

The Jodi Arias Saga: A Tragic Drama

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Abstract

On June 4, 2008, 27 year old Jodi Ann Arias murdered her lover, 30 year old Travis Alexander. Demonized in the popular press, Arias is often depicted as a crazy jealous angry sociopath who had a fatal attraction toward a man who was largely indifferent to her. Yet when her story is examined from a feminist perspective, the gendered sociological and psychological forces that influenced her decision to commit the brutal crime become apparent. The all encompassing rage that fueled her violent action was at least partially the result of being used, degraded and held to a double standard by a man who, at first glance, seemed to be her prince charming. As such, Jodi Arias is not the monster she has been portrayed to be. Her story can instead be likened to a tragic play.

Keywords: Sociology; Gender and women's studies

Introduction

In June of 2013, Jodi Arias was convicted of killing her lover, Travis Alexander. Because the jury deadlocked on whether she should be executed or sentenced to life in prison on two separate occasions, it was left to judge Sherry Stephens to decide her sentence. Consequently, on April 13, 2015 judge Stephens handed Arias the prison term of life without parole. To say that this case has been sensational would be an understatement. Both trials garnered wide spread media coverage and four separate books have been written about the murder.

According to popular opinion, Jodi Arias is a jealous, crazy, angry sociopath who had a fatal attraction toward Alexander. Yet when one looks at the case from a feminist perspective, the story reads like a tragic drama. With that being said, I am not excusing Arias for the murder of Travis Alexander. What I hope to do instead is shed light on the gendered social and psychological forces that may have induced a woman with no previous criminal history to engage in a brutal act of violence.

Act I

In act one, we meet a 26 year old woman who would like to marry and have children. She is in the midst of looking for jobs that will improve her financial situation. A high school dropout, she supports herself by working as a waitress. We also find that Arias is living with Darryl Brewer, a man 20 years her senior. Brewer admittedly has no interest in marrying Arias [1]. The two are in the midst of losing the home they purchased together.

At this same time, Arias learns about Prepaid Legal, a company where employees make money selling legal plans. She attends a company conference and meets the dashing Travis Alexander. As a star motivational speaker for the company, he has been slated to attend a formal banquet the next evening. He invites Arias to be his date, and because she has nothing to wear, he finds her a gown.

One part of the banquet includes presentations given by star associates, which delineates their financial success with the company. At this time, Arias learns that Alexander owns a home in Mesa Arizona and drives a BMW. She gets stars in her eyes because it seems as though she has met her prince charming.

Arias, however, initially resists Alexander's sexual advances because she is still in a committed relationship with Darryl Brewer. But since Alexander seems intent on forming a relationship with her,

and she is keen on exploring this option, she ends her partnership with Brewer soon thereafter. Arias makes it known that she hopes the budding romance will lead to marriage.

Analysis of Act I

In act one, the feminist themes are already evident. The fact that Arias was looking to marry comes as no surprise as women living in contemporary society are still taught that their lives cannot be complete unless they form a long lasting romantic partnership with a male. Young girls are bombarded with this message from toddlerhood on. They learn about it directly from family and friends and indirectly by way of movies, popular songs and fairy tales such as Cinderella and Snow White. As such, the ability to attract men becomes incorporated in a woman's self-concept, and romantic rejection is often experienced as an assault to one's self-esteem.

Because narratives such as these can serve to shape a woman's point of view, and guide her behavior, as girls grow to adulthood, finding a husband (or a close equivalent such as a live-in boyfriend) becomes a primary aim. Securing a mate is, of course, not a young woman's only cultural objective as females living in America and other developed countries are now expected to attain some sort of career. But marriage to a successful male is the culminating event in a whole host of cultural trajectories and a good many women still hope to meet this societal goal.

Act II

In Act Two, we watch the progression of the couples' relationship. Because Arias really wants to please Alexander, she takes instruction in the Mormon faith, and is eventually baptized into the religion by Alexander himself. Although it takes a while for Alexander to fully commit to Arias, they are an official couple for about five months.

During this time period Arias begins to speak like Alexander and

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use his rhetorical quotes on her My Space page. When she is with him, she follows him from room to room, scrolls through his text messages, and listens in on his private conversations; when he is not in her physical presence, she talks about him incessantly.

Alexander's friends refer to Arias' behavior as strange and crazy. They come to the overall conclusion that she is "off." Although they warn Alexander about her, he insists that she is truly a nice and kind person.

