

Systemic Violence Against Women: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Girard's Theory of Sacrifice

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Abstract: The structure of sacrifice alludes to systemic violence and poses a question: What are we sacrificing when we sacrifice? In this research, I revisit Rene Girard's concept of ritual sacrifice as systemic violence. I examine sacrifice and systemic violence through a psychoanalytic lens (e.g. Lacan, Irigaray, Kristeva, McGowan, Morris). The logic of sacrifice and systemic violence is analyzed to demonstrate that these systems of violence correlate within the realm of the unconscious – and may reveal why this connection is both disturbing and instructive regarding some of the origin points of our culture(s). Following Kristeva, I analyze the abject feminine as the unconscious target of systemic violence. The unconscious tensions are dealt with through systematized violence against women and others who evoke the threat of the feminine abject. This adds a critical feminist and psychoanalytic turn to the initial question: When we sacrifice, are we sacrificing the feminine?

Keywords: systemic violence, sacrifice, abject, feminine

Introduction

The ancient concept of sacrifice and its scapegoat extends beyond the study of religion, myth, and the ancient past. In this article, I revisit Rene Girard's concept of ritual sacrifice as systemic violence centered around the scapegoat to continually confront the problem and the question: what are we sacrificing when we sacrifice? This question is engaged through a psychoanalytic lens to understand the unconscious dynamics behind ritual sacrifice.

In this work, I aim to untangle the logic of ritual sacrifice through a psychoanalytic lens and suggest how violence becomes systematic. The logic of sacrifice and systemic violence is analyzed to demonstrate that these systems of violence correlate through the realm of the unconscious. I claim that the unconscious dynamics behind these systems of violence

may reveal the role systemic violence plays in structuring society.

This analysis addresses sacrificial violence as the precursor to systemic violence. By examining ritual sacrifice through a psychoanalytic lens, I explore the ritual of sacrifice as a system of violence, highlighting the notion that the scapegoat, which represents the focal point of systemic violence, is the feminine. The scapegoat structure suggests its relation to the feminine – a symbolic threat to the (societal) order.

Sacrifice and systemic violence are inextricably linked as they both deal with the unconscious anxieties over the threat – the threat that I claim to be feminine. The unconscious anxiety becomes materialized and contained by the ritual structure for the stabilization of society. The ritual structure shared by sacrifice and systemic violence implies societal categories and localizes the unconscious anxiety of that society onto a scapegoat. The ritual of sacrifice, as a systematization of violence in this work, is argued to be rooted in the structure of societies.

For Girard, society is an affair of men,³⁶ however, the pact between brothers brings harmony within society only if the brothers resolve their conflicts over the same desires through a third party – a scapegoat who, when sacrificed, ensures their unity. In this way, the pact for societal security and the sacrifice of a scapegoat imply one another. This pact of brothers, as a signifier of society, takes place to evade the conflict over the same desires; this is what I assume for Luce Irigaray and her scholar Margaret Whitford was the regime of the same. Thus, the pact between brothers forms a society that conducts the regime of the same – society of multiple selves, multiple ‘I’s who possess the same (logic of) desire.

To answer the question posed earlier about what are we sacrificing when we sacrifice, I use the Lacanian interpretations of desire and enjoyment (*jouissance*), as treated by Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Todd McGowan, and Margaret Whitford. By employing a psychoanalytic approach, I introduce the scapegoat as the materialization of the unconscious threat of the feminine. This connection reveals how ritual sacrificing persists as systemic violence against women, exemplified by honor crimes and oppressive regimes.

The conceptualization of the scapegoat through psychoanalysis helps dissect how the ritual logic of sacrifice is reflected in systemic violence against women – why that connection is both disturbing and sig-

³⁶ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray. Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991), 145.

nificant, providing insight into some of the origin points of our culture(s). The proximity of ritual sacrifice and systemic violence, analyzed through psychoanalysis, unveils an unconscious structure behind systemic violence, thus opening and contributing to the initial question of this work: what are we sacrificing when we sacrifice (*women*)?

The Rare Sacrifice of Women

*"The sacrificial victim is almost always an animal"*³⁷

In his later work, Girard suggests with more clarity that women were chosen as sacrificial victims, as the mere fact of being a woman was considered a stereotypical victim's sign as she belonged to a precarious social group.³⁸ He further develops the thought that human victims selected for sacrificial rituals had qualities that hardly changed from culture to culture, implying that sacrificial violence is not one culture-specific, but rather a structure detected within various societies.

However, I argue that there is a specific tension in Girard's work, because he firstly rejects the idea that women are scapegoats, and in later work, he changes his mind, albeit subtly. Girard never clearly develops the idea that the scapegoat is a woman or that sacrifices always target something specific. However, he subtly alludes to a woman as a scapegoat within the society: "The historians continue to affirm the actual existence of the victims massacred: lepers, Jews, foreigners, women, those who are disabled, marginal persons of every sort."³⁹ He states that the ritual survives only in the form of comedies of terror intended to impress the uninitiated, women, and children.⁴⁰ This supports my view that sacrificial ritual survives in modern societies as violence against a more oppressed group.

Rather than typologizing forms of violence, I focus on Girard's notion of the scapegoat within ritual sacrifice. I argue that the sacrifice of a scapegoat could be seen as systemic violence against women through its

³⁷ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 9.

³⁸ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 49.

³⁹ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 75.

