the five men through the perspective of this myth, Thana "asks for it" by dressing up in efforts to gain the attention she once avoided, only to shoot and kill men who dare to give

her that attention. In summation, I argue *Ms. 45* critiques the myth that women who dress provocatively are "asking for it," by inserting a narrative reversal; at the beginning of the film, we see Thana as modest and fearful, which is when she is victimized. However, after these attacks, we see Thana take on the myth that women who dress (or act) in certain ways are "asking for it," by dressing and acting in precisely these ways. She dares men to risk offering her (unwanted) attention, only to kill them if they do. By embodying the myth and presenting herself like a woman who is "asking for it," Thana shoots any man who wrongly assumes she is vulnerable to rape.

The second component in this scene that I read as demonstrating Thana's agency is her choice to walk alone at night; an act considered by many to encompass a high level of risk. Although daytime attacks occur (as demonstrated by Thana's character being raped twice at midday), walking alone at night is a scenario that many people avoid because of the association of night with bad things happening, perhaps because it is dark at night and there are fewer people about (which assumes proper folks are in bed), and there is more alcohol and drug use. This anxiety about the night is something I am familiar with, something that makes my own walks home after dark in my quiet neighborhood, slightly uncomfortable. When the camera shows us Thana walking slowly and calmly out of frame with her 45-pistol held in her right hand, I read her as embodying a confidence I can only wish to embrace. Thana is no longer vulnerable; she is dangerous. She makes being a man no longer safe, which is a provocative concept even 42 years after the film was originally produced.

According to Emily Badger (2014), "it's worth noting that crime has broadly declined in the United States since the early 1990s. But it's hard to say how much of women's perception of their safety is attributable to actual declines in crime, and how much is attributable to other

factors (like changing social norms about whether it's okay for women to walk around alone)" (p. 6). The 2021 case of Sarah Everard, a 33-year-old woman who was kidnapped, raped and murdered on her night walk home, only solidifies the grim reality that walking alone at night still presents a real danger for certain populations, intensifying a fear that has been ingrained within the minds of those who feel most vulnerable. Although this incident happened in the UK, I incorporate this story as it contradicts certain stereotypes: Sarah was not inebriated and she was walking on a well-lit street. According to Molly Bishop (2021), the public was stunned by this case, because Sarah was deemed to have done "all the right things" that night: "She called her boyfriend, she covered up with bright clothes, she walked on a lit street and she was sober" (p. 8). This notion of "doing the right things" can help one avoid sexual and other forms of violence may be a highly normalized idea, but it is also deeply flawed. Bishop asks: "Can we forbid that a woman is ever drunk? Or claim that wearing a short dress is risking her own safety?" (p. 9). This mindset severely disadvantages vulnerable people, placing the responsibility for avoiding sexual violence on those who might be assaulted. It also perpetuates the myth that violence only happens at night. Violence of all types can occur at any point during the day; just as sexual violence is not contingent on what you wear. However, because of the deeply engrained association between night (darkness) with crime / violence, Thana confidently choosing to walk alone at night during 1981, was a provocative choice for the filmmakers to make and remains a portrayal of confidence I still consider to be a powerful depiction today.

The film also portrays all of the men as being out of control. The men in the film are represented as overly aggressive, they cannot seem to control their sexual urges, they display an extreme lack of respect toward women and are consistently overstepping physical and verbal boundaries. The scenes that best illustrate this theme are, 1) the first interaction between Thana

and her boss, and 2) Thana and her three coworkers leaving work. Before exploring these textual examples, it is important to reiterate that this film was produced and released in 1981, and my analysis is conducted through a contemporary feminist lens; a process Byers (2024) refers to as re-watching. Re-watching, according to Byers (2024), is similar to looking at an old photograph: "It allows us to imagine what it was like to live in a time before the future" (p. 7). In the context of *Ms. 45,* re-watching this film 40 years after its release, is a useful tool for highlighting what has (and has not) progressed within rape culture.

My first textual example focuses on an interaction between Thana and her boss, which occurs within the first three minutes of the film. In that moment we see Thana and her other female coworkers leaving for the day. Thana is the last to pass her boss who pats her on the head as she walks by saying, "Goodnight honey." There are two aspects to this exchange that illustrate disrespect and overstepping physical boundaries. First, terms like "honey" in the context of a professional relationship is inappropriate behavior; it is a behavior that Thana's boss repeats consistently throughout the film. Second, patting an adult on the head is patronizing; it is a gesture that an adult gives to a child. This interaction demonstrates Thana's boss is disrespectful and inappropriate: Thana is treated like a child and / or an object. This dynamic is maintained throughout the film: Thana is consistently referred to as "honey," and repeatedly endures unwanted physical and sexual advances from her boss.

The second example shows Thana and her three coworkers leaving work and immediately being bombarded by catcalls and harassment from men on the street. The camera shows the viewer men lining both sides of the street outside their office building, forcing Thana and her coworkers to walk in between the two rows of men who continuously make inappropriate comments like, "You do look good," "Come here sugar," "Hey sweetie, you wanna

sit on my face?" and "Oh mama…hey baby." As viewers, we are invited to witness what Thana and her coworkers experience when simply walking down the street; the unwanted sexual advances and comments said by men make Thana and her coworkers visibly uncomfortable and upset. While this scene may be exaggerated for effect, I read this portrayal of sexual harassment as highlighting how women are viewed by men in the film; they are merely sexual objects, on display for men. Again, I read the dynamic between Thana (and other female characters) and the men throughout the film as a justification of Thana's violence reprisals against predatory men.

According to Rosen (2019), "to these men, they (women) are simply meat. Women are a pleasure to be consumed, nothing more. Women are nothing, nothing to be scared of. Or, at least, so they mistakenly thought" (p. 4). Other examples of men Thana kills, include: 1) a pushy photographer who hounds Thana into letting him photograph her in his studio, "hey, there's no sense in being shy with a face like that," 2) a young man on a street corner who is continuously catcalling women on the street: "hey little girl, sweetheart, where you going? What's the hurry?", and 3) a pimp who beats a sex worker, "never f*ck with my money!" These interactions situate men as predatory, sexual aggressive, inappropriate and violent.

Aside from walking alone at night, another more subtle display of Thana's agency, as noted by Rosen (2019), is her muteness: "The first version of Thana is the oppressed, scared victim whose silence represents her literal inability to speak for herself. The second version, more of a femme fatale kind of character, sees Thana in control and her silence is a weapon and not a weakness" (p. 6). Thana's silence becomes a method for deceiving men: she uses her selective muteness to convince men she is interested in their advances before killing them. An example of this is depicted when Thana accepts a ride from two male strangers. After being propositioned by one of the men to stay the night with him, Thana nods slowly in agreeance

while a lit cigarette dangles loosely from her bright red lips. As she slips the cash he gives her into her purse, Thana quickly pulls out her 45 revolver and shoots both men. I interpret how easy men fall for Thana's deception, as perpetuating the film's portrayal of men as desiring only two things: sex and power. The film suggests that Thana believes men will attempt to take her power away by physical or sexual force, if necessary, regardless of whether she speaks or not. This suggests to me as the viewer, Thana's belief that even if she were to say "no," men would not listen. In essence, silence in women is associated with docility, contrasted by the associations of silence in men, which is most often perceived as seriousness. Silent men are merely quiet men and are far from docility.

Promising Young Woman (2020)

The way Cassie's agency is depicted in *PYW* leaves me feeling conflicted. When Cassie is first introduced, she is established through her self-appointed position as avenger of her (dead) best friend, Nina. In my reading, the film is quick to show the manifestation of Cassie's vengeance as resulting in her decision to spend her nights out in clubs and bars, where she feigns drunkenness until a "nice guy" offers to bring her home, only to reveal her sobriety if they try and take advantage of her. Through the reveal of Cassie's small notebook full of tally marks (representing the many men she has caught with this ruse), the film makes it clear that men have made a pattern of falling for her stunt for years. As the viewer, this only situates Cassie as a character who carries the burden of Nina's trauma from the start of the film, which Walker (2021) argues does not offer the viewer a message of hope, especially for those who have been through sexual assault (p. 6). Instead, this situates rape as undefeatable.

I find Cassie's agency most strongly demonstrated during two early scenes in which we witness her engaged in her ruse, the first of which opens the film. Cassie is offered a ride home

by "nice guy" Jerry (Adam Brody), who sees what appears to be Cassie sitting drunkenly alone on a bar couch and approaches. Once at his apartment, Jerry obnoxiously gropes Cassie as she pretends to be slipping in and out of consciousness, repeatedly asking him, "What are you doing?" As he begins to take off Cassie's underwear without her consent, Cassie sits up and repeats for a final time, now clearly sober, "I said, what are you doing?" Jerry shrinks from embarrassment and humiliation with a horrified expression on his face. In my reading, Cassie's ability to change the dynamic quickly and dramatically in this scene is an empowering demonstration of her agency. Her blunt attitude when confronting Jerry, a stranger she just met in his own home, is thrilling to witness. My own fear of retaliation and threat of violence would be unavoidable if I were faced with this scenario in real life.

The second time we see Cassie in action is in a scene involving Neil (Christopher Mintz-Plasse), another "nice guy" who we see snorting cocaine and rambling on about his unpublished novel. After ignoring her slurred requests to leave, Cassie confronts Neil and his eagerness to take advantage of her during her drunken state, to which Neil reacts to almost comically: "I'm a nice guy! I thought we had a connection!" Cassie responds by asking, "What's my name?" leaving Neil without an answer. As in the previous scene, the film makes it clear Cassie's confrontation initiates Neil's realization that the power he *thought* he had over Cassie, was just a ruse to make him *think* he held the power, which is physically noticeable in their body language. Where Neil moments before invaded Cassie's space on the couch, he now is positioned defensively backing away from her. Cassie, who at first sat slumped on the couch, now stands and corners Neil against the wall before he demands that she leave. I found it exhilarating to watch Cassie make self-proclaimed "nice guys" like Jerry and Neil speechless, humiliated, and even afraid. I appreciate that this is a scene of revenge that is absent of violence and yet supplies

the viewer with the satisfaction of witnessing men quiver from a strong female presence: a role that Cassie successfully fulfills.

In my reading, Cassie's agency weakens as the film progresses; her acts of redemption for Nina become motivated by ill-intent to cause psychological harm to other women, and the absence of Nina's agency in the film only becomes more troubling. McAndrews (2021) writes, "Every move Cassie makes is in memory of Nina. Every punishment is enacted because of Nina. Everything is about Nina. But Nina's voice is never heard. She's a ghost, silently floating at the periphery, talked about, not to" (p. 6). Focused so intensely on Cassie's grief, the film's narrative strips Nina of her personhood, leaving her simply as a victim of rape who commits suicide: no one besides Cassie remembers her name (p. 6). "Even Nina's mother tells Cassie to move on 'for all of us,'" McAndrews (2021) elaborates, "which can be interpreted for both the living and the dead. While Cassie's grief shouldn't be dismissed, it should be examined as something harmful to the sexual assault victim herself" (p. 7). Where Thana's agency is articulated as reaction to her own rape, Nina's agency is never considered. This leads me to ask: is the revenge Cassie seeks something that Nina would have even desired? This is a necessary question, especially considering this film has positioned itself as feminist, but just having a female avenger is not enough. Cassie engages in a fantasy of posthumously saving Nina, but the film completely excludes Nina from the narrative, reducing her to being a victim and nothing more.