Analysis of Act II

At first glance, Arias' actions do seem out of the ordinary. When her activities are examined through the use of a feminist lens, however, one begins to see that her behaviors are not necessarily so unusual after all. It appears that Arias was simply following a cultural trajectory amply described by sociologist Rose Weitz. "Women," she writes, "are taught that they cannot live happy fulfilled lives without a Prince Charming who is superior to them in all ways" [2]. In this way, it appears that Arias looked up to Alexander and wanted to be just like him. After all, Alexander was a successful and charming businessman and there was no one else like him in her social sphere. And Arias is certainly not the first woman in the world to mold herself into the kind of person that she thought the man of her dreams wanted her to be.

There was a second issue probably going on as well. While the fact that Arias seems as though she is becoming Alexander seems strange, her behaviors are in keeping with what sociologist and psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow says commonly happens to females when they enter into romantic relationships [3]. Working from a branch of psychology known as the object relation's perspective, Chodorow contends that when babies are born, they see themselves as one with their mothers. But as the children grow older, they gradually form ego boundaries, and by definition, eventually come to see themselves unique individuals rather than an extension of their mothers.

At the beginning of this developmental process, girls and boys want to behave as their mothers would. But since anything seen as feminine is devalued in American society, mothers panic when their sons begin to engage in "feminine" actions. As a consequence, mothers push their sons away and this abrupt separation occurs long before little boys are ready to sever ties with their primary caregivers. Overall, this sudden and painful split causes young to develop very rigid ego boundaries, and they come to see themselves as markedly separate from others.

Mothers, however, do not become frightened when their little girls begin to imitate them because they are playing their proper gender roles. As such, mothers are not compelled to push their daughters away. But the lack of separation leads to a different set of problems. Because a girl's primary caregiver is usually her mother, she never completely individuates from her, and as a consequence, she never sees herself as completely separate from other people either. All told, when compared to men, women's ego boundaries tend to be far more permeable.

Taken as a whole, Chodorow's theory can be used to explain why it seemed as though Arias was trying to "become" Alexander. Because Arias' ego boundaries were exceedingly porous, she didn't know where Alexander ended and she began.

A clause from Actress Angelica Huston's autobiography, *Watch Me*, provides us with yet another example of this phenomenon. After breaking up with a long term boyfriend, she wrote the following passage in her diary. "I didn't know what was me and what wasn't anymore ... I'd been Bob's possession and his construct, saying the things he might say, even smoking his brand of cigarettes" [4].

Nevertheless, Arias' intense manifestation of this problem appears to be at extreme end of the continuum and she may indeed have been suffering from some sort of mental disorder. And this hypothetical psychiatric malady was probably at least partially fueled by her desire to meet gender norms for marriage and family. In fact, a number of researchers have shown that gender rules are intertwined with many different psychopathologies. Although such works are too numerous to expound upon in this short article, I will mention several of them here. In her bestselling book *Reviving Ophelia*, psychologist Mary Pipher reported that many girls who were fine as children began to develop psychopathologies when they entered into their teens. Placing the blame for such maladies squarely on the back of cultural rules for women, Pipher notes that as girls move from childhood to adolescence, they are expected to follow harmful social directives. One such mandate has to do with physical appearance and girls are induced to spend an inordinate amount of time perfecting their looks. This, of course takes time away from healthier pursuits such as sports, study and other creative activities. But in an attempt to fit in with their peers, girls adhere to these cultural guidelines even though they know the rules are damaging. As such, they replace their true needs with false ones, and the suppression of their true needs gives rise to all sorts of psychological problems [5].

Other social scientists have examined the ways in which gender roles impact adult women. In her inquiry into the lives of married females diagnosed with schizophrenia in the 1950s, sociologist Carol Warren discovered that the women's psychiatric symptoms were imbued with gender symbolisms relating to their husbands and children. One woman, for example, tried to burn her house down and another woman fed her child a tranquilizer pill. After conducting a careful analysis of their life stories, Warren concluded that midcentury gender rules, which relegated women to the domestic sphere, served to incite feelings of powerlessness, loneliness, stress and isolation. As time went on, she theorized, their feelings morphed into more serious psychiatric ailments [6].

Taken as a whole, the studies show that gender rules and roles can be linked to a variety of mental illnesses as women have diverse life circumstances and varying vulnerabilities. Other psychological maladies that have been directly connected to gender rules include eating disorders, nervous breakdowns, and even suicide.