⁴⁰ Girard, *I See*, 81.

shared ritual structure at the core of society. Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* is mainly used in this analysis because it productively deals with the psychoanalytic perspective on sacrifice. This perspective helps to problematize the scapegoat position within the symbolic order, and understand sacrifice as a structure dealing with the unconscious tensions. Such analysis shows the high stakes of sacrifice in connection to systemic violence, serving as part of the self-formation of an individual as well as the collective.

Girard mentions women as sacrificial victims among others; yet, the psychoanalytic reading of sacrifice unwinds the scapegoat as feminine. Girard does not fully differentiate sacrificial victims; however, reading his work through a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens opens a venue to view the scapegoat of sacrifice through the symbolic tensions of the masculine and the feminine. This way, I argue, sacrificial logic reveals a particular violence that persists in modern societies as a system – one that maintains order within that society.

Girard argues that all society is based on self-destructive violence. Through sacrifice, the violence that threatens the community is ritually cast out and turned outward rather than inward. Girard emphasizes that the sacrificial act is similar, but symbolically completely different from spontaneous violence – like a man kicking his dog because he cannot kick his wife or boss. Human/animal hierarchy is immediately evident; discontent is vented out through violence toward an animal instead of a human. For example, in the myth of Ajax, that Girard re-tells, after the Greek army denies him Achilles's weapons, he vents his rage towards the army by slaughtering a herd of sheep. Even though sheep were traditionally used by Greeks for sacrificial purposes, this act took place outside of the ritual framework; thus, Ajax is seen as a madman.⁴¹ Not only does this myth suggest that ritual framework is what legitimizes violence, but also that the sacrificial victim is animal-like and, hence, less human. In his later work, Girard states that there is an evident gradual disappearance of the border between animal and human in those who were marked as victims. Girard argues that there are other societies in which human victims are substituted for the individuals who are threatened by violence.⁴² This argues that groups that are vulnerable or marginalized are more likely to be ritually sacrificed. Such notions following his work pave the

⁴¹ Girard, *Violence*, 9.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 10.

way for gendered interpretations of the scapegoat, or more specifically, as I argue, indicate that the scapegoat contains the threat of the feminine.

The human-victim, or a woman scapegoat to be exact, is challenged by Girard when he states that “looking at the vast spectrum of human victims sacrificed by various societies, the list seems heterogeneous, to say the least.”⁴³ He notes that there was no unified victim of sacrifice. For Girard, sacrificial victims ranged “from the very dregs of society to kings, and mostly included prisoners of war, slaves, small children, unmarried adolescents, and the handicapped.”⁴⁴ Girard includes the Greek *pharmakos* (a person often already condemned to death in ancient Greece as a means of purification or atonement for a city or community) as a reminder that societies saw ritualistic sacrifices as the essential lawful formations for communities because it served to cleanse and thus form (confine and define) them. *Pharmakos* “was used as a kind of sponge to sop up impurities, and afterward he was expelled from the community or killed in a ceremony that involved the entire populace.”⁴⁵ Through sacrifice, the violence threatening the community is ritually cast out and directed outward rather than inward: “The function of sacrifice is to quell violence within the community and to prevent conflicts from erupting.”⁴⁶ By agreeing on those who can and will be sacrificed, the community unites itself, as those who will sacrifice and prevail. In this way, through sacrifice, society cleanses itself and defines its norm – a purified standard, exiling those who do not fit under that category as a threat to the norm, prompting the question of what is truly being targeted when women are killed. This ancient position of sacrifice within society shows the cleansing logic of (systemic) violence.

Girard notes how the court’s fool is the outlet for the king to vent his anger: “From every point of view, the fool is eminently ‘sacrificable,’ and the king can use him to vent his own anger.”⁴⁷ Yet a fool is not necessarily a sacrifice, because the anger toward him is not regulated in any way. A fool is an object that soaks a king’s passionate, uncontrolled, and unsanctioned anger. Thus, a sacrificial victim is structurally different from a victim of an accidental outburst of violence. The victim of a

⁴³ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 95.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 12.

ritual sacrifice is a central part of a specific structure that regulates the flow of violence in society. Therefore, I presuppose that a scapegoat is not an accidental victim of rage. The violence of sacrifice is formulaic. This formula contains the tensions and addresses anxieties enacted within this structure. The scapegoat serves as an outlet – an outlet for the unconscious tensions embedded in societal organization.

For Girard, “violence will accumulate until it overflows and floods the surrounding area. Therefore, the role of sacrifice is to stem this rising tide of indiscriminate substitutions and redirect violence into proper channels”.⁴⁸ Not only does the regime of the proper (normative standard) need a sacrifice to confine and define itself, but it also needs a proper victim towards which it may redirect violence, so that it would not contaminate society. Here I introduce an Irigarayan-like reading of Girard, society defined as the pact between brothers, needs the other to maintain itself, as without the other – the non-brother, they cannot have the pact in the first place. As it follows, the opposite of a brother (he) is a sister (she) who contains all that is not accepted into the normative. For the standard to function, the abject must be pushed out. The abject here is taken from Julia Kristeva as “the opposite of an ‘I’”.⁴⁹ This ‘I’ can be viewed as the society of brothers or the symbolic order. This brother’s pact forms society to prevent conflict over the same desires for Girard, what Irigaray and Whitford called the regime of the same – a society of multiple selves, multiple ‘I’s with the same logic of desire.