Despite these shortcomings, the complexity with which Cassie's obsession with avenging Nina is represented is nonetheless worth exploring. If I consider that what happened to Nina could have easily happened to Cassie, my perspective on Cassie's narrative shifts. "Trauma and the Girl," an essay by Mythili Rajiva (2014), explores girlhood and the ways sexual violence may be understood as a shared experienced through first or secondhand trauma. As Rajiva

(2014) says: "There is an embodied awareness for girls that their lives are shaped by both societal discourses of fear and risk, as well as the very real existence of danger, as exemplified by the wealth of feminist research on violence against women" (p. 138). Like the fear of walking alone at night, a connection can occur when people relate to each other through shared vulnerabilities. As illustrated by Rajiva, this connection and mutual understanding is notably born between women through shared experiences of sexual assault and violence. If we read Cassie's character as feeling vulnerable because she can imagine herself in Nina's place, an important narrative tension is created by the film, one that offers a perspective on Cassie's obsession with revenge. This is more than just a portrayal of her grief but rather Cassie trying to gain justice for the version of herself that feels she was also raped. Through this lens, Nina can be viewed as a symbol of women who have suffered at the hands of a system unwilling to support them.

In the context of *PYW*, the system is represented by the University / Medical School Nina and Cassie attended, whose administrators dismiss Nina's rape report. As a white character, I do not situate Cassie (and more importantly, Nina as the rape victim) as being representative for all women's experiences on campus; especially when discussing the treatment of rape reports. According to Wallace, et. al (2024): "Black women college students experience sexual violence at least as often as their white counterparts, if not more" (p. 244). Wallace, et. al (2024) emphasizes the lack of research that examines the experience of Black female college students and sexual violence, resulting in a gap in campus life research for Black women; a gap that is similarly found narratively in *PYW* (and *M.F.A.* examined in chapter two), where a white woman's experience is the only perspective depicted. That said, it is worth noting that Cassie (and Nina's) experience does not necessarily exclude other demographics from relating to their

story just because they are white. As Rajiva (2014) explains, experiences of sexual assault have the power to unite women in a powerful way, one where empathy can override their differences. Nevertheless, showcasing the white woman's narrative is not unique to *PYW*, but rather is a pattern that dominates most (if not all) rape and revenge films. This pattern replicates society's own bias toward amplifying white voices while silencing or ignoring the voices of those who are racialized, queer, poor, etc. Taking this into account, *PYW* highlights how Cassie, a white, thin, middle-class character, still has virtually no recourse within rape culture, even though she is among the most privileged. If *they* (white, thin, middle-class women) cannot be believed, what chance would poor, racialized, queer (etc.) people have?

Cassie first seeks revenge against her former classmate, Madison (Alison Brie), to punish her for her disregard of Nina's rape and suicide, and later takes revenge against Dean Elizabeth Walker (Connie Britton), the Dean of the medical school Nina and Cassie attended, who ignored Nina's rape report. Cassie's attempts to avenge Nina puts these two women at risk. This is displayed when Cassie purposefully positions Madison to believe that she was raped in a hotel room by a stranger following their impromptu lunch. This is another ruse planned by Cassie. Pretending to drink alongside Madison, Cassie waits until Madison is thoroughly inebriated before slipping a hotel key into the hands of a man she pays to convince Madison she was assaulted during her drunken state. Though this assault does not actually happen, Cassie's intention to make Madison believe it did, is disturbing. This is the first of two examples that trouble my reading of the film's portrayal of Cassie's revenge in ways that her earlier interactions with Jerry and Neil did not. Perhaps my perspective on feminism does not align with the "feminist" narrative that falsely implies a character was unknowingly raped, as in Cassie seeking revenge against Madison (and later Dean Walker).

Following her setup of Madison, Cassie moves to Dean Walker. During a meeting at the University, Cassie convinces Dean Walker that she (Cassie) has left Dean Walker's teenage daughter, Amber (Francisca Estevez), alone with a group of college boys in Nina's old dorm room; Cassie has actually dropped Amber off at a café. What may seem to be a harmless prank still places a young woman at risk. In efforts to make her fictional story plausible, Cassie hands Dean Walker her daughter's phone, which leaves Amber alone in a public place without the ability to call for help if she did in fact need it. Both situations involving Madison and Amber make me question Cassie's ability to be a character the audience wants to support, when her revenge objectively targets women, and not just Al Monroe, the rapist. Although Madison contributes to Nina's unhappiness through social exclusion, and Dean Walker for her negligence as the Dean of the university who openly denies Nina's allegations, Cassie revenge is ill-fitting for a film that holds itself as feminist. I feel empowered by Cassie's agency to defend herself and confront Jerry and Neil, yet I find Cassie's actions that place other women at risk under the guise of bringing justice to Nina's memory, unsupportable.

I also read Cassie as not gaining anything from her acts of revenge. This is dramatically represented in the scene that follows Cassie's interaction with Mrs. Walker, and, in which I read Cassie's actions as demonstrating anything but fulfillment or satisfaction. In the scene, Cassie sits with her head on the steering wheel of her parked car that sits in the middle of the road. A truck driving past her honks the horn, before the driver yells out the window: "Hey you're blocking the road…get out of the f*cking road, what the f*ck is wrong with you?" The truck stops and the man continues to yell as Cassie slowly raises her head from the steering wheel, staring blankly ahead. He continues yelling: "You're sitting in the middle of the intersection. How'd you get your license? You blow the entire DMV? Look at me you stupid c*nt!" Without

looking directly at the man driving the truck, Cassie gets out of her car, walks to her driver side window (which is open), pulls out a tire iron and proceeds to smash the truck's back lights and shatter the windshield. Thrown by Cassie's sudden aggression, the truck driver drives off quickly, leaving Cassie standing in the middle of the road with her tire iron by her side. A moment passes before Cassie appears to snap out of a daze, covers her mouth in shock as if just realizing what she did before rushing back to her car and driving away. This scene demonstrates to me a character whose grief and guilt is manifesting into self-sabotaging behavior and angry outbursts. This leads me to consider whether my reading of Cassie (a character who is unable to achieve resolution), is because Cassie herself is not the rape survivor; Nina is. Cassie (and the viewer) can only imagine what happened to Nina, hence Cassie's inability to experience any catharsis. Al does not murder Nina, however the aftermath of her rape results in her suicide, Ultimately, the only way I read Cassie as obtaining resolution is by becoming Nina, and letting Al kill her; just as Al's rape of Nina, led to her suicide.

Cassie is simply unable to let go of Nina's rape or death, and the film seems to suggest that her trauma is undefeatable. However, anecdotally, I feel it is important to witness women overcoming their trauma as so many of us who have experience with rape in real life do. This taps into feminist notions of community building and shared experience, which highlights the importance of witnessing other women healing from rape. As illustrated by Sweetman (2013), "feminist solidarity strengthens the power of women to challenge gender-based violence, abuse, marginalization and poverty. Through taking action collectively, women can draw on their pooled skills, knowledge and resources, enabling them to take courses of action which would not be available to individuals" (p. 219). Rape, sexual assault, and the overall awareness or fear of rape are shared experiences, not individual issues, nor are the trials and tribulations of healing.

Rape can so often correlate with feelings of isolation that to prioritize portrayals of healing would help survivors realize their experiences are not isolated, but are a product of a larger, systemic issues that are beyond any one individual's level of resistance. Rape culture cannot be fought, nor defeated if every person who falls victim to it feels alone. In addition, a narrative that positions their protagonist as alone in their fight (demonstrated in most of the films examined in this thesis), is arguably a very "male" narrative; mimicking the common "I work alone" trope seen often in actions films starring male leads, according to Narula (2023): "They're lone wolves: they have no backup, no help" (p. 1). It is disappointing that the rape and revenge narratives in this project replicate this "I work alone" narrative, when rape often yields the desire (and need) for solidarity and support.

American Mary (2012)

I consider *American Mary*'s protagonist Mary and her violent revenge (though extreme), to be a more powerful demonstration of strong female agency and empowerment than we are offered with Cassie in *PYW*. For example: 1) Mary, also a medical student who is raped, only seeks revenge against her rapist, in contrast to Cassie who seeks revenge against multiple people whom Cassie deems responsible for Nina's suicide. 2) Mary and Cassie's approach to revenge is different. Cassie uses psychological torture, while Mary seeks both physical and psychological revenge. This is not to position Mary's gruesome physical harm against her rapist as "more empowering" than Cassie's revenge, however Mary appears to gain more from her revenge. I feel this is illustrated by Mary's monetary gains and professional success from clients who pay her in cash up to $12,000 at a time, which in part, is due to her ability to practice surgical procedures on her rapist's body. Finally, 3) Mary is able to use her surgical abilities to help

people achieve their unconventional body modification goals (tongue splitting, the removal and reattachment of limbs, the removal of nipples, etc.)

American Mary also critiques misogyny and the abuse of female bodies. The former is most notably demonstrated by Mary's professor who curses openly at Mary during class, calls her after school to scold her, and later rapes her. The latter is demonstrated in two key scenes in the film: 1) the ill-lit strip club, where the manager sexually harasses the dancers through repeated inappropriate and toxic behavior, for example, kissing them without their consent and coercing them to perform oral sex, and 2) the sex ring run by abusive and corrupt medical professors who drug and rape female students, including Mary. I read these examples as displaying men's entitlement to women's bodies.

Deadly Consequences

While the three films selected for discussion in this chapter are narratively different from one another, they each reach the same conclusion: the death of the main character(s). Where Cassie (in a sense), initiates her own death, Thana and Mary are both murdered, hence my decision to examine their deaths more closely, here. Thana is stabbed by her coworker, Laurie (Darlene Stuto) at a costume party, where she is dressed as a nun. The scene begins when Thana enters the party with her boss Albert (Albert Sinkys), who soon ushers her upstairs and attempts to seduce her. It is not long before shots are heard, and the party guests, assuming she was the one shot, run to Thana's aid. They are horrified, however, to find Thana holding the gun. Before anyone can react, Thana unleashes her final act of uncontrollable rage and begins to frantically shoot every man at the party. Amidst the chaos, the camera shows Laurie running toward the snack table and grabbing a large knife, which she positions between her legs with the blade angled up. Laurie stands still as Thana, unaware that Laurie is behind her, steps backwards and is

stabbed by the knife. Thana turns, ready to shoot her attacker, but when she sees Laurie, I read her facial expression as a mixture between sadness and confusion. "Sister," Thana breathes quietly before falling to the ground. This is the only time the audience hears Thana speak throughout the entire film.

There are many ways to interpret Thana's death, however what I found most prominent is it renders the symbolism of the unspoken responsibility women have to control other women. Laurie's murder of Thana is a direct example of this. Like Thana, Laurie finds men bothersome and infuriating, which is demonstrated in every scene where Laurie's character interacts with men. Yet she is the one chosen to stop Thana from destroying men, men the film portrays as unsafe to women, and who Laurie herself appears to despise. Laurie silences Thana, the ultimate form of betrayal. According to Rosen (2019), "The facial expression of Thana when she turns around is almost heartbreaking; it's the shock of betrayal from not solely a friend but by her own gender. The very thing she was trying so hard and hoping to protect ultimately destroys our vigilante" (p. 13). Over the course of the film, the viewer witnesses Thana's fear of men progress; her actions illustrate to me that she believes no man can be trusted and to let them live places her at risk. I read this positioning as problematic, it perpetuates a conservative (right-wing) claim that all feminists hate all men. For Laurie's character to intervene to end Thana's murdering frenzy during this final scene, interrupts this claim by situating Laurie as the moral woman; essentially illustrates to the viewer that although Thana's rape is unacceptable, violence is not the answer. To be violent against men is to replicate men's violence against women.

