

The Gaze, Image, and (Hi)stories: A critical review of the representation of the rape and murder of Vithya Sivaloganathan

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Abstract- Media construction, representation and discourse of rape have a considerable power in shaping public understanding and knowledge of rape, and the use of images has a significant impact on this as a "photograph immediately grabs the viewer's attention and triggers profoundly personal responses—emotional, paradoxical and not always rational" (Roberts, 2011). These dynamics are at work in *Gossip Lanka* news articles on Vithya Sivaloganathan's rape and murder which occurred in May, 2015, and the present study has analysed the manner/s in which the rape and murder of Vithya Sivaloganathan is constructed, which also enables multiple discourses, ways of seeing (the gaze) and understanding rape, violence and murder along with their re-presentations (the image and (hi)stories), in order to examine the ways in which rape is constructed with the use of images, and identify how constructions of rape enable ways of seeing and understanding rape. The study revealed that the images were often used to guide the audience's perspective in a particular way desired or pre-designed by media, and at times the accuracy of the images used were also questionable. Therefore, the need for a more responsible, non-sensationalist type of representation of serious issues is identified. However, it was also identified that the audience may have the potential of seeing beyond the media manipulation.

Keywords- Representation of Rape, Vithya Sivaloganathan, Sri Lanka, Gossip Lanka

I. Introduction

When considering the role of media reporting vis-à-vis the concept of rape, it is obvious that media construction, representation and discourse of rape

have a considerable power in shaping public understanding and knowledge of rape. More than the written word, images are capable of sending powerful messages as a "photograph immediately grabs the viewer's attention and triggers profoundly personal responses—emotional, paradoxical and not always rational" (Roberts, 2011). This study aims to examine how the rape and murder of Vithya Sivaloganathan is visually depicted on a selected online news platform, namely, *Gossip Lanka*, and the implications of such representation. According to Foucauldian understanding of discourse it is suggested that discourse 'constructs the topic' (Hall, 1997). If so, the discourse surrounding Vithya Sivaloganathan's rape and murder may have an influence on the ways in which the audience read, view, understand/form knowledge about the issue of rape and murder. Therefore, it would be of interest to explore how the rape and murder of Vithya Sivaloganathan is constructed, which, in turn, enables multiple discourses, ways of seeing (the gaze) and understanding rape, violence and murder along with their re-presentations (the image and (hi)stories). Hence, the objectives of this research are to examine the ways in which rape is constructed with the use of images, and identify how constructions of rape enable ways of seeing and understanding rape.

II. Methodology

The research intends to analyse the images on *Gossip Lanka* news articles about Vithya Sivaloganathan's rape and murder which occurred in the year 2015. The images vis-à-vis the content in five articles which were published from 15th May to 24th May 2015 under the heading "Brutal Murder of Jaffna Student" will be analysed.

The primary analysis of this critical review is based on the first five news updates of Vithya's rape and murder on Gossip Lanka, dated 15th, 18th, 19th, 22nd and 24th May, 2015. Gossip Lanka news articles were chosen for the analysis since this is a popular source of news accessed by a majority of the general public of Sri Lanka (Alexa ratings, 2016). Since the articles are published in Sinhala and English both it reaches a wider audience (though mostly literate only in Sinhala) than, for instance, *Colombo Telegraph* or *Groundviews*. Hence it is important to analyse how rape is constructed and represented in news items which are consumed by the masses. In addition to the five articles, references would be made to other online articles on the incident and theoretical texts which bear relevance to the points discussed.

The primary method of analysis is a close reading and content analysis of the texts with particular focus on the images in the articles, and the critical review focuses on positions of seeing (the gaze), and modes of representation and construction of rape (the image and (hi)stories). The analysis has extensively drawn from Laura Mulvey's theories of perverse spectatorship and the gaze, and Foucauldian understandings of discourse. Review of literature has also been woven into the analysis itself in order to present more profound and nuanced insights on rape and its representations.

III. Analysis

As stated by Sophia E. Shaw, Ellen Nye, Joanna Jamel & Heather D. Flowe, "the print media are a key disseminator of knowledge. With a large percentage of the population solely dependent on the media for facts, media reports can influence public opinion at large, and even impact criminal case outcomes" (2009). Therefore, analysing the significance of news reports and images can be considered crucial in gauging the impact made by media depictions on viewers.