This abject stands as the opposite of an ‘I’. The ‘I’ represents the society of brothers. Therefore, the opposite of an ‘I’ is someone with a different logic of desire. This different logic of desire is found with the feminine; thus, in this work, I view the abject as the feminine that poses a threat to the brothers’ pact and their (symbolic) order. Kristeva states that “the abject and abjection are my safeguards, the primers of my culture”⁵⁰ shedding a different take on Girard’s idea that the scapegoat is central to societal organization. The abject-feminine is central to the society of brothers. Thus, the scapegoat is guarding the abject-feminine at the center of societal organization.

However, what is interesting is that Girard does not go to this split

⁴⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

so quickly and clearly states, though in later work he fluctuates in his position to a degree, that women's sacrifices were a rare phenomenon. A degree of integration between those who could be sacrificed and those who could not is a deciding factor for Girard. Yet, he notes that in many historical epochs, or even current cultures, women are not considered fully-fledged members of society, and yet they are rarely sacrificed: "In many cultures women are not considered full-fledged members of their society; yet women are never, or rarely, selected as sacrificial victims."⁵¹ Girard explains the rarity of female sacrifices because a woman, even when married, retains ties with her kin.

Thus, I assume her former family is always a threat, as they are believed to seek vengeance if their member is sacrificed. In this logic, a woman's sacrifice entails a risk of violence. Hence, the possibility of vengeance is the primary reason why Girard claims that women's sacrifices are rare: "The considerable importance this freedom from reprisal has for the sacrificial process makes us understand that sacrifice is primarily an act of violence without risk of vengeance."⁵² I would argue that it does not seem to be true in contemporary discourse, which shows that vengeance does not stop men from killing women. It is crucial to problematize Girard's system of vengeance: what kind of violence, or even murder, is simply not avenged? The kind that is justified.

(Not) Avenged Violence and Regimes

In modern contexts, the risk of vengeance is averted when violence is seen as deserved or violence towards a victim is not perceived as a crime; in other words, it falls into the state of the normal, or regular functioning order. In this way, the violent act is seen as 'good' violence, as it protects society and occurs within a ritual – it is systemic. 'Good' violence protects the pact of brothers from the 'bad' violence that threatens them. For Girard, the act of vengeance is undertaken by the judicial system, and therefore, there is no fear of repetition or a cycle of vengeance (violence causing another vengeful violence). It could be argued that modern society is less prone to treating vengeance as a family matter, with the judicial system expected to take on the duty of revenge. However, I propose that this is where the vengeance system fails: when

⁵¹ Girard, *Violence*, 12.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 13.

the violence inflicted on specific groups is not considered worthy of avenging. It is not perceived as an injustice in a legal, structural way. Some violence against certain people is seen as part of the system's ordinary functioning.

For Girard, in primitive societies, the role of and prevention against vengeance was assumed by religion. To prevent private vengeance and the overflow of violence within the community, public vengeance manifested through judicial or religious law. For Girard, the unique public vengeance in heavily regulated societies like ours is known as the judicial system. Thus, it can be seen that a policed society, where it is 'natural' to be governed by moral laws and monitored by behavioral rules, tends to justify violence when it conforms to a rule: it is a law, therefore it is just(ice). Conversely, violence that occurs outside of society's established channels is forbidden and, therefore, not 'good': it does not structurally benefit brother society.

Along the lines of Girard, the society that is structured by a system of religious or judicial laws delegates the process of vengeance to a higher power that is law and this way supposedly averts the dangers of escalation: "Under the public system, an act of vengeance is no longer avenged; the process is terminated, the danger of escalation averted."⁵³ From this logic, it follows that the principle of justice is revenge, which is taken up by religion or the judicial system.

Violence becomes a public matter in the religious or judicial system. For Girard, the purpose of religion concerning violence was initially aimed at protecting society from violence; the private and thus uncontrolled violence is symbolically exercised as a collective sacrifice. It is also in this context that the scapegoat is most prevalent, appearing necessary for a collective execution of just violence. The scapegoat transfers violence from a private domain to a public one, creating an illusion of societal balance. Sacrifice becomes legal vengeance, transforming violence from private to collective. Ritual sacrifice is legitimate, and structures violence. Sacrifice legitimizes violence through a structure by shifting vengeance from the private to the public domain – violence from an individual to culture. This transformation is significant because it depicts just and thus 'good' violence as a preventive measure against a potential threat.

For Girard, vengeance protects a woman from being sacrificed.

⁵³ Ibid.,16.

However, I posit that the public system, which adopts vengeance as its role, eliminates the threat of private vengeance, making women dependent on such a system and thus more vulnerable to violence. Will that system include them as part of the societal pact? The very thing that kept them protected – the threat of vengeance – is removed, because vengeance is institutionalized and becomes a matter of religious or judicial law that might not consider violence directed towards them as illegal and, therefore, vengeance worthy. The religious or judicial system does not treat a woman as an equal member of society; she is not a brother and, thus, is not a part of the pact between brothers. Consequently, the public system may not avenge her. The pact of brothers is what constitutes a society; therefore, the vengeance system of that society will not necessarily protect those outside of this pact.