Act III

After about five months as an official pair, Arias and Alexander conclude that their relationship needs to end. For Arias, Alexander's inability to be faithful is quite troublesome. However, they continue to communicate on a daily basis and this makes it difficult for Arias to let go of her dream of marrying Alexander. So she decides to move from California to Mesa, Arizona to be closer to him.

Though Alexander tells his friends that Arias irritates him and the he is unhappy about her plans, he helps her become familiarized with her new surroundings. He pays her to clean his home, and allows her to sneak into his house and sleep with him at night. And they continue to take trips together, just as they had when they were an official couple.

Meanwhile, Alexander is openly looking for a chaste Mormon wife. He begins to date Lisa, an 18 year old woman who is 11 years his junior. The fact that he is not only sleeping with Arias but vacationing with her as well is kept secret from most of his friends.

Arias suspects Alexander and Lisa are dating, but he tells Arias that

they are only friends. Lisa also suspects that Alexander is cheating on her with Arias, because he talks about her so much [7].

On two occasions Alexander's tires are slashed while he is with Lisa, and on a third, Lisa's tires are lacerated. Though Lisa is sure that Arias is the culprit, Alexander refuses to believe that Arias would engage in such behavior.

Alexander breaks up with Lisa and attempts to take up with another Mormon woman 29 year old Mimi. He tells Arias that he feels God wants Mimi to be his future wife and at this same time comes clean about his relationship with Lisa. Because Arias now realizes that the situation is hopeless and that she and Alexander will never marry, she returns home to California.

Analysis of Act III

In Act III, additional gender issues become apparent. First, since Arias correctly surmised that Lisa was Alexander's official girlfriend, and was aware of the fact that their own sexual relationship was a secret, one wonders why she would stay in situation that placed her at the bottom of her lover's relationship hierarchy? Once again, the probable answer comes from Sociologist Rose Weitz. "In their struggle to keep their men," she writes, "women learn to view one another as untrustworthy competitors" [2].

It seems to me that Arias saw herself as part of a competition that she could definitely win, and that her willingness to have regular sex with Alexander would give her the competitive edge. She was obviously convinced that Alexander would eventually come to see her as that special one and would ultimately end his relationships with other woman and marry her.

The strategy Arias used to "hang onto" her prince charming was no different than the tactics employed by scores of other women trying to achieve this very same goal. In spite of the changes made as a result of the women's liberation movement, one powerful strand of cultural thought still teaches women that the prime way to attract men is through their sexuality. Unfortunately for Arias, the tactic was an exercise in futility; instead of drawing Alexander closer to her, he came to look upon her with disdain. And at some level, Arias had to have known that she was degrading herself.

Second, it is easy to see that Arias' jealousy didn't just rise up out of thin air as many people in the media have suggested. No matter what he told his friends, Alexander and Arias was a couple. Although much has been made of Arias' fatal attraction to Alexander, little has been made of his fatal attraction to her. When it comes to their drama, he was very much a willing participant.

Act IV

Even after Arias returns home to California, she and Alexander continue to communicate with each other on a daily basis, and he even tells her he'll come for a visit. Their conversations become erotic and they engage in phone sex. But they also argue and Arias feels that Alexander is becoming increasingly mean. In one text message he calls her a "three holed wonder" and says that she is at least "good for something".

Though Arias and Alexander are scheduled to travel to Cancun to tour the nearby Mayan ruins, Alexander tells Arias that he wants to go alone. What he doesn't tell Arias is that that Mimi will accompany him on the trip. Arias will soon discover the truth.

During this period of time Arias logs into Alexander's Face book

page, and he becomes extremely angry in that that she has violated his privacy. A few weeks later they have another fight, and Alexander tells Arias that her recent actions have left him in a state of emotional ruin. He rebukes her with a series of verbal denunciations calling her a sociopath, a slut and a whore. He goes on to say that she's the worst thing that ever happened to him.

Eight days later, Arias visits Alexander at his home in Mesa Arizona. They spend the afternoon having sex. She kills him in the early evening. The murder is brutal. She stabs him 24 times, slits his throat, and shoots him in the forehead.

Analysis of Act VI

Arias had to have been cognizant of the fact that Alexander held her to a double standard. On the one hand, he saw Arias as tainted despite the fact that he willingly slept with her. On the other hand, he felt that he himself was worthy of a "virtuous" Mormon wife. What's more, being called a slut and a whore had to have provoked feelings of anger and pain. When Alexander adds invectives such as sociopath and liar to his verbal assault, the rage that had been smoldering within her rose to the surface. It is at this point in time that Arias appears to have snapped.