The method in which Laurie stabs Thana adds another layer to my analysis. The knife is purposefully positioned phallically, held low between Laurie's legs pointed upward, as if erect. Rosen (2019) notes: "The fact that Thana is stabbed by a knife that's placed and held like a penis

reflects the penetrating penis that started Thana's violent journey. The circle is now closed" (p. 13). The knife in this case, represents the very thing Thana was trying to destroy; sexually aggressive and dangerous men. Furthermore, the knife's phallic representation can portray the law (the social normative rules of gender, embodiment, sexuality and relationality). In addition, Laurie killing Thana demonstrates that in the world of *Ms. 45*, the power resides with women; the only person who *can* kill Thana, is another woman. If the film would have had a man kill Thana, it would result in a difficult situation narratively where we see men intervening to silence women.

Mary's death is less related to the rape and revenge plot; she is stabbed by Mr. RealGirl (Travis Watters), after he discovers his wife, Ruby RealGirl (Paula Lindberg) (one of Mary's clients), has undergone elective surgery (conducted by Mary) that makes her sexually unavailable to him (her vagina is surgically closed). Unable to contain his rage, Mr. RealGirl kills Ruby before hunting Mary down. The scene begins with Mary receiving a call from another client, Beatress (Tristan Risk), who frantically warns Mary that Mr. Realgirl is on his way to kill her. Mary enters her home and is immediately attacked by Mr. Realgirl who is already inside, waiting for her. Mary kills him but not before he stabs her in the stomach. While bleeding, Mary crawls to her surgical tools and stitches her own stomach wound together before succumbing to her injuries and dying. As a surgeon, Mary helped people free themselves from societal standards of how a body "should" look. Her character is a conduit for self-expression, female empowerment and resistance to misogyny, using body modification to free feminine bodies from sexualization, and she is destroyed because of this. I read Mary's final surgery conducted on herself as a representation of her last attempt to free herself from men's feelings of entitlement over her body; the entitlement that not only results in her rape, but also her death. Mary's

character can be read as intensely threatening to conventional gender and sexual relations; hence the reason Mary is murdered. I read Mr. Realgirl as a representation of the backlash that would (and does) erupt if feminine bodies were no longer available to men sexually; chaos, violence and murder would ensue.

Cassie's death, in particular, remains unsatisfactory to me. Though her death exposes the bleak and alarming reality that many rapists (especially unexceptional middle-class white men) live normal lives without consequences, what enrages me about Cassie's death is the film's almost cheeky reveal that Cassie planned it herself. This reveal is depicted by a winky face sent from Cassie's phone after she dies, the last message out of several texts Cassie scheduled to have sent in anticipation of her death. It is these texts which ultimately lead to Nina's rapist's (and Cassie's murderer's) arrest. I wonder if the viewer is supposed to feel this self-sacrifice is Cassie's ultimate act of agency. Al's arrest for murder and not rape only makes this more outrageous, leaving nothing empowering about the film's ending. McAndrews (2021) echoes this sentiment, arguing, "Even if she was empowered in sending that text, she's still dead. Two women had to die for a man just to get arrested. It hits too close to home and Fennell (director) tries too hard to make it funny for it to mean anything" (p. 12). Although some viewers may experience catharsis during Al's arrest, as it informs the audience that Al will be punished, the method in which the film brings the viewer to this resolution remains unsatisfactory to me.

Incorporating Burt's (1980)'s rape myth—"women who are raped are sexually promiscuous, or 'bad,'" (p. 217)—back into this discussion shifts how I read the filmmakers' choice to kill their protagonists. Blaming a victim's promiscuity, behavior, or clothing for their rape, or placing responsibility for rape on victims instead of their perpetrators, frees rapists from consequences or accountability and can contribute to rape victims feeling shame. Although the

films chosen for this chapter do not position their protagonists as objectively responsible for their rapes, I do read the decision to kill them as perpetuating Burt's myth that rape victims *should* be punished. Integrating outdated ideals of "good" and "bad" femininity and each protagonist's deliberate disruption to these ideals, can arguably be perceived as the punishable offenses for which they are later killed. As illustrated by Chemaly (2018), the ideals of "good" or "pure" femininity encompass submissiveness, docility, delicacy, and agreeability (p.16). To be feminine in this context is to be quiet and presentable, expressions of femininity that Thana, Mary, and Cassie, all blatantly reject: Thana and Mary enact extreme violence, and Cassie is persistent and deceitful, which disrupt traditional feminine norms and roles. These women break the (patriarchal) rules and therefore can (and perhaps must) be justifiably punished.

This chapter leaves me grappling with the question: why is death the only resolution in these three films? One way I read the deaths of each of these characters, alone or as a group, as, for example, reflecting broader social issues surrounding ingrained misogyny, profound flaws in the criminal justice system, and male entitlement to women's bodies. I position death as each film's harsh critique of a society that "pushes victims of sexual assault to the side," where they are made to feel (and perhaps the filmmakers also feel) death is their only option (Rosen, 2021). Yet, I question whether these issues could be brought to light through different means other than death. As the viewer, I struggle with witnessing these three protagonists endure trauma only to die by the end of each film. In my conclusion I explore the film, *Women Talking* (2022) that considers a different route to resolution; a resolution that involves a community effort, where the support of other women is not only helpful but necessary for change. No women die at the end of the film, and there is no violence (aside from rape) that is inflicted onto anyone. Although *Women Talking* is a drama and does not follow the rape and revenge narrative illustrated in the

films discussed in this chapter, its emphasis on communication, community and support in response to rape is an empowering (and unique) approach to overcoming the trauma of rape.

Discussion

In my analysis, I have identified two plausible arguments for how I perceive the motivation behind the narrative choice to kill the protagonist as demonstrated in all three rape-revenge films included in this chapter: 1) the death of the protagonist positions rape as something undefeatable, and 2) the death of the protagonist is a product of misogyny and represents the (permanent) silencing of rape victims. Though the true motivations of the makers of these films are ultimately unknown, I find this type of narrative (killing the protagonist in the end) disappointing.

Witnessing justified feminine rage be extinguished through death, is discouraging. I perceive this narrative trope as portraying women whose agency is taken from them not once, but twice; first through rape and second in death. Cassie, however, disappoints me in a different manner; her final act of agency *is* her death by suicide. I read this narrative as more discouraging than Thana and Mary's; in real life situations, most women do not choose death when they are faced with the complexities of rape, they instead navigate their trauma to the best of their abilities. These narratives, whether they portray their female characters as choosing death or being murdered, are sensationalized; and they demonstrate rape (and the aftermath of rape) through the perspective of the writers and directors. In addition, each narrative is impacted by the genre of the film. For example, a horror movie's representation of rape and revenge will be different than the representation of rape and revenge portrayed in a drama or historical film.

It is important to include the limitations of genre in this discussion, as it plays a role in narrative structure and thus to my analysis. *Ms. 45* is a horror (and action) film, *PYW* is a type of

dramedy, and *American Mary* is nominally a horror film. The expectations of these genres, narratively, are quite different as are the levels of violence the target audience of each will be willing to tolerate. Each of the three films discussed in this chapter already engage with the difficult subject matter of rape, however the various methods each protagonist uses to gain justice from their rapist(s) is where the level of violence varies. The levels of aggression toward women also vary, most notably in *Ms. 45*, which situates men as women's enemy whose intentions are always bad. In comparison, *PYW*, which offers a more contemporary vision of rape culture, focuses on the "nice guys" who appear to have good intentions but whose intentions are actually bad. Through the lens of her grief, the film shows Cassie attempting to send a message to men who claim to be "nice guys" yet who take advantage of women, while also portraying Cassie as someone unable to release herself from the guilt and pain associated with Nina's rape and suicide. The film does suggest Cassie's actions are unhealthy; in one scene Nina's mom tells Cassie: "You need to stop this; it isn't good for Nina. Cassie move on, please, for all of us." But this moment in the film is overshadowed by the narrative choice to have Cassie choose to be killed as her method of "moving on" from her pain.

While rape is devastating, healing is not an insurmountable feat. Yet this component is missing from the films discussed in this chapter. Non-violent depictions of healing are not integrated into these narratives, for reasons I believe are strongly associated with what is considered to have entertainment value, which is often achieved through sexual content, violence and genre. If films only portrayed healthy mechanisms for coping with rape, the films would, arguably, be less entertaining to watch. Although these films have the potential to start conversations around rape, navigating rape culture, and grief, their top priority is to make money by entertaining as many people as possible in the ways they would like to be entertained.

A question I have considered in undertaking this work is: how do these films challenge their viewers? *American Mary*'s approach to revenge, and the film more broadly, incorporates the most intense depictions of gory violence, shown through numerous and horrific procedures Mary conducts on her rapist, including representations of the removal of her rapist's arms and legs, the splitting of his tongue, and his body being hung from the ceiling of her basement from hooks embedded into his back. Does this representation of intense violence reduce the power from the protagonist by situating the viewer to *only* see her as a woman who goes too far? That is, does the violence of the revenge take away from the narrative that is attempting to expose rape culture and the injustices rape victims face? As the viewer, *PYW* challenged my perceptions of how I categorized "good" and "bad" revenge. I did not object to witnessing the violence against men, demonstrated in *Ms. 45,* and *American Mary* (including the films examined in chapter two), however I did object to the psychological revenge Cassie targets against women. As a woman, my focus on supporting other women (especially in situations involving sexual violence against women), prevented me from recognizing when it is also important to hold other women accountable. After unpacking my own reaction, I can recognize that perhaps Cassie was simply holding Madison and Dean Walker accountable for their contribution to Nina's suicide; however, I can also disagree with Cassie's method for holding these women accountable (in particular, leveraging the threat of rape, as retaliation against Madison).

In the context of *American Mary*, my reading of Mary's torture of her rapist is complicated. At first glance, Mary treating her rapist's body like meat, to be poked, prodded, experimented on, cut, sliced, and stitched, treated as nothing more than flesh on a hook (literally), could undoubtedly convince a viewer her violent actions are far more extreme than his. Yet I read her violence as a grotesque and exaggerated representation of how Mary's rapist

treated her body. On the night of her attack, Mary is flirted with, gawked and stared at by predatory men; her body is viewed by them as a symbol of youth, desirability, and opportunity. She then is drugged, and her body led by her rapist without her consent to a bedroom, where she is thrown onto a bed and raped. She is lifeless and unable to protect herself. Sticking his fingers into her open mouth and grabbing her face, Mary's body is also treated like meat, to be used and abused, a receptacle for the sexual pleasure of her rapist. I argue, Mary's revenge is simply a variation of the torture inflicted upon her.

Conclusion

Out of the three films in this chapter, I appreciate *American Mary* and *Ms. 45* the most. Mary and Thana are characters I enjoy watching, both of whom transform from victim to vigilantes who men fear. While *American Mary'*s graphic and bloody depictions of violence may lose the popular vote, I position this film as hitting the mark. It successfully delivers the story of a woman who gains success by performing life changing body modification surgeries for a community ignored by mainstream medical practices, while engaging in discussions of female sexual exploitation. At the same time, it is a gore-filled representation of a woman who enacts severe revenge against her rapist. I read Mary's death as representing the violence that would ensue if women's bodies were no longer sexually accessible to men.