For Girard, sacrifice is inextricably linked to religion, which he sees as the origin of human culture. Thus, systemic violence can be viewed as a modern form of ritual violence: “all human institutions, and therefore humanity itself, are rooted in sacrifice.”⁵⁴ Sacrifice becomes a societal instrument, preventing internal threats. When societal organizations take up vengeance as their public function, private vengeance does not pose a threat. Therefore, women can be, and are, sacrificed in such societies.

As Girard has many times defined, the scapegoat is not a direct reason for anger and violence, but rather, it is a stand-in for violence that would otherwise permeate the entire society. I would propose that this underlying force of violence – which for Girard is deflected to the victim of sacrifice – could be read, in psychoanalytic terms, by drawing a direct connection between sacrifice and the unconscious, or violence and desire.

Irigaray’s scholar, Whitford, comments that, for Girard, society is an affair of men. Based on these thinkers’ reading of Girard, it can be assumed that the mission to keep violence away by redirecting it to the scapegoat is a ritual organized by men. Since men are led by desire, which is initially the same for Girard and Irigaray, violence is expelled only temporarily. This clear indication that male desire is uniform suggests that its opposite – female desire – is perceived as different. Therefore, I assume that the scapegoat becomes a permanent structure within

⁵⁴ Girard, *I See*, 93.

such a community to continuously atone for the violence, and it is crucial for maintaining the border between the abject other and the self-same (the pact of brothers). For Irigaray, Girardian sacrifice and its function corresponds to the model of male sexuality described by Freud – the model of tension/discharge/homeostasis⁵⁵ indicating that identity is deeply linked to violence.

For Irigaray, relations between men and women are paralyzed because society does not recognize the initial sacrifice of women in that society, as Christianity ritually consumes the body and blood of women. As the symbol of sacrifice, she proposes fertility, which I would read as desire, while initially, Irigaray does not only talk about the biological possibility of women to bear children, but of the various possibilities of their desire. This way I interpret her work within the symbolic rather than the material. The suppression of maternal genealogy (feminine desire) and the incorporation of paternal genealogy (masculine desire) leads, for Irigaray, to disrespect towards fertility or, more plausibly, to the inferiorization and even sacrifice of the feminine desire.

I propose honor crimes as an example to expand on the concept of sacrifice and its scapegoat – a woman – not to victimize women, but rather to understand the threat of the feminine within systemic violence against women. According to Girard, the violence threatening society can be seen as desire, which is an illuminating thought for my claim that systemic violence targets the feminine (desire). Honor crimes exemplify Girard's notion of vengeance-free violence and highlight the fear that female desire poses to societal order, making female desire a threat and thus women scapegoats of systemic violence.

Sociologist Meltem Ahiska proposed an example showing how desire is lurking as an object-cause of violence against women. She comments that in “February 2015, Turkish Parliament suggested that a monthly allowance should be paid to single men to enable them to ‘satisfy their sexual needs,’ as a remedy for the problem of increasing violence against women”.⁵⁶ The sociologist notes that this proposition is trying to suggest to society, in order to structure the law on a falsified pseudo-fact, that it is their unsatisfied sexual needs that cause men to be

⁵⁵ Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, 150.

⁵⁶ Meltem Ahiska, “Violence against Women in Turkey: Vulnerability, Sexuality, and Eros,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 211.

violent against women.⁵⁷ Ahiska suggests that sexuality and violence are inextricably linked, and that they lead to the formation of political practices. I propose that vengeance does not pose a threat to the sacrifice of women (femicide) because the force that drives this violent action is unconscious, and these acts are justified as a necessary protection of honor; in this way, through viewing feminine desire as a threat, violence inflicted on women becomes systemic. For Ahiska, honor crimes show that male desire can be murderous, yet I argue that the masculine (order) is threatened by and fragile to the feminine (dis-order), thus making feminine desire a threat to the masculine order.

This is how violence inflicted on women becomes ritualistic and built into the structure of society. It seems that this violence is linked to desire and is trying to destroy this ungraspable threat that is lurking beneath women's bodies. This threat appears as through the activity of women's bodies and expression of female desire, as throughout history the female body was seen as a source of men's honor. "Honour is said to reside within the bodies of women as women are the supposed 'repositories' of honour".⁵⁸ Examples like Turkey, or violent regimes in history, show that women are murdered because their bodies exhibit signs of feminine desire and are seen as a provocation of, and a threat to, the (masculine) rules.

Violent regimes that take control of sexuality know this. Nazi racism was indirectly connected to regulations on sexuality. Controlling sexuality, for the regime, was one of their main and most important tasks, and failure to control the sexuality of certain groups was considered a quasi-terrorist (anti-national) act: "Sexual activity per se entered the discussion when it served as a diagnostic marker".⁵⁹ Sexual activity defined who was normal or abnormal, and 'sexually promiscuous' women faced penalties in the Nazi state. The regime not only denied them medals and restricted their reproduction, but also institutionalized them, imprisoned them, and sent them to concentration camps.⁶⁰ These

⁵⁷ Ibid., 212.

⁵⁸ Mohammad Idriss, "Abused by the Patriarchy: Male Victims, Masculinity, 'Honor'-Based Abuse and Forced Marriages", *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2021): 2.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Heineman, "Sexuality and Nazism: The Doubly Unspeakable?" *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, no. 1/2 (2002): 43.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 44.

examples in actual lived experiences of women shed light on the symbolic argument about sacrifice of the feminine I try to make: uncontrolled feminine desire in violent regimes seems to come in as a challenge for the masculine order, or the order of the masculine. Feminine desire challenges this order by exposing the weakness of the symbolic power that this order seems to claim.