According to one researcher, "the notion that a photographic image provides a straight reflection of the "reality" of people, a scene, a landscape, etc. assumes that by "simply looking", we "know" the image as reality" (Roberts, 2011). Hence it can be argued that the image has the power to construct particular realities.

In such a context media representations of rape has significant potential in constructing rape, and influencing the ways in which the public understands rape. Ambika Satkunanathan in her article *The rape and murder of Vidya: Do women really matter in Sri Lanka?*, comments that the photograph of Vithya's body has a symbolic value, and that it

"...reminds us, hopefully and inter alia, of the many more like Vidya in Sri Lanka, and that debates around the aesthetics and ethics of journalism aside, this horrible business of rape must end" (Satkunanathan, 2015).

On the other hand, reporting of rape can be problematic. Brownmiller's study states that reporting of rape is 'more complex than simple, factual reporting' (Brownmiller, p.337, 1975). She also points out that media tends to report only 'selected rape', which will be 'enhanced by certain elements of glamour and aided by the use of stimulating adjectives, judiciously written in' (Brownmiller, p.337, 1975).

As indicated by the literature, an in depth understanding of media representation of rape and its implications can be gained through analysing images in news articles. Therefore, the present study will examine how the rape of Vithya Sivaloganathan is visually represented in *Gossip Lanka* news articles, and the implications of such representation in influencing rape discourse, and ways of seeing and understanding rape.

Vithya Sivaloganathan's rape and murder which occurred on 13th May, 2015 became an event much discussed in Sri Lanka. Despite the delay in making it to the newspaper headlines, the news of this brutal rape and murder was given much prominence and publicity in media once it attracted the attention of media following the hartal in Jaffna demanding justice.

The news of Vithya Sivaloganathan's rape and murder did not feature Gossip Lanka news till 15th May, 2015 which shows the amount of importance attached to the news prior to the protests held in Jaffna on that day, and the former president Mahinda Rajapaksa's dubbing the protests as a sign of resurgence of Tamil terrorism.

Was this because rape has become commonplace and media has other, more important news to cover? Or is it because what happens in the Northern peninsula does not affect the rest of the country unless there is an undercurrent or implication of terrorism? However, media culture awaits rupture and the moment they spot a newsworthy rupture they generally tend to harp on it. In this context it might appear that the politicized version of the rape and murder was what gave the incident its news value, i.e. marketability.

The first article, published on 15th May 2015, briefs the readers of the rape and murder with a collage containing a photograph of Vithya, and a few of the protestants, along with a caption highlighting the gender and status of the victim. The second article on Gossip Lanka titled *Elder and younger brother get together and commit rape on Advanced Level student ...and after killing her, has hid her in jungle near the home*, however, focuses more on sensationalizing the rape highlighting the facts that this is a gang rape, and the victim is a schoolgirl.

Vithya's images which accompanied the articles on her rape and murder are an important aspect for analysis. As Mary Anne Layden claims, people "...learn better using images than words, because images carry more information in a more compact form. A split-second look at an image can convey more information than a split-second look at words. Words are often perceived as opinions while images are often perceived as events or facts. We argue in our head against words or opinions, but much less often against events or facts, particularly images" (n.d. p.1).

The first photograph accompanying the article is a collage of four pictures; a crime scene of a rape (not Vithya's), Vithya in school uniform, grief stricken mother at the funeral and a student protest.



Image A: Photo montage in Gossip Lanka Article dated 18th May, 2015

What generates interest here is the first frame of these four; the image of a female corpse. According to Simone de Beauvoir (1956), and Judith Butler (1986) 'the body is not a lifeless fact of existence, but a mode of becoming' (p. 38), and it can be argued that the process of becoming is closely tied up with ascribing meaning, knowledge and interpretation to it. In this situation though it is obvious that this is not the body of Vithya, and may not even be the corpse of a rape victim, the body is ascribed the meaning of a body subjected to rape and murder. A closer look at the implications of this image reveals that it is an attempt to cater to the so-called tropes of rape news reporting. Inserting a picture of a female corpse grabs the attention of the viewers and contributes in representing the main points of the article in a single collage; beautiful Tamil student, raped and murdered, funeral and protests held. The construction of the image thus guides the gaze of the readers. It seems to position the viewer outside the picture while media manipulates the way s/he grasps the news. This may damage the reliability of the news report, but adds to the sensational element of the news where news providers are concerned more with attracting an audience than maintaining accuracy.

