

# Can Rape be Perceived as a Rational Choice of Survival: Reflections on “Woman in Berlin” by Marta Hillers

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**Abstract**—April 1945. The soviet assaulted the city of Berlin and took the entire city progressively. The Red Army seized the whole city and almost all the transportation in and out of the city was stopped. Vengeful soviet troops engaged in mass rapes, killings and pillages. German women were raped ‘En Masse’ by the Red army. But somehow a strange thing was happening and that is, the rape victims were not complaining but were silent.

*How do we explain this strange behavior of rape victims?*

*Can there be far important value than the dignity of a woman at stake? What that can be?*

*Supposing, a choice has been given to a beautiful woman that either she should have the intercourse or her entire family will be annihilated. What a rational person should choose under these severe or crucial circumstances? What would be the rational choice?*

*To this age old predicament of women’s fate, the celebrated author Marta Hillers provides an answer. In her work, she talked of the ferocious weeks from 20<sup>th</sup> april to 22<sup>nd</sup> june 1945. Herself a rape victim, Hillers narrates the story of those German women through her Diary entries, who were victimized by the Red army and were given such a stark choice.*

## **Can Rape be perceived as a rational choice of survival: Reflections on “Woman in Berlin” by Marta Hillers.**

"Our eyes carried no hate, only recognition of what was,... Peace was an abstraction. The world we Kinder knew nearly always had the word 'war' appended to it."<sup>1</sup>

Beginning in 1945, Russian troops had started to free Nazi-possessed domains. Death camps, focuses of mass murder, were before all else phases of disintegration, the casualties of which were sent to evacuee camps spread out crosswise over Western Europe. A large number of non-Aryans had been ruthlessly exterminated; thousands upon thousands had succumbed to genocide. Hitler and his top authorities had been caught or taken their own particular lives. The foundation of Germany had been broken, the heartland obliterated, structures and the markings of an once acculturated, developed society violated by the trading of flame, lories, and steady overhead ethereal assaults.

The battle of Berlin designated by the Soviet Union as the Berlin strategic offensive operation and was the final major offensive of the European theatre of world war II. The soviets attacked Berlin and gradually took the whole city. In all those areas, which were captured by the Red Army was seized and almost all the transport in and out of the city was stopped. Even the bombed-out sewers had contaminated the water supplies. Vengeful soviet troops engaged in mass rapes, killings and pillages.

An Anonymous 34 year old lady has created a discourse starting in April 1945. It is around then that the Russians attacked Berlin, which comprised of a vast female populace. For two months, this lady kept a day to day record of her encounters and people around her, and she described the mass assault endured by about all women. Her journal demonstrated the repulsiveness that war brought to women, and she interacted with numerous women and urged them to tell how they were dealt with.

During the last days of World War II and in the falling of the city of berlin, there were many such kinds of perilous stories which were buried down by the authorities. But this account of the author has revealed the act of humanity. This account raised several questions like, whether the most important values of human being is survival at any cost or preservation of dignity? Whether the values of survival outweigh the value of dignity? Whether rape can be perceived as compromised consent under crisis situation? And how can rape be seen as human and a mode of protection in society?

“The Nazi world - ruled by men, glorifying the strong man has begun to crumble, and with it the myth of "Man". In earlier wars men could claim that the privilege of killing and being killed for the fatherland - was theirs and theirs alone. Today, we women, too, have a share. That has transformed us, emboldened us. Among the many defeats at the end of this war is the defeat of the male sex.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel in “The War of Our Childhood: Memories of the world War II”.

<sup>2</sup>A Woman in Berlin.

To investigate the account in its verifiable setting, it is important to know the background matter. . Marta Hillers, the author, was discovered as a journalist of Germany in the year 2003. Her work was her only document by her. It contains the story of those ferocious weeks from 20<sup>th</sup> April to 22 June 1945 during the capture of Berlin and its occupation by the Red Army. The writer described the widespread rapes by the soviet soldiers, including her own. This work accounts for a pragmatic approach to survival by accepting the heinous deeds of these soldiers and often taking soviet officers as their protectors.

Berlin, once a metropolitan focus of business and culture, laid in demolish, its populace groveled in basements, shields, and shelled out pads. Plague and primitive propensities assumed control as the signs of social Darwinism started to end noticeably the regulating doctrine. As repeated a few times in the journal, *Homo homini lupus*<sup>3</sup>. Generally interpreted, people progressed toward becoming as wolves.

“What does it mean – rape? When I said the word for the first time aloud, Friday evening in the basement, it sent shivers down my spine. Now I can think it and write it with an untrembling hand, say it out loud to get used to hearing it said. It sounds like the absolute worst, the end of everything – but it is not.”<sup>4</sup>

What is sexual assault or Rape? Rape can be characterized as a physical assault on the body of a women without her free consent or will. It is an exercise of naked power against the female body without her willingness. It is an assault of one sided desire. Histories of victories and conquests offer little in this regard. Indeed, most occurrences are skimmed over, overlooked, scratched out of histories through and through. Particularly for female amid wartimes, regardless of whether medieval time or in recent century, the commonness of assault is practiced as a type of energy by the heroes upon the prevailed once. Freeing troops, in this particular case Russians, went to war to stop the spread of Nazism as well as to retaliate for the monstrosities Germans committed amid World War I and during the major portion of World War II. But the basic purpose got derailed when red army started raping and violating German women. They threatened the residents of berlin to surrender their weapons or they will be shot at the spot. When the weapons have been taken away from German males, what choices were left with powerless women against rapacious Russian males. It is in this context, the above questions become urgent and relevant.