It is interesting to note that regimes expose that the line between acceptable and illicit female desire is often blurred. For example, the women's killings in Turkey, in most cases, are viewed as provoked by signs of female desire that are deemed unacceptable within the family (and society). Signs of female desire that are deemed unacceptable include the wearing of tight trousers, carrying love poems, going out or traveling without permission, wanting a divorce, and so on.⁶¹ Her desire to enjoy not any particular man but life itself seems to put a man on the losing side: she desires something else than (just) him. A man is desperate to fulfill his symbolic role, but the encounter with the feminine desire threatens and destabilizes his symbolic claim: "A man is traumatized by not being able to assume his symbolic role. This gives us an answer as to why some men are so concerned to keep intact their well-organized life and dread encountering the woman who provokes their desire".⁶² The symbolic role is attempted to be assumed in a relationship with a woman. I propose that state-controlled sexuality seems to put forth this anxiety as the primary motivator of violence against women. A version of my initial question in this work is also asked by Irigaray: "What man looks for in violating her?"⁶³ reappears and seems to be answered here, he looks for his own lack. In this violent quest to find it, he will enact his symbolic power. Symbolic power is what is reclaimed in the act of violence towards the threat. As the masculine subject, a violent regime is desperate to fulfill its symbolic role, but the encounter with the feminine desire threatens to destabilize its symbolic claim. The reconstitution of power within the symbolic is the reason that ritual violence takes place within modern society.

These examples in actual lived experiences of women shed light on the symbolic argument about the sacrifice of the feminine that I aim to

⁶¹ Ahiska, "Violence against Women in Turkey", 218.

⁶² Renata Salecl, *On Anxiety* (London: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 50.

⁶³ Luce Irigaray, "Divine Women," *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 7.

present: the uncontrolled feminine leaks through desire in these examples and appears to challenge the phallic order or specific regime. Here, violence can be viewed as an attempt to deal with provocations that the feminine poses to normative/ masculine; such violence reinforces the symbolic function and well-organized boundaries of the normative. Violence occurs when the encounter with the other (woman) reflects and therefore, brings to the surface the lack of a normative standard. "Men are frightened by the emerging sexuality of young women and their (potential) challenge to male rules ... cutting down a few women in the prime of their youth is expected to deter other young women from expressing themselves in a sensual way".⁶⁴ Feminine is a threat within the symbolic. Therefore, a social category of a woman translates this threat into material terms, and it is in her that this threat hides. Therefore, she and all the other others who carry the threat of the feminine need to be controlled through sacrifice for this threat to be stopped.

Woman as a Rival: The Threat of Other's Enjoyment

Honor crimes and systemic violence against women along the lines of Girard's notion of sacrifice show that women are doomed to be split as a source of honor (pure-virgin) and shame (deviant-slut). Through violence, or a threat of violence, women are bullied into not expressing their desire.

Expanding on Irigaray, I hypothesize that society that is functioning by the pact of brothers would not break that pact easily by sharing its initiative with the other-woman: "a person who is in a position of mastery does not let go of it easily. In other words, the masculine is not prepared to share the initiative of discourse".⁶⁵ A man, the society of brothers, and the symbolic order prefer to experiment with consuming a woman rather than leaving her any right to intervene, to act in her own interests.⁶⁶ Thus, any expression of her desire, pursuit of her own interests, or any intervention in the male-dominated order is blocked for her through violence. To prevent her from intervening, society consumes and this way sacrifices a woman.

As mentioned, the unresolved tensions in the symbolic are threatened by feminine desire, and this is what makes a woman a scapegoat of

⁶⁴ Idriss, "Abused by the Patriarchy", 10.

⁶⁵ Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, 131.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

ritual violence within society. For Irigaray, as soon as something valuable appears to be coming from the side of women, men want it.⁶⁷ Something valuable, in this sense, is feminine desire and enjoyment. Thus, I would propose that here is where a woman comes in as a rival: something about her desire makes him anxious. "He desires something he lacks: which the other seems to possess."⁶⁸ This way, I propose that this tension about the desire of the other rises not between the brothers, but rather between him and her, or more specifically, masculine and feminine symbolic positions.

Rivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single object; rather, the subject desires the object because the rival desires it. In desiring an object, the rival alerts the subject to the desirability of the object. Thus, the rival serves as an essential model for the desires of the subject. But what is important to note here is that feminine desire (a mystery since Freud's "What does a woman want?") can be interpreted as not having a particular object of desire; exactly what would make a man anxious, as he does not and cannot know that object of her desire. For Girard, the mimetic quality of desire is most obvious in childhood as children shamelessly want something simply because the other desires it. "The mimetic quality of childhood desire is universally recognized."⁶⁹ But for adults, this quality of desire is disguised, as a mimesis of desire reveals a lack. "Adult desire is virtually identical, except that (most strikingly in our own culture) the adult is generally ashamed to imitate others for fear of revealing his lack of being."⁷⁰ I propose that this logic of mimetic desire shows that the feminine desire and enjoyment expose the masculine lack. This lack is what frustrates a man; a lack that a woman, on the contrary, does not seem to possess. Ergo, the society of brothers denies this lack and is obliged to destroy what reminds them of this lack on their side. Feminine desire exposes this lack, and a woman, because of her desire, becomes a rival for a man, and this way, a scapegoat for the society of brothers.