In her seminal article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey (1999) analyses the male gaze and representation of the female as the object of the gaze. She further explains how the woman on screen is simultaneously subjected to the gaze of the males on screen and the spectators outside. Her central argument is that women are subjected to multiple gazes and the spectator is encouraged to identify himself with the male protagonist on screen, 'his screen surrogate' (p. 338). By extending this argument, the present analysis finds a similar operation in the way the images are presented in Gossip Lanka articles on Vithya's rape.

This projection invites gaze of the audience, and while gazing on the victim, the audience is encouraged to identify themselves not with the victim, but with the camera. To elaborate, the camera gazes on the victim and the audience follows the camera's gaze. In doing so, the audience identifies with the camera and the eye that seeks the *truth*, and hardly with the victim.

As opposed to the gaze of Vithya in the school uniform looking at the camera or at the readers, the third image of her mother at her funeral offers a sharp contrast. There the gaze is directed at the coffin. The public is primarily invited to behold the grieving mother, but the attempts of photographing or videoing also seen in the picture (the person on the left of the mother) shows how the demarcation between the private and the public has become blurred, i.e. the personal grief of a mother and the tragic death of a young girl have become 'news' for public consumption.

The third news update dated 19th May presents the news in a novel angle of interest by introducing the 'Swiss national' who has 'videoed' the rape, destruction of the houses of the perpetrators by angry mobs and another hartal. The anonymous 'white-skinned national coming from Switzerland' (Brutal Murder of Jaffna Student, 2015) is used to raise the curiosity of the readers, but even in the fourth update the identity of this individual has not been revealed. The image accompanying the article is another collage.



Image B: Photo montage in Gossip Lanka Article dated 19th May, 2015

This, once again, attempts to summarize the focal points of the storyline of the article, as it highlights the camera and the arrest of the victims. The montage once again cleverly directs the audience's gaze, and even before reading the content the audience is given a blueprint that may frame their mindset.

The most detailed account of the incident is given in the fourth update dated 22nd May. It grabs the readers' attention with the captions *Police who looked aside when said girl was missing.... had said, "may have eloped"-Body found by brother who went in*

search alone -A female Deputy Minister alleged to have influenced Swiss national to be released!-True story of Jaffna student covered up by Colombo media.

The article sums up the inefficiency of the police, political involvement hindering justice, and concealment of 'truth' from the public. The fragmented title itself provides a kaleidoscopic view of the incident. The active involvement of the police hitherto indicated in *Gossip Lanka* articles on the incident is falsified by this update where it is revealed that the police has been negligent, and even the discovery of the corpse was done by the victim's brother. The way in which the blame is directed at 'Colombo media' for concealing the 'true' story of Vithya Sivaloganathan is rather ironic. *Gossip Lanka* too is part of the body of 'Colombo media', and shares the blame as well. However, it seems to be overlooked in the project of making the news more appealing to the public. This is then followed by a lengthy, detailed account of the rape as the "true story as reported now is as follows"; which problematizes this 'truth', i.e. does this mean that their version of truth is also temporal and subject to change?

The construction of the incident involved a number of competing, contradictory narratives. A case in point is *Gossip Lanka* articles' revelation of the reasons for this crime. According to the fourth update,

"The mother of Vithya, Sivaloganathan Saraswathy had served under a doctor in his house and one day on seeing 3 robbers who had tried to rob the house she had given evidence at the identification parade in courts of those 3 persons living in this area. When the police questioned her as to whom she suspects in connection with the murder of Vithya, what she had told the police was that because of the incident of identifying these robbers they had not been on good terms with her after that and that they could be connected to this murder. Accordingly when the police interrogated on suspicion the 3 brothers of the same family down that lane after a few days after this murder, they confessed before long that they were involved in this incident", (Brutal Murder of Jaffna Student, 2015)

This fact is also mentioned in the fifth update dated 24th May, as part of the confession of the rapists. However in an interview of Sivaloganathan Saraswathie, Vithya's mother, published in *Ceylon*

Today, she denies this version saying, “I have never given any evidence against them. It is a story fabricated by the killers. They wanted to rape and kill my pretty daughter” (Sivaloganathan, 2015).