“These days I keep noticing how my feelings towards men - and the feelings of all the other women - are changing. We feel sorry for them; they seem so miserable and powerless. The weaker sex.”<sup>5</sup>

The above mentioned quote is a question on patriarchy and the male domination in society. Male has assumed the domination because they are physically strong and can protect the weaker ones in the community, but above history of assaulting the dignity of a woman is a proof that a woman can't be called ‘a weaker sex’ but man should be. Rape culture also strengthened the intensity of emotional and social desensitization by drawing a correlation between social Darwinism and forcible sex. Women turned sex into a form of prostitution; doing sex with high ranking officers for survival, underlining, a choice of a beautiful woman that either she should have intercourse with the defense officer or her entire family will be annihilated. Was the male domination meant for this?

There is another dimension to power equation between the male and female. In the patriarchal system, a male boasts of his masculine power and he proudly proclaims himself a ‘Man’. But supposing the woman he is desiring, does not consider him to be enough of a man, then his entire sense of his manhood become very fragile. So, in this sense, woman is the definer of his power. So, the question is who is more powerful, male who is pleading for the attention of a woman or the woman who is in the position to either grant or deny his desire. In that sense, the German women were more powerful than the Russian males. And if the rules of game of sex are defined by a woman, then women can be called more powerful than men.

“I feel that I belong to my people, that I want to share their fate, even now.”<sup>6</sup>

In the reference to the novel, we can see how the author has surrendered her dignity to the higher ranking officer to get the best from the worst condition. So, as her few of her friends chose to survive.

In the above quote, the writer is taking ‘men’- a weaker sex, a miserable one, a powerless. If we look toward the primitive age, we will find that a female has always been commoditized for sex. In the utilitarian world, a female has been assigned the work to please the man by her beauty and produce children to him. The commodification of women as a sex object is an age old predicament. Marta Hillers here in her work provides a proof of such commodification, as the German ladies were bargaining their sexuality and their dignity for the food, water, shelter and most importantly the lives of their dear and nears.

“He looks at the pitiful group of people come to complain and laughs, laughs at my stammering. “Come on, I’m sure they didn’t really hurt you. Our men are all healthy.” He strolls back to the other officers. We hear them chuckling quietly. I turn to our gray assembly. “There’s no point.””<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Marta Hillers. (page 214).

<sup>4</sup>Marta Hillers (page 64).

<sup>5</sup>Anonymous. A woman in Berlin.

<sup>6</sup>A Woman in Berlin. (page 175).

<sup>7</sup>Anonymous (page 54).

When we look at human existence, we see the survival as primary value. In the state of nature, powerful prevails over the weak. Powerful use weak for his own purpose. Weak has no choice. He has either to serve the needs of powerful or be ready to die. And there is no dignity in dying because death is a great equalizer, so the question is how to act when we are alive?

When we apply the above frame of references in 'Woman In Berlin', in April 1945, what are the choices before these women. Power or Weapons have been taken away from the German protectors by Russians. And German women were left at the mercy of Russian army men. And Russian males started raping them mercilessly. After first on slot of rape, women of Berlin wondered about the future and survival of the remaining family. Resistance will not help, so as there is a famous saying, "if you can't beat them, join them". So they did; German women thought of that most rational option. If sleeping with those Russian Soldiers can provide them protection and their family, then why not sleep with the most powerful one, and that is the commander of Russian army in Berlin. In fact, that is precisely, the heroine of the novel did. So, if we leave aside the conventional morality, German women were exercising this rational choices by using their bodies for the protection of themselves and their families.

As famous German philosopher Nietzsche has said 'if something does not kill you, it makes you stronger.' Similarly, German women in Berlin, survived the rape and they became stronger. "No one gives a damn for us. All of a sudden we're individuals, no longer a community of people. All old ties between friends and colleague are gone, so long as we are separated by a distance of more than three houses."<sup>8</sup>

And they became individuals in their own rights instead of non-entity in their own community. They also reversed the roles as provider for the family instead of being provided for. Thus, ironically through their sexual identity, they discovered their new identities and their new bargaining power in the market of power relations.

When a rape is done first time, it is assault against the women's vary sense of self but once the initial trauma is overcome and one wonders about the options for the future as German women did through Marta Hillers, then sexual identity can be a strong bargaining tool for survival in the :struggle for the survival for the fittest" and even the roles can be reversed as Marta Hillers longing for ' Russian Commander'.

"This is a new situation. By no means could it be said that the major is raping me. One cold word and he'd probably go his way and never come back. So I am placing myself at his service of my own accord. Am I doing it because I like him or out of a need for love? God forbid! For the moment I've had it up to here with men and their male desire; I can't imagine ever

longing for any of that again. Am I doing it for bacon, butter, sugar, candles, canned meat? To some extent I sure am."<sup>9</sup>

Marta Hillers in her unprecedented work has narrated the plight of a woman who is subjected to sexual intercourse against her will during the time of war. In this time of crisis, once the initial trauma is over, she discovers the utilitarian value of her sexual identity in her service of survival. After recovering from the initial shock, not only she exercises her capacity to provide sex to Russian military officers as a rational choice but she goes on hunting for the highest bargain she can strike for herself, her family and her community. She actively seeks out the commander of the army to strike the biggest bargain. She wonders if rape is inevitable, then why not make the most of it by purchasing biggest survival benefits. So she goes for the highest bargain. If man can look for biggest bargain or most profitable venture either in the time of peace or war, why the issue of pseudo dignity is brought when a woman confront with the same predicament. Thus, Marta Hillers exposes the hypocrisy of patriarchal society and mentality. Thus she lays bare the two essentials of human nature that rule of jungle prevails when man is under no supervision, and that survival of yourself, your family and your community is the highest value which any rational person has to strive for, whether male or female.

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<sup>8</sup>Anonymous. (page 34).

<sup>9</sup>Anonymous. (page 115-116).