According to Girard, desire is essentially mimetic: it is directed toward an object desired by the other who becomes a model for desire.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 146.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Feminine desire is marked by, what Bethany Morris calls, partial ‘lack of lack’⁷², as feminine desire is not marked by castration. Following her, I assume that a lack does not define feminine desire and enjoyment, therefore, it is not confined by (the lack of) an object and anxieties to possess it. In this way, her desire, because it does not revolve around the object that would fill the lack, exposes that a masculine position lacks. He cannot come to terms with this lack and thus takes up violence as a solution: as for Girard, mimesis coupled with desire leads automatically to conflict. A woman is a rival because the object of (her) desire is hidden (for a man); it is unattainable and out of reach (for him).

Girard alludes to a scapegoat’s connection to mimetic desire, which I propose is inherent to certain forms of violence, such as sacrificial or systemic. When the desire of the other appears to be something you are lacking, the other becomes a rival, which opens up the venue for violence. I argue that because of the different structures of masculine and feminine desire, this rival in society of brothers is first and foremost a woman – the non-brother. Therefore, a woman can be viewed as a rival for a man: the locus of her desire is elsewhere than his, thus it is out of reach. A mimesis of desire defines this exchange of difference between him (I) and her (Other) as rivalry because he wants yet cannot obtain what she seems to enjoy.

It is helpful to expand on the role of the other’s enjoyment in the acts of systemic violence, as it helps to reveal motivations for this violence that are rooted in unconscious dynamics. The philosopher and psychoanalyst Todd McGowan proposes a critical addition to the reading of systemic violence. He criticizes the common discourse of bio-power, in which the will-to-power is portrayed as the most significant motivator for any attempt at destroying the other. For McGowan, “Neither Foucault nor Agamben offers any theory about why the Nazis pursued the Final Solution. For both, the answer is obvious and lies in the determinations of power.”⁷³ However, as McGowan notes, despite Hitler’s claims, the Nazis did not kill the Jews “like lice” at all. They performed horrific experiments on them and submitted them to every kind of brutal humiliation. They killed the Jews as figures of threatening en-

⁷² Bethany Morris, *Sexual Difference, Abjection and Liminal Spaces: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Abhorrence of the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 68.

⁷³ Todd McGowan, *Racist Fantasy* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 161.

joyment, rather than “lice”.⁷⁴ The threatening enjoyment that I argue is taking the symbolic position of the feminine.

In this way, Girard’s ‘sacrifice’ can be understood as systematic violence directed toward an individual or a specific group designated as a scapegoat due to the distinct logic of their desire – a feminine logic. As mentioned earlier, sacrifice represents violence that is justified within society (legal or quasi-legal) and is not accidental, but rather structural, essential for the organization of that particular society, which bases itself around the other as its own opposite. This other is the scapegoat at the center of the ritual, just as the victim is central to systemic violence. Nevertheless, what is particularly intriguing about sacrificial violence and its scapegoat, or systemic violence and its victim, is that it deflects the true cause of and motivation behind that violence.

Through sacrifice, society deflects the true object of this violence. Following McGowan and Irigaray, I would argue that the object, that ritual or systemic violence against women tries to destroy is this enjoyment and desire. Following McGowan, we can trace that systemic violence often interacts with desire. It is evident in honor crimes, and state regimes where a victim’s sexuality is a major concern. The psychoanalytic reading of the sacrificial scapegoat puts forth anxieties over the sexuality of the other as the main cause of its destruction within systemic violence. This connection highlights how feminine desire challenges the masculine-normative order, leading to women’s tragic murders as a warning to other women. The victims of honor crimes are scapegoats as their deaths are quasi-legal because they maintain the social order by suppressing female desire, which poses a threat to the pact of brothers.

For McGowan, the Jewish “obscene enjoyment posed an absolute threat to the German nation and the enjoyment of that nation.”⁷⁵ McGowan said that what needs destroying by the persecutors (by men, by racists and antisemites, or by regime) – systematically, in the case of the Jews or African-Americans – is their enjoyment, indicating that the essence of their ‘evilness’ is none other than their sexuality, thus he underlines that: “we don’t see the sexuality of the killing when we examine only in terms of bio-power.”⁷⁶ Therefore, a psychoanalytic perspective on systemic violence is

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 162.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

productive and reveals that this sexuality, or rather desire and enjoyment, which poses a threat, occupies the position of the feminine within the symbolic system – as the feminine is something that disrupts. Following this line of argument, it is possible to see that this enjoyment of the other – the other that is not in the symbolic phallogentric position – is the unconscious object of the persecutors' violence.

Therefore, I propose that in the act of sacrifice, women are often scapegoats, because the object of the persecutor's violence is any sign of feminine desire – that desire that is unattainable for him. Female desire and enjoyment show that she is enjoying despite a man. Her autonomous desire shows she is not lacking; her desire is not focused on this absence, unlike a man's desire. This feminine excess (desire and enjoyment) that constitutes the feminine, for men if encountered, is a new-found discovery, almost a shock, as Irigaray puts it: "a pleasure that perhaps constitutes a discovery for men has long been familiar to women."⁷⁷ What Irigaray calls pleasure here can be seen as feminine enjoyment (*jouissance*). Her desire seems to involve something a man does not have, and exhibits her enjoyment as active and independent. It contradicts a man's active role because it, and thus his symbolic power, is defined by her supposed passivity. Signs of her desire provoke anxieties for a man, suggesting he lacks that, what she enjoys.