Cassie's death is arguably similar to Mary's. Smothered by a pillow by Nina's rapist, Cassie is permanently silenced like most victims of rape, representing a clear depiction of rape culture. Yet my relationship to *PYW* is different than *American Mary. PYW* disappointed me most out of the three films examined in this chapter. It is a film which represents grief and revenge, however, I read the narrative as misrepresenting rape as something that is undefeatable, where the road to healing is unpaved and never ventured on. As a viewer, I longed for something

more from (and for) Cassie. I desired to see her break free from her self-imposed prison and to succeed in what she was trying to achieve. And yet, that moment never arrives. Friendless and uninspired at her parttime job, Cassie is a character who exhibits no joy. Her only wish is to find justice for Nina. Mary is focused on financial success and avenging her *own* rape, unlike Cassie. As the viewer, the absence of Nina's character makes Cassie and her actions very frustrating. If Nina was physically present in the film and she could demonstrate her own agency, I imagine my feelings toward Cassie's character would change; for Nina and Cassie to pursue revenge for Nina's rape together (and not just Cassie), it would benefit the film's narrative and strengthen Cassie's character.

I read Cassie's relationship with Ryan Cooper (Bo Burnham), an old friend from school, as a glimmer of hope for Cassie. The viewer witnesses a small, sweet moment between Ryan and Cassie, as they lip sync in a drugstore while dancing through the aisles, giving the illusion that Cassie is finally learning to enjoy life again. However, the relationship ends once Cassie learns that Ryan was present during Nina's rape, leaving Cassie (and this viewer) incredibly disappointed. And the disappointment only continues. Cassie's revenge against Madison and Mrs. Walker is also disappointing. These are components of *PYW*'s narrative that Ayesha Siddiqi and Vicky Osterweil disapprove of, claiming: "the film allows only two acts of retribution, both against women" (p. 16). These brutal and cruel psychological acts of revenge are a further disappointment to viewers, as is Cassie's final act of revenge, which ends with her own death. "In other words," according to Osterweil, "there is nothing here but a beautiful young white woman nobly suffering through disappointment after disappointment chastising dozens of men to no avail, humiliating other women, and finally calling the cops" (p. 16).

Analysis Chapter Two: Universities, Court Proceedings, and Victim-Blaming, Oh My!

Introduction

You walk into class, sit down, and situate yourself before hearing the classroom door open behind you. You glance back and watch as your rapist enters the room. Experiencing a sudden burst of anxiety, fear, and panic, you quickly gather your things before rushing out of the room, as your rapist calmly waits for class to begin. Perhaps you find yourself in a courtroom, retelling the story of your rape, as the men who cheered on your rapists' stare blankly at you. The lawyer for the defense tries to poke holes in your account in an effort to use your words against you. This trial is no longer about serving justice to your rapists but rather becomes a space where you are forced to defend your character and your truth. Or instead, you are floating in a lake watching helplessly as your sister swims away from you, furious because you just admitted your brother-in-law, her husband, raped you, a terrible incident which she blames you for. Or alternatively you are running barefoot through the desert, as three men chase after you. One is your rapist, another is a man who watched your attack, and the third is your lover. You reach a cliff with no options but to turn and face them as they surround you. Your lover reaches out to you signaling a gesture of surrender, but as you step towards him, he pushes you off the cliff to your presumed death. These are scenes taken from the four films I analyze in this chapter: *M.F.A.* (2017), *The Accused* (1988), *Violation* (2020), and *Revenge* (2017). I read these films as offering critiques of rape culture, although they use different strategies to engage in this critique. *M.F.A*. targets harmful university campus culture, where cases of rape are high, but students are repeatedly subjected to a lack of institutional support or advocacy. *The Accused* focuses on rape cases that make it to trial, highlighting the injustices of the criminal justice system and the rampant victim-blaming that can permeate a courtroom. *Violation* incorporates discussions of

consent and victim blaming within complicated and fraught familial relationships, while *Revenge* offers a more fantastical approach to consent, isolation, and violent revenge. As I did in the previous chapter, below I offer short summaries of each film, followed by an analysis that is divided into three sections: 1) (un)complicated consent, 2) the depiction of rape, and 3) collective trauma.

Film Summaries

M.F.A. (Leite, 2017) is an independent film that follows Noelle (Francesca Eastwood), a Master of Fine Arts student who is raped by her classmate Luke (Peter Vack) at a party. Feeling defeated after receiving no support from her university, Noelle confronts Luke in his home. It is here that Noelle accidently kills Luke by pushing him over his staircase banister where he falls to his death (a classic trope that is often seen on television). This launches Noelle's killing spree, in which she murders three more rapists and injuries a fifth, none of whom have faced any social or legal consequences for raping women. Enacting this violent revenge brings more meaning to Noelle's art and creative process, which is narratively significant. Prior to her rape, Noelle is presented as one of the weakest artists in her class. However, by connecting to her rage and enacting violence, Noelle's art becomes more profound, illustrating how a woman's rage is provocative, powerful and, in the context of this film, artistic. Noelle's spree of killing rapists ends when she is arrested for murder at her graduation.

The Accused (Kaplan, 1988) is based on a true story that took place in 1983. The film is about Sarah (Jodie Foster), a 21-year-old woman who is gang raped in a bar by three men after a night of drinking. Though the physical evidence of the attack is staggering, Sarah's rapists have their charges of rape reduced to reckless endangerment as Sarah's character is brought into question. Sarah's lawyer, Kathryn Murphy (Kelly McGillis), seeks redemption by bringing three

other men who encouraged the rape to trial, where she wins. The role of Sarah is considered significant in Foster's transition from child actor to serious adult actress; her performance won her an Oscar (Chilton, 2021). Receiving an Oscar demonstrates the impact this film and Foster's performance had in Hollywood, as one of the first films to "directly address rape… (and made the) controversial decision to not gloss over it" (Schuldt, 2024, p. 7).

The film, *Violation* (Sims-Fewer & Mancinelli, 2020) is about Miriam (Madeleine Sims-Fewer), a woman on the brink of divorce who visits her sister Greta (Anna Maguire) and her brother-in-law Dylan (Jesse LaVercombe) at their cabin. A film which jumps from the present to the past, the narrative follows the events before, during, and after a camping trip where Dylan rapes Miriam while she is asleep. Watching her own relationship with her husband Caleb (Obi Abili) fail, Miriam decides to enact revenge against Dylan, and meets him at the cabin under the pretense that they will sleep together. However, after tricking Dylan into stripping until he is completely nude, Miriam ties him to a chair and hits him over the head. A struggle ensues when Dylan regains consciousness, but Miriam overpowers him and kills him. When Miriam tells Greta that Dylan raped her, Greta refuses to believe her and instead blames Miriam for flirting. Out of anger and spite, Miriam takes Dylan's ashes and pours them into a tub of homemade ice cream Greta has made for a family gathering she is hosting. The film ends with Miriam watching Greta and all the other attendees happily eating the ice cream.

Finally, *Revenge* (Fargeat, 2017) follows Jen (Matilda Lutz) who accompanies her married boyfriend Richard (Kevin Janssens) to a remote house in the desert for a vacation. Their trip is interrupted when Richard's two hunting friends unexpectedly appear at the house. The couple host the two men, and they drink, eat, and dance together, enjoying each other's company. However, when Richard leaves for a short while the following day, Stanley (Vincent

Colombe) rapes Jen in her bedroom. After returning home and discovering what took place, Richard attempts to pay Jen as compensation for Stanley's attack. When Jen refuses Richard's offer and threatens to call his wife to disclose their relationship, Richard strikes Jen before chasing her through the desert when she attempts to run away. The three men chase Jen to the edge of a cliff, where Richard soon pushes her over the side. To his surprise, Jen survives her fall commencing the grueling and gory hunt where Jen attempts to kills them all.

(Un)Complicated Consent

All four films incorporate the concept of consent and demonstrate how the line between yes and no is ultimately manipulated by perpetrators. In *M.F.A.* the line of consent is blurred after Noelle is led to Luke's bedroom. After a short exchange of words, Luke and Noelle share a deep and passionate kiss, initiated by Luke. Up until this scene, we have been encouraged to see Noelle as desiring Luke, and there are no visible signs that might instruct the viewer to read Noelle is uncomfortable; rather Luke's gentle touches evoke a feeling of sweetness. This is short lived, as Luke's kisses quickly become more aggressive. "You're so f*cking sexy," Luke says as his grip on Noelle's face visibly tightens. This is the moment I notice a shift from consensual to nonconsensual sex. Though this is not the moment when Noelle says no, the heightened tension in actor Eastwood's body language indicates to me that we are meant to read the character as uncomfortable. This scene highlights how quickly an encounter can transition from consensual to nonconsensual, leaving little time for someone to react. Here, the escalation is so dramatic Noelle has no time to process what is happening. Even if the progression from gentle to aggressive was slower, the scene places Noelle at an incredible disadvantage. Luke not only physically overpowers her by throwing her onto his bed and pinning her down, but she is also not in a familiar place. She is in Luke's bedroom and in his house, which only further isolates her;

the violence she endures places her in a position where staying quiet and hoping it will be over quickly is a legitimate survival strategy.

I perceive the depiction of consent to be more complex in *Violation*. I read the feelings of intimacy and genuine attraction represented between Miriam and Dylan as more clearly defined in comparison to what we see in the scenes between Noelle and Luke, who appear to be newly acquainted through their drawing class. Miriam and Dylan's attraction is illustrated most strongly in the scene prior to Miriam's rape, where she and Dylan are sitting alone by a fire after both Caleb and Greta have gone to bed. The camera is focused closely on Dylan, who watches Miriam as she looks up at the stars. This intensity continues throughout their conversation, depicting several moments I consider to be portrayals of flirtation: Miriam sharing her dreams and complaining about her poor sex life with Caleb ("we haven't had sex in almost a year"): and their body language: they lean on one another, swaying slightly from side to side as they laugh, and Miriam touches Dylan's face in a joking manner that also seems intentional. At one point when their eyes meet, Miriam even kisses Dylan before realizing what she is doing and pulls away, quickly apologizing: "I do really selfish things – I kiss my sister's husband." The two of them continue to laugh drunkenly and appear to move on from the kiss. By incorporating this scene prior to the assault, the film creates a purposefully complex dynamic between Miriam and Dylan. The decision to have Miriam kiss Dylan may situate Miriam negatively in the minds of some viewers. Miriam's initiation of the kiss might lead to her actions being perceived as blamable for the rape to come. However, this does not erase Dylan's actions in the next scene, where the dialogue clearly has Miriam saying "don't" and "stop" as Dylan is raping her. What *Violation* appears to center is the fact that regardless of Miriam's actions prior to her rape, she *is* raped by Dylan; her prior actions do not mitigate her assault.

For Sarah in *The Accused,* the situation is different and begins in a crowded bar where she is shown openly flirting with different men. These men include Danny (Woody Brown), a man at the bar who buys Sarah and her friend a drink, and Bob (Steve Antin), a young college student with whom she shares a smile as he passes her table: "He's cute – I should take him home and f*ck him," Sarah remarks, before she, Danny, and Bob eventually make their way into the game room, where they play pinball together. Even through her drunkenness, Sarah clearly sets boundaries with both men. When Bob gropes her by the pinball machine, Sarah quickly pushes his hand away and states: "Knock it off." When Danny repeatedly kisses Sarah after she invites him to dance, she again reestablishes her boundaries by saying: "I've got to go, I work tomorrow," and "I'm too drunk"; both statements are deliberately ignored. These interactions are representative of how women's kindness and flirtation can be misconstrued as sexual invitations or genuine romantic interest. Peggy Orenstein's (2020) research on boys and sex uncovers how, "some guys Bedera [Orenstein's assistant] talk to believe smiling indicates a girl wants to have sex: it might, though people smile for all sorts of reasons, including discomfort and appeasement" (p. 172). Even "standing close. Dancing. Touching someone's arm during conversation" (p. 172), are actions that are read by some of the young men in Orenstein's research project, as being potential sexual "invitations." Overall, what the boys and men in her research took as sexual "invitations" were incredibly broad and inconsistent; even insignificant details like an emoji, or how a girl is dressed were read as indications of interest in having sex, when in fact: "The only thing they all have in common is that the guy in question reads them as evidence" (p. 172). Each perpetrator portrayed in the films examined in this chapter, replicate this tactic; they each assume the protagonist has "invited" them to have sex, and then disregard their victim's blatant verbal and physical cues that they do *not* want to have sex.