Constructing the ‘truth’ of this rape and murder in media thus becomes challenging in the face of contradictory narratives, and rather than giving a balanced account of the incident the media culture of the country may tempt media to pick the narrative which triggers public interest most as the dominant narrative. Hence the commercial underpinnings of representing, constructing and reporting rape appear to be the principal governing body. It can be argued that power of media representation is ultimately linked to commercial interests, which raises questions on media ethics.

The article dated 24th May includes a confession by the perpetrators at the courts, and it contains a detailed account of how they committed the crime. It highlights the tropes of rape such as violence, vengeance and total victimization of women, in other words a typical rape story. If we apply E. Diamond’s understanding of mimesis to this, it is evident that though repetition of the tropes and details of rape and reinforcing of violence attempt to create a mimesis of rape, it is possible for the viewers to unmake mimesis and read the power-plays or undercurrents used in promoting a certain reading (Diamond, 1997).

The pictures in the articles capture and project Vithya as a student, a young girl and a rape victim (see images A, D and C in Appendix A). The image A represents Vithya as an ordinary school girl dressed in uniform, with the pottu on her forehead indicating her ethnic identity. The image on the left in image C shows her as an ordinary young woman with no indication of ethnic identity. One active protestant used this photograph on the left (cropped) as his profile picture before media gave publicity to the event, and some of his friends posted comments asking whether she was his girlfriend. This shows that when taken out of context, the image has less potential unless there is awareness on the side of the audience. The image D and the images on the right of image C, however, clearly represent Vithya as the victim. As Michel Foucault argued, an image or any other form of representation does not have meaning or cannot generate specific knowledge when taken out of its context (Foucault quoted in Hall, 1997). Thus it is evident that to grasp

the meaning of these representations they need to be placed in the context of rape and murder. In this instance, media becomes the power which places the images in the context and guides the readers in their viewing or ‘reading’ of the image.

However, being part of a postmodern society, all readers do not view the images with the lenses provided by media. Eve Oishi’s concept of the perverse spectator (2006) plays an active role in this instance where people openly condemned and objected the public circulation of Vithya’s images. On the one hand these images give weight and truth effect to the story covered by the articles, and on the other they expose the victim to the readership and the society at large. The latter was viewed by many as a violation of the privacy of the victim.

Image D in particular generated controversy as these perverse spectators argued that subjecting her body to the gaze of the public is disrespectful and a violation of her privacy, leading to an ethical discourse, which resulted in removal of those pictures. So it is evident that discourse can be generated through representation.

Nevertheless this is not the only discourse springing from these images. The author of the post *What happened in Jaffna should not stay in Jaffna* in icaruswept, for instance, notes,

“I am not going to take this picture down, though I take no pleasure in posting it here. My purpose is to show you what the media deftly reduces to “a schoolgirl was raped”. Understand that “rape” is not simply an occasional curse word or a Pornhub filter. This is the savage act that rape is – and by ignoring it, by refusing to see it, we paint over the horrifying ugliness that would otherwise churn our hearts” (icaruswept, 2015).

The bound and gagged (according to the articles) corpse with arms and legs twisted in painful angles sends a strong message of the torture undergone by the victim, to be registered by the viewers, and the writer seems to call for a more practical and radical stance in terms of raising public awareness on how despicable an act rape is. S/he views censoring of such ‘disturbing’ images is a mere act of glossing over the brutality of rape. This may have a point because there are other forms of media (like pornographic videos of rape or forced sex) glorifying the act of rape, where

rape is shown as a demonstration of power which more often than not is enjoyed by the victim and less traumatic (Check and Malamuth, 1985). Mary Anne Layden in her article *Pornography and Violence: A New Look at Research*, writes that such representations

“...give us permission to engage in a behavior we would like to engage in or are engaging in and tell us there is no need to stop, change, or reduce it...This “may be pornography’s most insidious influence; namely, the acceptance of the attitudes (some obvious, some more subtle) expressed in pornography. Pornographic depictions of the sexuality of women and children distort the truth about desires of women and children, and legitimize men’s sense of entitlement, and use of force, violence, and degrading acts by the male actors” (n.d. p. 2).