Following the developed argument, I hypothesize that ritual violence, or quasi-legal/systemic violence, is an attempt to control and sanction feminine enjoyment. Systemic violence against women, even in such examples as a witch hunt, shows that something about feminine enjoyment is the root cause of societal anxiety. For Morris, witches can be seen as beholding feminine enjoyment.⁷⁸ Women whom the church did not protect were persecuted and burned due to speculations about their involvement in witchcraft.⁷⁹ In one way or another, women who were challenging the expectations of women with their desire (had no children, who were deemed suspiciously smart) were deemed dangerous by society. In such contexts, the church performed ritual violence in early formations of the law, where women were sacrificed by this system to 'protect' society.

⁷⁷ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), 141.

⁷⁸ Morris, *Sexual Difference*, 42.

⁷⁹ *ibid* 53.

“For men, the way they desire (which is crucial also for the relation they form with the object *a* on the side of their partner) is conditioned by the fact that castration marked them by a lack, which also means that their phallic function has been negated”.⁸⁰ As a result of this negation, men are anxious that they might not be able to do it: that their organ might deceive them at the time they will need it most, and that others, especially a female other, might find them powerless.⁸¹ Jacques Lacan points out that the myth of Eve was created by men because of the anxiety felt by this lack. The creation of Eve out of Adam’s rib signifies that only this rib was taken away from him; thus, he lacks only it and nothing more.⁸² However, it could follow that this is where the myth fails: when a man encounters feminine desire. A myth that was mainly created to combat the anxieties felt over the feminine. The anxieties felt over facing the lack by encountering the feminine are unconscious; the anxiety is signified into the consciousness and thus dealt with via violence. The anxiety felt over his own lack motivates the quest to reclaim his symbolic power through the act of violence.

Systemic violence aimed at women targets the feminine, to eliminate the disorder it signifies for the symbolic masculine order, and asserts the symbolic power that feminine desire and enjoyment challenge. Feminine desire is where the symbolic power is contested by confronting its lack.

The Polluting Feminine: Sacrifice and the Symbolic Order

As previously argued, a woman’s uncontained sexuality is dangerous to the man, to the phallic symbolic order, and thus, to society. Her sexual appetites, if not controlled, pose a threat to society. Therefore, her desire is kept intact, and her body is heavily policed. “There is nothing more spiritual than female sexuality”⁸³, Irigaray writes, and yet, the body, for a woman, and consequently, her sexuality, has been deprived of its spiritual dimension. Following Irigaray, female sexuality, deprived of the

⁸⁰ Salecl, *On Anxiety*, 49.

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX, Encore, 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 10.

⁸³ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), 57.

spiritual/symbolic dimension, takes up a lower function and is rendered more nature-like, more bestial. Bram Dijkstra, who analyzed the 'evilness' of femininity by researching the female vampire, states that "racial, sexual, and political prejudices converged during the Middle Ages to make the sexual woman into one of the most terrifying human monsters of all time".⁸⁴ Such example illustrates that female sexuality mirrors the anxieties regarding feminine desire, shaping it as fundamentally dangerous for society, a society that is constituted by the pact between brothers.

An evident reduction of a woman to either purity or animality can be seen. Irigaray offers a compelling rift on this divide, arguing that humankind has been divided into two functions, and that one sex takes over from the other the unwanted functions: "Humankind has divided itself into two functions, two tasks, and two kinds. Woman has given up her kind under the threat of death. Man has too, but in a very different way".⁸⁵ Due to this division, Irigaray argues that only relationships between men have been spiritualized, as only male sexuality has a place in the symbolic. I interpret Irigaray's notion of the spiritual as the symbolic, viewing the masculine (sexuality) as phallic symbolic order. Due to this division of functions, the woman is seen as more nature-like, bestial, and corporeal (monstrous), and the man as more human and rational. Therefore, he is associated with the spiritual, or the symbolic. In contrast, women are relegated to guarding all that is considered abject. Clean and proper masculine, which serves as the normative standard (a more accurate reflection of God), comes in contrast with the feminine as his dirty mirror-opposite – the non-spiritual, para-symbolic, dis-orderly.

Irigaray claims that the spiritualization or symbolic representation of the feminine in the spiritual discourse is essential to avoid the reduction of women to animality and dependence. I want to echo Irigaray's thought by stating that the feminine has been deprived of a spiritual or, as I claim, symbolic dimension: it has been reduced to a lower function, existing not by its own right, but according to the masculine symbolic principle. Instead of asserting another logic of symbolization, the feminine is abjected, the feminine as it does not present itself in its own right, enters the phallic symbolic order as a glitch, as a collapsed mean-

⁸⁴ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 253.

⁸⁵ Irigaray, "Divine Women", 11.

ing, a non-meaning. The feminine creates a glitch in the symbolic order, as it is not a part of it; it is the abject to that phallic order. Therefore, the abject feminine is where symbolic meaning collapses, as the feminine is another order – a dis-order *par excellence*. However, the feminine is symbolized and materialized according to masculine symbolic principle, and this way takes up a lower function. The feminine that carries this threatening desire and enjoyment is a para-symbolic position. I claim that it is not a particular woman that the violence targets, it is this un-contained and unsymbolized force of the feminine that threatens to destabilize the symbolic order.