The dynamic between Stanley and Jen in *Revenge* similarly affirms the social relationships found in Orenstein's research. In the scene before Jen's rape, Stanley is seen standing in the doorway of Jen's bedroom watching her secretly as she dresses after a shower. Jen is surprised and slightly confused when she notices Stanley in the doorway, but Stanley enters the room anyway, lending Jen a throwaway apology: "Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." Stanley joins Jen, who is sitting on the bed wearing only a t-shirt and pink underwear: "Hey, this is a nice bedroom," Stanley says. Jen laughs in agreement; however her expression tells the viewer she feels uncomfortable. Their conversation quickly transitions to Stanley giving Jen his business card: "Call me," he says. Perhaps Stanley's proposition to Jen indicates his belief that Jen is a sex worker, or "paid girlfriend" to Richard; hence, her flirtatious nature the night before toward Stanley, leads him to believe Jen can be "bought." However, Jen politely declines his proposition. This is when Stanley's aggression begins to appear, as he repeatedly asks what Jen finds unattractive about him. The camera is centered on Jen's facial expressions which are easily readable as displaying her discomfort. "What is it you don't like about me?" When Jen says he is simply not her type, Stanley asks her again, "Why am I not your type?" Jen responds nervously: "You're too small, I like taller guys that's all." According to Gorman, et. al (2019), because of the problematic myth that associates men's height as an indication of their masculinity, Jen's comment on Stanley's height perhaps implies to Stanley, she is suggesting he is not man enough for her.

The tension in the scene escalates further when Jen attempts to leave the room. Stanley corners her near a window, justifying his aggressive advances by claiming Jen's flirtation was an invitation: "When we were dancing together last night everything was very clear…rubbing yourself against me turning me on, and now suddenly, I'm not your type? Yesterday you were

dying for it." Like the rape myths articulated by the men in Orenstein's research, this dialogue replicates the false narrative surrounding flirtation as consent. Stanley reads Jen's willingness to dance with him as an expression of explicit sexual interest. Once she rejects him, however, he suddenly changes tactic, insulting her intelligence. For example, Stanley refers her to as having a "tiny little oyster brain," and mocks Jen when she says she'll be too busy with work to see him, "so now you're a f*cking politician." I read this scene as demonstrating Jen's attempts to deescalate the situation because she feels threatened, an experience Kate Harding (2015) claims is not uncommon: women have grown accustomed to deescalating situations of harassment by walking away in order to avoid the threat of violence that often comes with defending oneself (p. 16).

It is sobering to realize that *The Accused,* a film released in 1988, accurately portrays the victim-blaming trope "she was asking for it" that is still commonly used 36 years later. This is best represented by Sarah herself: she wears a loose-fitting shirt without a bra, she is flirtatious, she touches Bob, dances closely with Danny, and is still not interested in having sex. Phillips (2021) argues the phrase "she was asking for it" is both ghastly and revolting (p. 6): a phrase that is usually "used when the attacker claims that the victim's clothing implied they wanted whatever assault – verbal or physical…it takes the humanistic quality and universal rights of the ability to consent out of the picture, claiming that fabric instead, sent the victim's true message. No means no" (p. 6). Harding (2015) echoes Phillips argument: "By the time we finish high school, our brains are already filled with such rape-proofing basics as the appropriate skirt length for discouraging violent attacks (long)" (p. 17). Alcohol consumption is no different: "the number of alcohol units that can be consumed before one is thought to have invited sexual

assault (one, tops)" (p. 17). As the film later demonstrates, Danny, Bob, along with other men at the bar believe that Sarah's drunkenness and flirtation justify their use and abuse of her.

The dynamic between Luke and Noelle in *M.F.A.* portrays victim-blaming in a different way. Instead of the classically stereotypical "signs" depicted above (clothing, alcohol consumption, etc.), Luke's self-absorbed nature clouds his judgment, and he reads Noelle's interest as indicative of her desire to have sex with him. I consider the film's invitation for us to observe Noelle glancing at Luke during class and her expression of admiration during their conversation at his party as signaling Noelle's interest. Luke's actions following the attack on Noelle represent a display of selfishness and sexual entitlement: "That was so f*cking good…here, let me get you a towel," he says to her. This dialogue depicts Luke's utter obliviousness to the trauma he has just inflicted on Noelle. I read Luke's ease in joining the party again and touching Noelle's arm to guide her back down the stairs and out his front door, as behavior indicating that this is not the first time Luke has done this, nor will it be last.

We see Luke's narcissism demonstrated again when Noelle accuses him of rape; he asks, incredulous: "You want me to apologize for f*cking you?" Noelle responds, "That's not what happened – you raped me." Letting out an exaggerated laugh, Luke says, "Oh that's f*cking rich, stop being so f*cking sensitive." Luke gaslights Noelle as his manipulative tactic for dismissing her accusation; a common tactic according to (Bendt, 2020) that can be incredibly harmful: Phrases like, "'you're overreacting,' and 'you're crazy' are all phrases that are used in an attempt to make someone severely doubt their ability to perceive" (p. 6). This tactic, however, does not deceive Noelle. In fact, I feel Noelle is encouraged by his ignorance. "Stop acting crazy!" Luke yells at Noelle, after she follows him upstairs. Noelle responds, "I'm not crazy!" and pushes Luke backward, where he falls over the staircase banister to his death. Perhaps we are invited to

perceive Noelle pushing Luke over the banister (by accident) as, in a sense, calling his bluff; Luke accuses Noelle of "acting crazy" by being unwavering in her belief that she deserves an apology from him for raping her; so, in turn, Luke is punished (by death) when Noelle pushes him over the banister screaming, "I'm not crazy!" This demonstrates to me; the film's almost cheeky method of portraying exactly how "crazy" Noelle can be.

The Depiction of Rape

Beginning with *The Accused,* the most difficult element of the film for me is the graphic rape scene. According to Budowski (2018), "the brutal 3-minute rape scene at the end of the film is nearly impossible to stomach and it isn't even narrated by Sarah, but by a male witness of the event…" (p. 9). Unlike Miriam, Jen, or Noelle, Sarah is surrounded by bystanders while she is raped, none of whom intervene. The camera shows Sarah's eyes looking at the large group of men standing around her watching, none of whom step in to help; several of them are cheering her attackers on, yelling: "Hold her down, make her moan," "One two three four, poke that p*ssy till it's sore." The sound of these men cheering only adds to the scene's disturbing nature. The viewer is shown the pinball machine moving violently that Sarah is being held down on, indicating the aggressiveness of the attack, and Sarah's physical condition is upsetting to witness: her shirt is ripped as soon as the attack begins, exposing her chest which is grabbed at and kissed, her arms are held down by a man who later rapes her, and her mouth is slightly bloodied and bruised from men grabbing and biting her face. The fact that Sarah is raped by three men consecutively, only intensifies the scene. The camera focuses on each rapist's face, all of which are sweaty, and display expressions of pleasure, aggression, and climax. Because Sarah bites the hand of her last rapist, allowing her a chance to escape, the viewer can only imagine how many more men would have raped Sarah if she had been unable to run away. The scene

evokes feelings of chaos, fear, and disgust. It is an incredibly violent portrayal of gang rape that creates a disorienting feeling for me as the viewer. This film is also based on a true story that took place not long before the film was made, which adds to the horror of watching the visual representation of such a graphic violent attack.

In contrast, Noelle's attack takes place inside Luke's bedroom. There are no witnesses and no nudity aside from the exposure of Noelle's thong, which Luke reveals amidst their struggle as he throws up her dress. Noelle is on her stomach. Luke's topless body is positioned behind her, and the camera is focused on Noelle's facial expressions that demonstrate her pain. Every part of Noelle's body is resisting Luke's attack. "You're so f*cking tight," Luke says, which I read as both an explicit textual nod to her body's resistance and a positioning of the viewer to understand that this is not an arousing situation for Noelle. What commonly occurs during arousal is the release of natural lubrication alongside an expanding and lengthening of the vagina; in situations of rape, these physical signs are absent. Although natural lubrication is involuntary—it may not occur during consensual sex, and may occur in situations that are nonconsensual[3]—in the context of *M.F.A.*, I read Luke's comment as a method for communicating to the viewer that Noelle's body is being violated. The scene lasts only a few (long) minutes, yet Noelle's physical appearance shifts drastically during that time: her makeup is smeared, her eyes are barely open, her hair sticks to her forehead from sweat, and she breathes heavily through her open mouth. A small detail I appreciated was the filmmaker's decision to fade the music over the course of the rape, which I read as representative to the fading of Noelle's fight. She resigns herself to what is happening and simply waits for it to be over,

[3] See Suschinsky & Lalumiére (2011) and Manne (2018) for a more expansive analysis and explanation to situations of natural lubrication during non-consensual intercourse.

demonstrating a scenario that is relatable in these circumstances. There is a feeling of reluctance and submission in the moments of being overpowered, and I position my own experience as evidence to support this claim. Noelle's slow movements on the bed and lethargic descent back down the stairs perpetuate this loss of adrenaline and the onset of exhaustion experienced after enduring physical, emotional, and psychological trauma.

Violation and *Revenge*, also approach their portrayals of rape in different ways. *Violation*, does not show the rape but rather only close up shots: Miriam's eyes, first closed and then again open with a flash of horror and recognition as she understands what is happening, a fly that lingers on Miriam's finger, Dylan's hand gripping her bare waist, Miriam's neck and her ear with Dylan's mouth leaning in whispering, "I've wanted you for years." I appreciate this method of depiction, as it eliminates the viewer's need to watch a graphic portrayal of rape that were present in the films described above. *Violation* highlights a component in rape that is not often featured in film: rape by someone trusted, where aggression and violence are absent. Instead, the film focuses on the time during the assault where all the survivor can do is concentrate on their surroundings, wait for it to be over, and endure the shock of what is happening. I read shock as something experienced by all four victims in these films; however, Miriam's shock is perhaps the most complex. She is raped by her sister's husband, someone with whom she shares a relationship, and the scene is complicated by how she perceives their time spent together by the fire, prior to the rape. During the rape, Miriam stares at a fly on her finger, which stays in place for multiple (what feels like) minutes, indicating to me that Miriam is not moving in the slightest. I read this scene as illustrating time slowing down for Miriam, where seconds feel like minutes. The common saying "fight or flight response" is misrepresentative of how all humans react to

dangerous situations. We freeze in moments like these.[4] As an independent film, the scene's focus on these details (the fly, Miriam's finger, her ear as Dylan whispers to her, etc.) may also be an aesthetic choice of the director.

Revenge (like *The Accused)* focuses its rape scene on the bystander. Dimitri (Guillaume Bouchéde), Richard's other hunting friend who arrived with Stanley, enters the bedroom casually eating chips as Stanley has Jen cornered against the glass window, unbuckling his pants: "Can't you see we're busy? If you want some, come in, otherwise get lost." With tears streaming down Jen's face, it is clear to the viewer and to Dimitri that Jen is in trouble. Pleading with her eyes, Dimitri stands there for a moment, appearing as if he is contemplating Stanley's suggestion or the impulse to help Jen, however he decides to do neither and instead shuts the door. The film adds an interesting yet slightly grotesque close shot of Dimitri slowly crushing a chocolate bar between his teeth before shutting the door, which I read as representing Jen's predicament; she is a sweet, delicious treat, which is about to be devoured, crushed, and consumed.

