

Reviews

As ISIS CELEBRATES ITS 25TH YEAR ANNIVERSARY IN 1999, WE ARE PRINTING A SERIES OF REVIEWS OF GROUNDBREAKING BOOKS ON FEMINISM PUBLISHED IN THE LAST 25 YEARS.

THE WAR OF INTERCOURSE

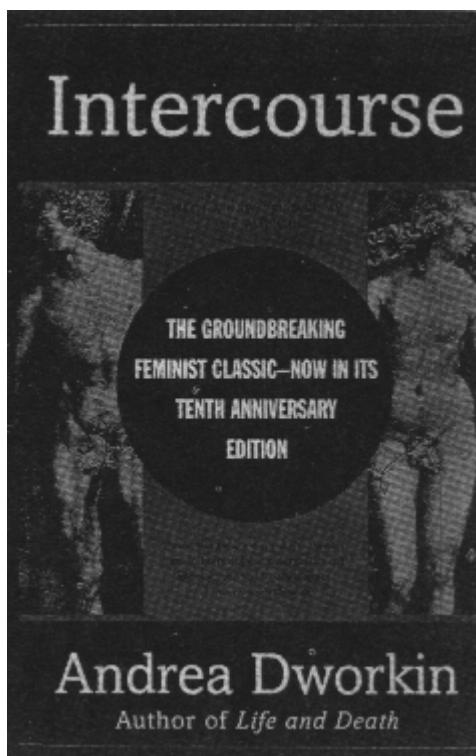
A review of Andrea Dworkin's *Intercourse* (Tenth Anniversary Edition 1997) by Giney Villar

Intercourse,

Dworkin's monumental book on the complexities of sex, now on its tenth anniversary edition, remains as forceful today as when it first appeared in 1987. In her new preface (1997) Dworkin describes it as "...a book that moves through the sexed world of dominance and submission..." and rightly so.

The author here questions and challenges the value and meaning that men and women attach to intercourse. While it is "easy to read" having been written in a lucid, scholarly manner without being highbrow, the book is difficult to comprehend. *Intercourse* compels its readers to rip open and examine their bodies and minds under the stark illumination provided by Dworkin. It is a disturbing light, and she makes no excuse for casting it. In this book she stops being female and suggests that all women must begin to stop being women as constructed by men, for their integrity and survival.

Intercourse opens possibilities. It can be interpreted in many ways. This is what the book exactly aims to do. To pose questions and spur action: in the author's own



words, "*Intercourse* is search and assertion, passion and fury; and its form—no less that its content—deserves critical scrutiny and respect."

The book is divided into three parts. The first part, "Intercourse in a Man-made World" illustrates the way men perceive women and themselves, as they sexually relate to women. In the section "Repulsion," Dworkin tells of the repul-

sion men feel about women's bodies, sexual intercourse and their unbridled desires, as exemplified by Tolstoy's life and works. In Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*, a man kills his wife to end his own torment and pain about the possibility of losing control over her. Dead, she would no longer be capable of defying him, and he would not have to bear the responsibility of subjugating her and desiring her.

Dworkin asserts that men are obsessed with protecting their own vulnerability and they use women to draw attention away from this "nakedness." Men resort to violence against women as a way of getting what they want without exposing their own vulnerability. Sexual intercourse is likened to being "skinless" where men and women merge and lose boundaries to become one flesh—male flesh.

Intercourse has also been understood as a form of possession. Women are penetrated and thus conquered and dominated as objects. In so doing, men possess women but both experience the man being male. In the process, women essentially lose themselves when they are taken over by men.

This is necessary for intercourse to be successful. Amazingly, men are not possessed even if they are literally enveloped by women during the sexual act. Women have been constructed by this type of sexuality. As Dworkin puts it, "This being marked by sexuality requires a cold capacity to use and a pitiful vulnerability that comes from having been used." And because of the social context, women have learned to equate sex with love and desire. Thus, male possession has become an affirmation of desirability, womanhood and existence.

In part two, "The Female Condition," Dworkin talks about the situation of women and the way men maintain female subordination.

In her first example, Dworkin cites the relationship between virginity and power as illustrated in the life of Joan of Arc, champion of France against the English. Joan of Arc repudiated the way women were constructed and fought against the English until her capture by the Burgundians. For her, virginity was "a passage, not a permanent condition," an act of integrity and not a retreat from life. Her virginity and military prowess challenged patriarchal powers and for a time succeeded. She was accused of more than seventy crimes foremost of which was wearing male clothes.

The Inquisitors went out of their way to break her and make her female, to make her submit. Believing that her power emanated from her virginity, she was stripped of her male clothes, returned to prison and was possibly sexually violated by soldiers to put her in her place—that of a woman, therefore an inferior being. Joan of Arc was burned for being inaccessible, for refusing to be female. It was a condition unacceptable to men.

Dworkin goes on to discuss another virginity in the manner that was experienced by the tragic fictional character Madame Bovary. Her virginity was "listless, dissatisfied ennui until awakened by the adventure of male sexual domination..." Virginity was equated with ignorance, until awakened by man. This is an idea that has prevented many women from enjoying satisfaction and wholeness within themselves. Men have made it impossible for these women to be happy without their approval and participation.