This is where Irigaray's model of duality alludes to the abject of Kristeva: the abject, instead of being a form of otherness, serves as a constant reminder of what should be expelled from "the self's clean and proper body"⁸⁶. This remainder of what is exiled from the clean and proper body (man) is the dirty and improper (woman). It is evident that a certain element of contamination appears when talking about the feminine as abject, and I want to propose that this connection opens up an approach to violence against women as a certain cleansing mechanism. This anxiety of contamination is what Kristeva called 'the return of the abject'. The encounter with the feminine as abject is unconscious. This encounter is materialized through sacrifice, which conveys the logic of pollution and cleansing. The unconscious threat of destabilizing feminine manifests as anxiety. This anxiety finds a substitute object and materializes the unconscious threat through violence. In this way, violence purifies from the threat and materializes it. Kristeva's concept of the abject correlates with Girard's view of ritualized violence as a protective and cleansing force against contagion, which, I suggest, represents the feminine.

Following Irigaray, it is evident that religion, functioning as a societal organization, has not spiritualized female sexuality but rather rendered it dark, dirty, and dangerous. In such a way, violence enters as a form of purification, not only to society as a whole but to individual women: the systemic violence against women is what cleanses women of their sins/desires/deviation. Thus, ascribing a woman to normative categories, without her own predicaments of her sexuality (enjoyment and desire), she, or rather the feminine that implies another independent logic from that of the phallic symbolic one, becomes stupid, deaf, sense-

⁸⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 78.

less. Considering that this encounter with the feminine is realized only unconsciously, a dangerous female sexuality makes meaning of this abject feminine and serves as a substitute for the persisting anxieties of men. She is sacrificed because this is how he deals with the content of his unconscious and his anxieties over the feminine destabilization. This is also the role of the scapegoat in society: it makes meaning from the abject feminine and contains its threat through violence.

Girard links purity and contamination within ritual violence, stating that concepts such as impurity and contagion translate human relations into material terms and provide a sort of camouflage – a camouflage from the unconscious. The encounter with the feminine is realized in the unconscious; this way, the scapegoat victim serves as a substitute. Sacrifice channels anxiety over the destabilizing feminine. The framework of sacrifice translates this unconscious threat of the abject feminine into material terms. The abject feminine disrupts meaning in the phallic order. Sacrifice reconstitutes that meaning through violence and its distinctions.

Otherwise, the abject feminine would threaten to annihilate and disturb the phallic order by proposing another logic of signification. Nevertheless, when the collapsed meaning of the abject feminine is materialized, the glitch in meaning is stopped. The materialized threat, in any form of other, contains within meaning this force of the feminine destabilization, and indicates what to do with this threat – we annihilate it, we erase it. Perhaps we do cling to this “threat”, because we need to stabilize the order in which we exist; otherwise, the structural distinctions posed by it, and us with it, cease to be.

In this way, this threat containing the feminine is made to be sacrificed for the sake of stability and order in society. This threat that contains the abject feminine is what we detect in the scapegoat of sacrifice. The feminine implies a certain dis-order, or non-order, as it always escapes and disturbs the phallic order and the symbolic realm as an abject – a collapsed meaning. The scapegoat victim of violence is what materializes the unconscious threat of the feminine. The symbolic order needs to be protected by containing this threat of the feminine, and organizing the society of the normals around this non-normal threat. The threat becomes actualized in the symbolic when violence perpetually and continuously inaugurates it into being: society calls for this threat to release the tensions phallic symbolic order holds for the unsymbolized feminine

dis-order. Just as the uncontainable abject (feminine) must be pushed from the clean and proper (masculine) subject, so too must the disturbing logic of the feminine be expelled from society; and this is where the sacrifice of the scapegoat enters society as a structure that keeps it balanced, clean and proper.

Therefore, I claim that the structure of sacrifice illustrates the tension between the symbolic order, which is the masculine, and the disruption or glitch in that order, the abject dis-order that is the feminine. Thus, sacrifice can be viewed as a structure of violence that addresses the unconscious threat posed by the unsymbolized feminine to the symbolic masculine order. The scapegoat that stands in for and materializes the abject feminine is prone to be sacrificed in ritual violence to prevent the abject feminine content that threatens to contaminate the normative by re-entering.

As the feminine does not exist as an independent logic from the phallic one, the feminine becomes 'abjected', and all that through which we encounter the abject feminine is denounced as evil and dangerous. The scapegoat, the victim of systemic violence, materializes the unconscious threat of the feminine. Through this framework, violence materializes the unconscious threat, perpetually and continuously inaugurating it to being: society calls for this threat to release the tensions the phallic symbolic order holds for the unsymbolized feminine dis-order.

If the boundary between the normative (phallic order) and non-normative (feminine dis-order) is clear, all threats can be evaded through ritual purification (systemic violence). However, if the ritual no longer exists, its clearly formulated distinctions (normative-masculine-prosecutor vs. non-normative-feminine-scapegoat) also collapse. The stakes of this inquiry extend as far as the constitutive quality(s) of ritual sacrifice for the structure of modern society itself, and a lingering question of if/how the horizon of that societal structure might look different without such a system of violence?