The audience hears Jen's screams for only a moment as the camera follows Dimitri's face, which wears an expression that is difficult to read. Could it be guilt? Could it be familiarity, where Jen is not the first woman Stanley has done this to? Or is Dimitri simply unfazed? Passing the TV, he turns it on, shifting the attention of the viewer to the sound of the TV, which drowns out Jen's screams. The camera follows Dimitri as he makes his way out to the pool, which faces the window Jen is pinned up against. The viewer watches as Dimitri dives into the pool and begins to swim and is shown a glimpse of Jen in the window screaming. I appreciate the film's focus on Dimitri as the bystander, as it adds a sinister layer to the scene.

[4] See Manne (2018), for a more in-depth exploration and analysis of the fight, flight or freeze response.

This perspective creates a tension between the characters. Dimitri's inhumane ability to ignore Jen's screams demonstrates a level of desensitization that is disturbing but serves to illustrate how Jen is viewed by the men in this film. She (like Sarah) is nothing but a party favor. This is also demonstrated by Richard, who treats Jen like a toy; something to be used, enjoyed, then thrown out when it becomes unusable or damaged. "You drive me completely crazy," Richard breathes as Jen pushes herself into him. For Richard, Jen is a symbol of youth and power, but this changes when Richard feels Jen has been damaged. The "damage" to Jen in the context of this film is not intrinsic to her character, but rather is imposed upon her as both a victim of rape, in addition to her fierce persistence to maintain her dignity by refusing to accept Richard's insulting payment for her silence. Women like Jen, in the eyes of Richard, are not women who should be strong or put up a fight, they are to be easy and disposable, which Jen is not, despite how she may appear. As the viewer witnesses later in the film, she is virtually indestructible: Richard, Stanley, and Dimitri's attempts to kill her fail miserably. Comparing Jen's narrative to Cassie from *Promising Young Woman* (2020), discussed in the previous chapter, Jen is a symbol of women who will not be silenced, whereas Cassie (and her dead best friend Nina) is a direct depiction of women who *are* silenced.

Looking at these four films from a broader perspective, the genre of each film is key to understand at least some of the choices made in the construction of each story. *The Accused* is a legal drama, which centers on Sarah's attempt to win a rape case in court and to achieve legal justice. I read this narrative as focusing more on representing the violence against Sarah inflicted by the criminal justice system, than just the violence of rape. The rape scene as a whole, which includes constructing Sarah as a less than ideal victim, as well as the rape itself, are meant to situate the viewer within the complexities of rape laws in the United States during the 1980s,

where you can know for certain someone has committed rape, yet you could not be sure of conviction. In contrast, *M.F.A.*, *Revenge,* and *Violation* which are horror-thriller films about vigilante justice, situate rape scenes as a central part of the plot. In this context, without the rape there is no revenge, therefore no story.

Collective Trauma

A component I find highlighted in all four films is collective trauma. A useful concept here is one Mythili Rajiva (2014) labels "the horizon of violence," which refers to the connection girls and women inherently feel towards each other when faced with trauma from sexual violence. This horizon "shapes the experiences and actions of marginalized subjects to not only think 'it could have been me,' but 'it could be me at some point in my life,' and 'when will I be next?'" (p.151). This connection is built from the understanding that all women are at risk of experiencing sexual trauma. I position empathy as a large contributor to an individual's ability to experience collective trauma; without collective trauma there is no empathy and without empathy, the ability to experience collective trauma is almost impossible.

There are four different scenes in *M.F.A.* that I feel demonstrate this concept in action, with Noelle's decision to murder Lindsey's three rapists and her attempted murder of Skye's rapist, as the first example. After watching an online video which shows three college students raping Lindsey as she slips in and out of consciousness, Noelle decides to seek revenge on Lindsey's behalf. Noelle's compulsion to act and to protect a woman she has never met is represented as born from the trauma that ties them together. Noelle approaches Lindsey's rape as if it is her own, which ignites her motivation to seek justice against Lindsey's rapists who never faced any punishment. Lindsey's rape is Noelle's rape, and Noelle's rape is Skye's rape, which is

representative of Rajiva's concept that situates the rape of one woman is essentially the (potential) rape of all women (or any woman).

The second example I relate to Rajiva's concept, is Noelle's decision to disclose her rape to her counselor and share her fear that Luke could rape someone else: "I feel like he could do it again." I read Noelle's gesture towards the protection of other women as a demonstration of her understanding that rapists rape; if someone rapes an acquaintance once, they will very likely do it again. Because Noelle's fear is not taken seriously, this scene calls attention to the way universities mishandle instances of rape; this is similar to the scene in *PYW* (2020) discussed in chapter one, where Cassie confronts the Dean of her university for disregarding Nina's accusations of rape. Considering Noelle shares her fear prior to Luke's death, if Luke was held accountable for his actions, it is possible that Noelle would not have begun her murderous spree. Hence, this scene between Noelle and her counselor allows the viewer to consider the collective responsibility and structural reasons for rape.

Skye and Noelle's conversation the morning after Noelle's rape is my third example. Skye's immediate response to Noelle sharing her experience is: "It's okay. You're okay," which at first watch, I found disappointing. Yet as revealed later in the film, Skye herself is a victim of rape, which brings context to her response that evoked my empathy. Skye's decision to disclose her rape to her university only led to her being ridiculed and labeled a slut and a liar. She achieves nothing but humiliation and blame: "You aren't going to tell them. You told me and I believe you. It was one shitty night, don't let it ruin the rest of your life." With a better understanding of Skye's history, I read her response to Noelle as her desire to save Noelle from enduring more trauma, which I also link to Rajiva's concept. Although Skye's empathy for Noelle that is rooted in her own experience and knowledge of how brutal the backlash against

those who come forward as a rape victim can be, Skye inevitably reverts to regurgitating the normalized response victims of rape have been conditioned to give: it is simply easier to stay silent. In contrast, I could also read Skye's response as expressing to Noelle that she is okay because she survived and that is enough; she should not want or expect more.

My fourth example is illustrated in Noelle's first visit to the V-day Balboa, a female student support group that discusses methods for improving and protecting the female student university experience on campus. During the meeting, the girls engage in a discussion of new protocols that have been introduced to increase the safety and protection of female students on campus, which include offering nail polish that will change color when dipped into a drugged beverage. "Or guys could just stop drugging and raping girls, so we don't need color-changing nail polish," Noelle interjects, which initiates a somewhat heated debate among group members about methods for ending rape on campus. Watching this group of girls enthusiastic reception of color-changing nail polish as a method for avoiding rape, after watching Noelle's brutal rape (that no nail polish would have helped), it was easy for me, as a viewer, to side with Noelle. Color-changing nail polish seems trivial, mainly due to the reality that if Noelle had been wearing color-changing nail polish it would not have prevented her rape. "What if we aren't prepared? What if we wear high heels and we didn't learn taekwondo?" Noelle asks, which no one in the group can answer. Without color-changing nail polish or the ability to physically defend oneself, is rape inevitable?

There are numerous methods women can and do follow, both subconsciously and consciously, to prevent the risk of rape that are in continual rotation within personal conversations, the media, films, and television. The ones I am familiar with advise women to avoid empty or dark parking lots, walking alone at night, and running if your instinct tells you to,

among many others. However, these safety lists also present as a constant reminder that to maintain women's safety, a woman's heightened sense of awareness to the dangers that can befall her at any moment, is required. Noelle's discussion with her peers on the subject of color-changing nail polish perpetuates this burden. Noelle's voice articulates "the horizon of violence" by replicating the sentiment that women's trauma is unavoidable. There is an unbreakable bond linking women together whether they choose to recognize it or not, as demonstrated by the girls in this meeting who push back against Noelle's questions: "Until that day comes (where men stop raping women) I think we need to be prepared," responds Jenna the president of V-day Balboa. In this scene, Noelle advocates for systematic, not cosmetic, change. She, and through the film, dares to ask that the same attention and effort required for creating and producing color-changing nail polish be instead focused on increasing sex education and teaching young men the importance of consent; which, as we see in the examples of the film, is unlikely to happen.

Violation offers a display of ignorance, portrayed in the scene where Greta blames Miriam after Miriam tells her that she was raped by Dylan the night before: "Last night by the fire, at some point I fell asleep and when I woke up…I didn't know what was happening." Greta responds, "What did you do?", a reaction clearly rooted in a victim blaming attitude; Greta cannot fathom the reality that her husband could have done this, so instead blames her sister. It is worth noting the complexity of this interaction, however. Unlike any other film I analyze in this project, this film focuses on the fraught relationship between two sisters. As the viewer, I believe we are meant to understand Greta and Miriam's reactions to each other as not displays of simply flippant remarks, but are reactions that are deeply rooted in familial relations and lived traumas. The conversation between the two sisters continues to escalate, as Miriam begins to plead with Greta to believe her: "He wouldn't listen to me Greta, he wouldn't listen." "Stop," Greta says, "I

knew I couldn't trust you. Whatever happened, it wasn't this, you f*cked up and you can't even own up to it. It's pathetic and f*cking disgusting." I read Greta's response as implying Miriam's past behavior has caused Greta's distrust. Although this is never explicitly stated or shown in the film, this exchange between the sisters illustrates Greta's reaction as being influenced by the history of their relationship.

For *The Accused*, I consider Sarah's ill-characterization in court and her lawyer, Kathryn Murphy's decision to reduce the charges against Sarah's rapists, Danny, Bob, and Kurt from rape to reckless endangerment, as the two most notable components demonstrative of the trauma that can be experienced when you are a rape victim on trial: "Three men accused of raping a young woman at a local bar pleaded guilty today to a reduced charge of reckless endangerment." This decision is made during a misogyny-fueled meeting between Kathryn and the three lawyers who represent Danny, Bob, and Kurt, where Kathryn is ultimately bullied into accepting their plea bargains due to Sarah's "damaged character." "What would you say to sexual abuse one [a lesser charge and shorter prison sentence]?" asks one lawyer. "I'd say rape one," Kathryn responds. "Kathryn cut the crap… She (Sarah) walked into a bar got loaded and stoned and did everything but yank their dicks. No jury will buy her." This scene highlights what Ralston (2021) refers to as the "bad girl stigma" (p. 51): a product of the Madonna-Whore Complex, which is rooted in a sexual double standard where men's sexuality is normalized, and women's is oppressed (p. 51-53). In addition, within this dyad, women can only be a Madonna (a virgin) or a whore, and all that these two positions entail. To be a Madonna is to be pure, submissive, undisruptive, etc. and to be a whore is to be sexually active, unruly and outspoken (Ralston, 2021).