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Finally, in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the author reveals a redefinition of virginity. In this classic tale, women remained virgins no matter how many times they had sex, as long as their blood was not spilled. For sex to be valid, one had to "die"—an idea akin to modern sado-masochist ideology.

Dworkin draws her readers' attention to the fact that among subordinated groups of people, women's experience of being made for sexual intercourse has no parallel. She asserts that this is not because intercourse is no less violative than other brutalities. Rather, she says, it is because the realities attached with intercourse—the violation of boundaries, the physical occupation and the destruction of privacy—are considered normal and essential for the propagation of human existence. For Dworkin the question to problematise is the possibility or

impossibility for a physically occupied people to be free.

She presents contending answers to this question. First, she says that some explanations contend that there is nothing implicit in sexual intercourse that mandates male domination of women. This view derives from a belief that intercourse is not an occupation or a violation of integrity because it is natural. It is a position that refuses to make a connection between intercourse and women's oppression.

Dworkin also talks about actions that have been taken to tilt the balance in favor of women. These efforts are directed to change the circumstances around intercourse ranging from raising the economic and political power of women, to more private recommendations such as more sensitivity and female choice in love-making. While recognising that such reforms may possibly provide incremental changes in the way intercourse is experienced—making it more "equal" between the sexes, Dworkin contends that they have so far not addressed the question of whether intercourse can be an expression of sexual equality in the current social context. And she points out that this context "whatever the meaning of the act in and of itself, is one in which men have social, economic, political and physical power over women."

Women, Dworkin suggests, are literally occupied in intercourse and perceive intercourse in the way men want them to perceive the act. By instilling fear among women, men have succeeded in alienating women from one another and consequently subordinating them. Fear has also assured women's complicity in their own domination and objectification—a requisite condition for intercourse.

This collaboration strips

women of their self-esteem so women expend their energies preparing themselves for intercourse rather than for their own liberation. Dworkin believes that intercourse, for as long as it is “experienced under force, fear and inequality, destroys in women the will to political freedom.... We become female; occupied...The pleasure of submission does not and cannot change...the fact, the cost, the indignity, of inferiority.”

Interestingly, while there was some discussion regarding male-to-male relations, no explicit mention of female-to-female relations—and its potential for transformation—can be found in the book. The reader might “read” the subtext, but one might be accused of overreading. The omission is all the more puzzling given that the first edition was written in 1987, at a time when the lesbian movement had already been around for nearly twenty years in the USA.

I dare raise some questions spawned by my reading of this book. Is male-to-female penetration qualitatively different from female-to-female penetration, or is penetration, penetration every time with all its corresponding “ills”? Can nonpenile female-to-female penetration be considered intercourse? Can two women fuck? If they can, is that a continuation of an oppressive cycle of domination and subordination or can it be liberative? Is it the act of penetration itself, as some feminists assert, that oppresses and thus breeds inequality, OR is it the penis, OR as with male/female intercourse is it all in the context?

In the last part of the book, “Power, Status and Hate,” Dworkin further reinforces this belief. She outlines how laws have defined intercourse to ensure systemic male-domination and

women’s subordination. Sexual intercourse, the book claims, has never been a private matter. Laws have regulated it and thus society has participated in ensuring its power to continue to possess women.

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According to Dworkin, laws emphasise gender polarity to avoid confusion of roles. This is especially evident in laws governing intercourse, most vital in maintaining gender as a “social absolute.” Gender polarity in intercourse, and the corresponding meanings and values attached to such differences, also protect men from being treated as women—a detestable fate. For if men like women could be violated, their power and status would be seriously breached and thus male dignity would be dealt a death-blow.

In drawing her discourse to a close, Dworkin expounds on misogyny and shows how women are equated with dirt. In the section “Dirt/Death,” Dworkin explains how everything about a woman, from her body parts to her actions, is reviled in a world that despises her. Men manifest their hate for women by genital mutilation and intercourse. Men punish themselves for feeling what they do and punish women for making them feel that way. In the end, whatever action men take against women, it

still is and always will be women’s fault.

Finally, Dworkin posits that for change to happen, a redistribution of power has to occur. There has to be a change in power relations and an equality of worth that is socially true. In this struggle, the power of language can be potent in changing the status of women only if its context is changed.

Intercourse evokes strong emotions in its readers with its choice of words, its imagery, and its controversial content. It is necessary to be passionate because Dworkin argues against the denial of women’s existence. There is no other way to attack the subject matter.

The book consistently paints an antagonistic scenario between men and women constantly at war, with the odds stacked against women from the very start. Despite the occasional window that Dworkin opens for the readers to breathe some air and get some respite from her multi-faceted onslaught, the experience still leaves them distressed. Dworkin refuses to write from the feminine posture of one knee bent in deference to the powers-that-be. Rightly so, for readers would need to feel Dworkin’s feet strongly planted on the ground as she hurls her challenges to both men and women.

Unlike the celebratory feminist books that seem to be in vogue, *Intercourse* will appear to be the raving, uninvited gatecrasher to the polite little feminist discussions we have in the safety of our man-made edifices. It froths at the mouth, shocks and offends, but deep inside us we know that it speaks the Truth. ♪

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