In such a context where media offers representations of rape as acceptable practice or behavior, there is a need for making the public see through the rape myth and become conscious of the brutality of rape. But this leaves the viewers with the question whether displaying the mutilated corpse of the rape victim is the most effective or the only way of raising public awareness.

At the same time detailed accounts and explicit images of rape incidents may sensationalize the act and lead to other similar incidents or reinforce gendered discourses or practice of identifying victimization of women and power of men over women. The chain of gang rapes following the Delhi rape in India and another gang rape and videoing of a girl following Vithya’s rape in Sri Lanka could support this argument. The publicizing of Vithya’s photographs tends to monopolize the gaze and the attention of the viewers, turning her into an object bearing evidence to the story narrated in the article. This representation becomes problematic where the victim ends up as the ‘spectacle’, i.e. the victimized woman, especially in the absence or the lack of presence of the perpetrators. In the articles and images analyzed in the present study, the perpetrators are literally caught in the audience’s peripheral view, (see image B, Appendix A). According to one article, the perpetrators consist of “3 brothers of the same family living close to the location where the girl’s dead body was found and in addition there is also a white-skinned national coming from Switzerland living in this same area and another 5 persons” (Gossip Lanka, 17th May). Except their names and a few small photographs, they exist in relative seclusion. The

images invite the spectator to gaze at the victim while shielding/ignoring the perpetrators, which further objectifies the victim. Her body, history and personality are looked at and analysed repeatedly, making a practice out of it. This sole focus on the victim favours none but the perpetrators since their identities are overshadowed, and their names and faces would be soon forgotten by the public so that in the event of getting lenient punishment or early release they would be able to integrate into ordinary life without much stigma attached to them. An aspect often overlooked by media, this leads to the victim’s embodiment of rape, violence and murder whereas it would be more effective if the perpetrators were made to embody those.

Ambika Satkunanathan in her article *The rape and murder of Vidya: Do women really matter in Sri Lanka?* comments on the blurred version of the image C, “In light of the debates, here and elsewhere, the original photo – though widely available online – is now blurred to a point of abstraction. It reminds us, hopefully and *inter alia*, of the many more like Vidya in Sri Lanka and that debates around the aesthetics and ethics of journalism aside, this horrible business of rape must end” (2015).

The blurring then helps depersonalizing of the victim, and the moment it stops being ‘Vidya’ it ‘becomes’ a symbol of rape. This broadens the discussion by inviting us not to discuss ‘the rape’, but rape. As opposed to the discourse which project Vithya as a victim, this leads to a discourse (be it on justice, women’s rights, human rights, or anti-violence) constructing and representing Vithya as a symbol. At the same time this may reduce sensationalizing of the images of the rape victim, and focusing more on addressing and grappling with the issue of rape as a social problem. Such different discourses springing in the radius of the rape and murder of Vithya show “the transformations which they have effected” (Foucault, 1991, p. 60). Though in Vithya’s case the sensationalizing and using the images as tools of marketing news had already taken place before ethical discourse countered it, the varied discourses on it have resulted in changing people’s perspectives of construction and representation of rape as exemplified in the above discussion.

IV. Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, the Foucauldian understanding of discourse suggests that discourse 'constructs the topic' (Hall, 1997). If so, the discourse surrounding Vithya Sivaloganathan's rape and murder would construct the issue of rape for the readers, or in other words, it would shape the ways in which the audiences read, view, and understand/form knowledge about the issue of rape and murder. When considering the role of media reporting vis-à-vis this concept, it is obvious that media construction, representation and discourse on the issue of rape has a considerable power in

shaping public understanding and knowledge; hence the need for a more responsible, non-sensationalist type of representation over such grave issues. However, the above discussion contained instances where a perverse audience would see beyond the representations and discourses generated and propelled by media, and maneuver counter discourses where necessary. Therefore it can be concluded that the rape and murder of Vithya Sivalaganathan enables multiple discourses, ways of seeing, and understanding rape, violence and murder.

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Appendix A



Image A: Photo montage in Gossip Lanka Article dated 18th May, 2015



Image C: The images that originally accompanied Gossip Lanka article dated 22nd May.



Image B: Photo montage in Gossip Lanka Article dated 19th May, 2015



Image D: The image on icaruswept which the author refuses to remove