Though Ralston's discussion of the bad girl stigma focuses on sex work, it is a stigma according to Peterson (1996, in Ralston), that "can be used against any particular woman (or

groups of women) who serves to model or challenge male entitlement" (p. 51). In this context, Sarah falls perfectly into the category of woman who is not only victimized by her three rapists but is again victimized by the justice system: "Whore stigma and slut-shaming…legitimize violence against some women by contrasting women on the basis of their sexual status and leads to the control of all women" (p. 51). Because Sarah is both drunk and high at the time of her attack, in addition to her flirtatious behavior, she is represented as a woman who is "un-rapeable." KelleyAnne Malinen positions "un-rapeable" women as residing within racialized demographics or poor women who "have historically had their experiences discounted because of a discourse of "legitimate and illegitimate victims"" (in Ralston 2021, p. 63). In the minds of the lawyers, because she is poor, not well-spoken (nor highly educated), and partakes in drugs and alcohol, she therefore would not make for a strong witness for the jury. "The testimony of her lover, Larry, who told you what kind of woman she is…and of the bartender Jesse, who told you that she was so drunk she could barely stand," are arguments offered by the prosecution as to why Sarah does not make a good witness or victim. Though the film does not show Larry testifying, the viewer can assume Larry depicts Sarah as someone who is promiscuous, unreliable, or any other characteristic that would blame her for her own rape, or at the very least, damage her credibility.

Revenge, by contrast, is shot in a desert where Jen is the only woman and is surrounded by three men who want her dead, emphasizing the relationship between the viewer and Jen. Located somewhere that is unknown to the viewer, the decision to place *Revenge* in a desert can be analyzed in several ways. The desert can represent the harsh reality that women can be raped anywhere, and that women are essentially never safe. Or the viewer could read Jen's rape as an isolated incident, where it can be positioned as a one-woman problem. Lastly, is the desert a

metaphorical representation of emotional isolation that many women experience after being assaulted? Where feelings of loneliness are overwhelming? Through this perspective Jen's fight for survival is representative of the internal fight against our own inner shame and blame. Compared to the three other films, Jen's isolation uses Rajiva's concept in a different way; as the viewer, we enter into relationships with these characters and are invited to share their trauma; Jen's narrative is no different. I read Jen's isolation as allowing the viewer to experience a deeper bond with her character, for there is no one else (literally) in the film for her to connect with.

Conclusion

The Accused, *M.F.A., Revenge,* and *Violation* engage with important aspects of rape culture, portrayals of collective trauma, and the complexities of consent. Noelle, Jen, and Miriam all offer familiar representations of rape victims in rape and revenge narratives, with their one goal of eradicating their rapists. This places Sarah as a bit of an outlier from the other protagonists; she is a victim who falls victim not only to the three men who rape her but to the justice system as well. When comparing the films to each other, *M.F.A.* and *Violation*'s depictions of rape are impactful because they incorporate the complexities of rapists being someone known to survivors, which is most often the case and one that I personally relate to. According to RAINN (2023) (Rape Abuse and Incest National Network), rape is 93% more likely to be committed by individuals known to the victim, while only 7% of rapes are perpetrated by strangers. This statistic is interesting considering the survivors represented in *The Accused,* and *Ms. 45*, are raped by strangers. With such a drastically high percent margin that represent real victims of rape as knowing their rapists, it is interesting for rape and revenge narratives to replicate the opposite.

Simons (2018), a victim of rape by a stranger, has a theory as to why "stranger in an alleyway" is often how rape is depicted in film, TV shows and literature: "'Stranger in an alleyway' fits the collective cultural nightmare, the stereotypical rape we see in movies, TV shows, crime novels: always in the dark, by faceless strangers far away from home. It is the easiest narrative to believe about rape – because it is the furthest removed from most of our day-to-day lives" (p. 7). In addition, I perceive the association of rape with the imagery of an unsuspecting woman dragged kicking and screaming into an alleyway, when depicted on screen, offers the viewer a stronger feeling of catharsis to witness the rapist later be brutally murdered. In essence, more violence can be considered by some, more entertaining, the more intense the rape, the greater the revenge. Simons (2018) also adds the believability that comes along with being raped by a stranger; it is often considered an undeniable crime: "The stories many people find hardest to believe are much more common than mine…my friends have been raped by dates that paid for dinner beforehand; in their own beds on top of soft Ikea sheets…we don't easily believe these stories" (p. 7-9). Without graphic physical injuries and a violent perpetrator, rape allegations become a game of "he said, she said."

Noting the difference between genres is important, as the films analyzed in this chapter do not all reside within the same genre. For a film like *The Accused*, which is not within the rape-revenge genre, distinguishing the context of the rape is significant. As a courtroom drama, the rape is positioned as a catalyst to Sarah's court case, in comparison to *M.F.A.*, *Violation*, and *Revenge*, where the rape is the catalyst to Noelle, Miriam and Jen's violent revenge.

The context of production is also important, *The Accused* was asking audiences to consider life as a rape victim during the 1980s in the United States, a time long before the #MeToo movement and before discourses of consent were even considered in the legal process.

Understanding this, the context of that film is different than *M.F.A.*, *Violation*, and *Revenge* which were released in the 2000s. *The Accused* highlights how the legal system allowed for the normalization of the idea that women who are drunk, dress provocatively and have sex, are asking for sexual violence. In contrast, the #MeToo movement is part of the context in which *M.F.A.*, *Violation*, and *Revenge* were produced, positioning them as part of the dialogue within our current political reality, one where there is visibility of sexual violence, in addition to social media discourses of solidarity (#Ibelieveher, for example). However, to claim today's society has overcome the issues which were prevalent in the 1980s would be false.

Despite the progressive changes in the United States that have been made (visibility of consent rules, higher awareness to the reality of rape culture, etc.), North (2019) notes there has been no downturn in sexual violence in the US, nor an upturn in prosecution: "While the number of reported crimes increased, the number of crimes actually cleared by police did not. That points to something survivors and their advocates have long known – that reporting a crime to police doesn't necessarily mean justice will be served" (p. 4). Criminal court cases that handle sexual violence are often unsuccessful. This is especially true for crimes of sexual violence between people who are acquainted and rely heavily on "she said he said" accounts, a term which Leotta (2018) claims is a myth: "The myth is that allegations of rape and sexual assault are often simply a matter of 'he said, she said'; that when a woman accuses a man of a sexual assault and the man denies it, there is no way to discern the truth and the justice system is impotent" (p. 1). However, as Leotta further argues, to claim a rape case is hard to prove because it relies on "he said, she said" testimony, is essentially saying women lie (p. 12) (which is also another rape myth). Leotta continues, stating that the "he said, she said" myth originated centuries ago: "rape prosecutions could not be brought unless every material element of the victim's story was corroborated by

another witness or evidence. Because sexual assaults don't usually happen in crowded pubs, this rule effectively barred many cases" (p. 2). This scenario is demonstrated in *M.F.A.*, *Violation*, and *Revenge*, where Noelle, Miriam and Jen are all raped in private spaces; with no witnesses to corroborate their claims.

All of the films discussed in this chapter do portray the complexities of consent and how quickly situations can move from consensual and non-consensual, and reestablishes how women are under constant scrutiny for how they present themselves in the world, according to Chemaly (2018). Women must be approachable yet are at risk for severe punishment if they are "too" friendly and suggestive, which Sarah, Jen, Miriam and Noelle are representations of.

Conclusion

As this project comes to a close, I reflect on my research, film analysis, and the writing process as a whole. The rape and revenge narrative in film has been a topic of interest for me throughout my academic journey, and I am thankful for my previous experience, as it laid the groundwork for this project to grow and expand to its full potential. However, my decision to continue my previous research did not come without its challenges. I consider myself to be a late bloomer in terms of finalizing my thesis topic. My graduate classes challenged my original idea (as they should), by supplying me with a feeling of limitless possibility; I had the power to tackle almost any research topic I desired in some capacity. This ultimately led to my decision to pursue an entirely different research topic prior to settling on rape and revenge in film. After I submitted an almost complete full draft of my proposal, I decided to abandon that project and instead begin again and follow in the footsteps of my original research.

As a rape victim, I approached this research simply as someone who valued the catharsis I felt when watching revengeful women kill their rapists. My undergraduate work initiated a

process of healing that came as a surprise, and this healing continued into my current research. Watching and critiquing these films allowed me to view the topic of rape and revenge through an analytical lens, where my emotional attachment to my own experiences was able to be less present. I consider this project to be an exploration of how seven films display rape and revenge, and how (in my opinion), they attempt to situate these topics more progressively than other rape and revenge films. There is potential for rape and revenge films to be a sub-genre of film that is powerful; however, this is only attainable when female agency is prioritized and exploitative depictions of rape are removed. Films like *I Spit on Your Grave* (Zarchi, 1978 & the remake in 2010), have largely contributed to this sub-genre being labeled exploitative, horrific and almost unwatchable, as it positions the main character Jennifer (Camille Keaton) to endure a long brutal rape that lasts over 20 minutes. Because of this, it is understandable why audiences have found this type of narrative unenjoyable.

In contrast, in the films explored in my thesis—*Ms. 45* (1981), *Promising Young Woman* (2020), *American Mary* (2012), *M.F.A.* (2017), *The Accused* (1987), *Violation* (2020), and *Revenge* (2017)—offer the viewer more important messaging: their narratives attempt to critique rape culture, grapple with the role of consent, (mostly) provide compelling displays of female agency and their depictions of rape are not exploitative.

That said, I found flaws in each film. But whether their flaws impacted the plot narratively or in the construction of the main characters themselves, flaws are expected. In Chapter One, "the protagonist dies in the end", I analyzed *Ms. 45* (1981), *Promising Young Woman* (2020), and *American Mary* (2012), and confronted what I considered to be a major narrative flaw: the decision to kill the protagonist. I felt this decision acted as a form of punishment for each of these agentic, female characters. In *American Mary* and *Ms. 45,* this flaw

was redeemed through Mary and Thana's revenge. As a viewer, I found Mary's underground surgical practice and Thana's transformation from victim to vigilante, satisfying. These characters are written as undeniable forces, who exhibit moments of vulnerability and experience the effects of their trauma, yet do not crumble beneath its weight. However, *Promising Young Woman* left me feeling disappointed. Cassie's death I consider damaging because it imagines rape as undefeatable, something impossible to move past. Her suicide situates death as her method for achieving justice for her best friend Nina, however it only results in two dead women.

In Chapter Two, "universities, court proceedings, and victim-blaming, oh my!", I examined portrayals of consent, depictions of rape and of collective trauma in *M.F.A.* (2017), *The Accused* (1988), *Violation* (2020), and *Revenge* (2017). These films demonstrated how flirtation and women's sexual expression can be exploited, abused, and transformed into ammunition to attack and blame rape victims. While this proved to be a complex subject to navigate as a viewer, I was encouraged to find each film successfully portrayed rape as wrong, regardless of how each female character dressed or behaved beforehand. Whether it was Noelle (in *M.F.A.)* willingly following Luke upstairs to his bedroom, Sarah (in *The Accused)* drunkenly flirting with the men at the bar, Miriam (in *Violation*) kissing her brother-in-law, or Jen (in *Revenge*) dancing provocatively, the viewer is never invited to sympathize with the men who attack these women. They are undeniably portrayed just as they are: rapists.

A running theme I found represented in every film I analyzed, is the (unfortunately) accurate portrayal of rapists not being held accountable for their actions, and every protagonist choosing to seek revenge because of it. In *Ms. 45,* Thana's first rapist is never caught, in *PYW*, the rapist, Al Monroe is not held accountable by his university, the numerous predators in

American Mary, that are shown leading young, unconscious women into rooms to be assaulted are never punished, "They're fine, they're more than fine," Lindsey (from *M.F.A.* whose gang-rape was filmed by three college students) remarks about her rapists, Sarah's rapists in *The Accused* are not convicted, in *Violation,* Miriam's accusations against Dylan are not believed, and Jen in *Revenge,* is almost killed by her boyfriend to protect his friend (her rapist).

Rapists being given benefit of the doubt is another accurate portrayal of real-life situations.[5] For example, in *The Accused,* the future of Sarah's youngest rapist, Bob is prioritized over her rape: "He's a kid of 22. He's an A student. He's got a future." This scene can be compared to the case of Brock Turner, a Stanford University athlete who only received a 6-month prison sentence and probation after being found guilty of raping an unconscious woman behind a dumpster in 2015 (Levin, 2016, p. 1). According to Levin (2016), "the judge, Aaron Perksy, cited Turner's age and lack of criminal history as factors in his decision, saying, 'A prison sentence would have a severe impact on him…I think he will not be a danger to others'" (p. 10). In this case, Turner's future was prioritized while his victim's future was disregarded. A quote from Turner's father, demonstrates why young (white and wealthy) male rapists, like Turner, are rarely punished: "His (Turner's) life will never be the one that he dreamed about and worked so hard to achieve. That is a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action" (in Wootson, 2017, p. 11). This statement by Turner's father is deeply problematic: it not only positions rape as "20 minutes of action" but also completely neglects to consider the impact his son has on the woman he raped. Like the scene in *The Accused,* where defense lawyers argue Sarah's youngest rapist, Bob should be spared severe punishment to preserve his future, *PYW* offers another example that replicates a similar scenario; where the future of accused rapists are prioritized over

[5] See Manne (2018), for an exploration of the concept "himpathy," referring to the trope that good men do not rape.

the future of the victim: "What would you have me do?" Dean Walker asks Cassie, "Ruin a young man's life every time we get an accusation like this? I have to give him the benefit of the doubt." As these examples illustrate, rapists are often rewarded with leniency (especially if they are young, white, and wealthy men), leaving the victim without justice. The example of Turner and his father's response, also show how families and educational institutions not only collide against survivors, but teach and reiterate these values that reward rapists with leniency and blame the victim. For example, the use of the word "action" by Turner's father to describe rape, can illustrate how he as a parent, may have discussed sex and consent with his children.

An issue with the representation of revenge I found replicated in each film, was the simplification of the impact rape can have on someone, as most of the films situate each survivor as envisioning justice in the same way. Navigating the emotional, psychological, and physical response to rape is complex; not every victim desires revenge, and attaining justice can look different to each individual. As Dalwood (2023) states: "It's easy to imagine that, in the immediate wake of our victimization, survivors are hellbent on seeing our victimizers punished, and nothing else. But in point of actual fact, punishment and incarceration are small –almost negligible—aspects of what we're looking for" (p. 7). In addition, *Ms. 45, PYW, American Mary, M.F.A., Violation,* and *Revenge,* all portray extremely violent depictions of revenge, which is not a common response to rape. Achieving revenge or justice, according to Dalwood (2023), includes "justice as consequences, recognition, dignity, voice, prevention and connectedness" (p. 8). In Dalwood's perspective, justice can be achieved by feeling seen, heard, and experiencing support and community, which the films examined in this thesis do not portray.

A final question I feel it is important to ask is, who is the imagined or ideal viewer of these films? Contemplating the context of the films I have discussed in this project, I consider

the target audience to be those who have either first or second-hand experience with rape. However, I also understand the graphic portrayals of rape each film includes could also deter this demographic. While it is anecdotal, I had an interesting discussion about my thesis topic with my boss, where she expressed her own feelings of catharsis when watching revengeful women release their rage; a fantasy she wished for herself. The depiction of strong women, female anger (and violence) was empowering to her. Perhaps these films target those who feel their own anger is suppressed. From my perspective, all these films have flaws (some more than others), yet there are components from each that could attract those who are aware of the prevalence of rape culture, and for whom they could offer a feeling of catharsis, big or small.

The two limitations I found to be most prominent in this project are as follows:

1) The absence of diverse representation.
2) A narrow data set of films.

In relation to the first limitation, the dominant presence of white women at the center of the narrative has been proven to be a consistent pattern in rape and revenge films. Each protagonist (and antagonist) in the films examined in this project are white, which impacts the narrative and potentially the way these films are read by audiences. By contrast, in the film *Storytelling* (2002), directed by Todd Solondz, the story titled "Fiction" complicates the rape narrative by staging it between a white female student and her Black male professor[6]. *Boy Don't Cry* (1999), a film based on the murder of "a 21-year-old Nebraska trans man who was raped and murdered in 1993" often referred to as Brandon Teena (Bendix, 2019, p. 2), complicates the narrative by portraying rape through the complex lens of gender identity. These depictions of rape are different from the rape narratives found in the films discussed in this thesis, where the victims

[6] The film encompasses two stories called "Fiction" and "Non-Fiction."

are all young white women, and rapists are (mostly) young aggressive white men. A broader representation of rape in film would yield vastly different results if the narrative depicted was presented through the intersecting lenses of class, gender identity and race. Rape is not a white woman's problem, nor should rage be exclusive to white women in film. I mention these films as examples of diverse representation of rape on screen. The reason I did not include these films in my analysis is because their narratives would not have fit within my primary criteria; neither film incorporates acts of revenge.

In terms of the second limitation, any project of this scope will have films that are inevitably excluded as the film data set narrows. I chose to have a small data set in order to expand my exploration of each film and be able to compare narratives that shared similarities to one another. This resulted in my exclusion of films that would have offered different narrative approaches to rape and revenge yet presented a significant departure from my original analytical structure. Because of this, I decided to include a brief exploration of *Women Talking* (2022), a film which I debated turning into a third chapter, however I did not have the capacity in this thesis to justify dedicating an additional chapter to a full analysis of the film. Hence, my decision to instead include a summarized exploration of the film in my conclusion, allowing me the opportunity to offer a brief analysis.

My original reason for rejecting *Women Talking* from my data set was due to a narrative / generic misalignment. *Women Talking* is a drama about a group of Mennonites. This was the only film I watched during my preliminary research that positioned rape as a community issue, not an individual one. Because of this, I felt it was important to discuss it as an alternative portrayal of rape and revenge.

When comparing how *Women Talking* approaches the discussion of rape in comparison to *M.F.A. (2017)* and *Promising Young Woman* (2020), for example, their portrayals are vastly different. Noelle and Cassie are represented as being alone in their experiences of rape. Although Noelle discusses rape in four separate interactions with other women (Skye, her roommate, the campus counselor, and Lindsey, a woman whose gang-rape was filmed during a party), I read these interactions as only highlighting one common response to rape: victims should remain quiet. There is no opportunity for Noelle to connect with these women on the issue of rape. There is no character who offers validation for the anger Noelle feels over men being spared consequences for rape. For Cassie, Nina's rape and suicide, was a hurdle Cassie was unable to overcome. Alone in her grief, Cassie has no close friends nor any connection that is not tumultuous or inconsistent. However, unlike Noelle, I read Cassie as *choosing* to have no support. She isolates herself from those around her, allowing her grief and guilt over Nina's death to be a barrier from which she can ruminate and wallow; a narrative I consider disappointing. For Cassie to ultimately choose death by the end of the film, only adds to my disappointment.

The women depicted in *Women Talking* do not murder or physically fight their rapists (regardless of how strongly some characters desires to do so). They instead communicate with each other, share their feelings, wishes and fears, and strategize methods for ending the violence. This sets the film apart from other rape and revenge films, most of which are missing this important component: women actively supporting women. The film also illustrates the difficulties of navigating trauma by positioning the characters in situations of conflict, where they point fingers at each other: "You have these attacks, you smoke, why? Why is it so much harder for you than for us, we were all attacked, all of us," and these women release their rage: "I

will lie I will hunt I will kill, I will dance on graves and burn in hell before I let another man satisfy his violent urges." I find these exchanges amongst the women refreshing as the viewer. I read them as positive and empowering demonstrations of rape as a collective issue, and although each woman responds differently to the attacks, these women understand they are not alone in their suffering but are instead connected by it.

Women Talking encompasses components I felt were missing from the films in my data set, and the sub-genre of rape and revenge as a whole: 1) rape is a collective issue, 2) trauma breeds connection, 3) through open discussion amongst women, revolutionary changes can be made, and 4) not combating violence with more violence. Residing within a society where rape culture is ever present, it can feel easier to succumb to social norms and expectations that we recognize are flawed; the energy required to stand in resistance is exhausting. We can experience anger, sadness, resentment, shame and doubt; yet that is unsustainable. I read the characters in the film as calling attention to this self-sabotaging pattern; highlighting how damaging and isolating self-doubt can be; how victims are enveloped by these feelings when their experiences are denied, gaslit and ignored. I appreciate *Women Talking* as a film that narratively encourages us (women, victims of rape, allies, etc.) to gather together, to empathize with one another, to resist collectively, to listen and to act. As a scholar it is important to also consider how this narrative would change if it were a community of Black or Indigenous women. It is unclear whether they would also feel comfortable turning to police for help and trust they would be believed. This question has the potential to open the door to another set of questions for future scholars to explore.

In conclusion, my previous research on this topic revealed certain biases of mine I hadn't before recognized, and this project is no different. I re-entered into the world of rape and revenge

films with a strong understanding of how I would differentiate between "good" and "bad" representations of the narrative; I was certain my previous experience and advanced critical thinking would be a reliable guide for how I navigated this topic. However, one should always expect to end a project of this magnitude with a change in perspective; to which I have. Throughout the writing process, my thoughts, perceptions and biases have been challenged, exposed and reevaluated. My analysis of *PYW* challenged my perceptions of "good" and "bad" revenge, highlighting an imbalance of judgement I held toward revenge targeted toward women compared to revenge targeting men. The double rape of Thana in *Ms. 45*, made me anticipate this film would portray the most challenging depiction of rape and revenge, yet my analysis proved otherwise; I now consider *Ms. 45* to be one of the more successful rape and revenge narratives. As the viewer, Thana is a character I share support and empathy for. Everything in the film is exaggerated—from the sexual harassment to Thana's numerous acts of murder—yet I feel the film is essentially inviting the audience to see this imagined world through Thana's perspective that stems from her own fear and heightened anxiety after her two assaults; where all men are dangerous and unsafe to women. After my own rape, my perspective on men was similar to Thana's; men were not to be trusted.

As illustrated in the title of this thesis, this project is an exploration of my *own* reflections of these films; a perspective I hope can be useful for students in the future. During the research process, I found the work of fellow students helpful. Navigating a large research project is challenging, and having access to other student's work felt like a useful guide. In addition, as a woman who can share in the experience of rape, I hope my evaluation and analysis of these films can be of use to those with similar experiences. Whether a fellow student or someone interested in exploring these films further, I hope to have written a body of work that encourages the reader

(any reader) to watch these films if they haven't already, and examine their own responses to them.

This project contributes to the field of Women and Gender Studies a research paper written for readers who also share an experience of rape or sexual assault; I hope this project supplies you with a sense of belonging and community; navigating the trauma of rape is a familiar burden and should be shared. Although most of the narratives I analyze situate the protagonist as alone in her journey to revenge, I believe these films can offer viewers moments of comfort and connection; the unleashed rage displayed in these films hold the potential to supply viewers with feelings of catharsis, and can also offer an opportunity for viewers to build connection and relatability to characters amidst trauma, conflict, and resolution.

In my introduction, I alluded to the other avenues I could have chosen to focus my research (the impact of the writer and director's gender, the impact of genre, and whether rape should be portrayed in film), and that work can still be done. Other feminist scholars interested in this topic, could continue this work by exploring a variety of perspectives and methods for approaching rape and revenge films in the future.

As I leave this project, I both mourn and applaud who I was when I began this research five years ago; someone unhealed with a desire to claim a new method for approaching my own trauma. Today I am grateful to be content, very healed, and I am ready to move forward.

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