The murder itself is consistent with gendered crime patterns. In her research on women who kill, sociologist Vickie Jensen discovered that when women kill, they usually take the life of people who reside in their domestic sphere and that person is often a husband or boyfriend [8]. The precipitating event is frequently an argument that is coupled with physical/emotional abuse. While men commit far more murders than do women, and they do indeed kill their intimate partners, sociological research shows that when compared to women, their motives for committing murder are far more varied. Specifically, male perpetrated homicides are far more often associated with financial endeavors. This comes as no surprise as American gender rules for men continue to equate status with wealth and power, as gender rules and crime are tightly interwoven [9].

The Arias case fits the pattern that Jensen and other criminologists describe. She did not murder Alexander for money. Though Arias claims that on the day of the murder she accidentally dropped Alexander's brand new camera and a violent confrontation ensued, her veracity has been repeatedly questioned on this point. The evidence does, however, show that Alexander was, at least, emotionally abusive. All told, it appears that Arias felt victimized and degraded by the man she initially thought would be her prince charming. She then went on to murder him while in a state of extreme rage.

As such, the contours of the case are similar to another sensational crime of passion that garnered widespread media coverage that of Dr. Anna Maria Gonzalez Angulo a woman who, on September 29, 2014, was convicted of aggravated assault for poisoning her lover, Dr. George Blumenchein, with a sweet tasting chemical found in antifreeze [10]. Similar to Arias, Gonzalez-Angulo found herself at the bottom of lover's relationship hierarchy. Though Blumenchein had a live-in girlfriend, he maintaining a sexual relationship with Gonzalez-Angulo and like Arias, Gonzalez-Angulo had no history of violence and no prior arrest record. In the end, the intense emotional turmoil that accompanied these love affairs gone-bad seems to be what triggered the violent behaviors exhibited by both women [11].

Of course these situations did not give either woman the right to assault or murder their lovers, and it should be noted that the vast majority of women that experience the feelings of anger that arises

in the aftermath of a failed relationship do not resort to violence. Nevertheless, in some rare instances, the hurt and rage that emerges after romantic rejection, coupled with the inability to meet powerful gender norms for marriage and family, can ultimately lead some women to commit unspeakable acts of brutality.

Arias' own unspeakable act of brutality has led a number of journalists to label her a sociopath. For example, in the last chapter of the Arias biography, *Picture Perfect: The Jody Arias Story*, author Shanna Hogan uses the word sociopath to describe Arias' character [12]. Although I have never met Arias, and as such, cannot make any kind of definitive diagnosis, after reviewing the evidence at hand, my training in both sociology and psychology has led me to conclude that she is anything but. I will now turn to the work of psychologists Neil Jacobson and John Gottman to help explain my reasoning.

After carefully examining the issue of domestic violence in their book, *When Men Batter Women*, Jacobson and Gottman conclude that men who batter women fall into two different camps, and call the first group of batterers "pitbulls" [13]. Because the "pit bull" is the type of batterer who is completely and emotionally dependent on his wife or girlfriend, he continues to obsess about her and even stalk her long after their relationship has ended.

Referring to the second group of batterers as "cobras," Jacobson and Gottman assert that men who fall into this category have a long history of antisocial behavior and are generally unable to hold down jobs. Some of these men, Jacobson and Gottman assert, can be looked upon as true psychopaths. Since the "cobra" is incapable of establishing any kind of true connection with other humans, they form liaisons with women for nothing other than sexual gratification and economic benefits. If the relationship should end, the "cobra" quickly moves on to his next target. So if Arias were a true sociopath, she would not have become so attached to Alexander and she would never have held onto him for such a long period of time.

Psychiatrist Dale Archer makes a similar point in an article he penned for *Psychology Today* magazine [14]. He begins his argument by explaining that the term, "sociopath" is nothing other than a "lay term for a psychiatric diagnosis denoted as antisocial personality disorder." He then goes on to compare what he's learned about Arias to the DSM IV diagnostic criteria for antisocial personality disorder. He notes that while some of what is known about Arias does seem to correspond with certain parts of the diagnostic measures, other aspects of her story do not meet the most important condition of all: having had displayed a long history of antisocial behavior, beginning before the age of 15. With this he writes that Arias had, "no prior behavioral issues, legal issues, problems with work, family or friends and no known problems with previous boyfriends."

Information gleaned from Arias' former boyfriend Darryl Brewer corroborates Archer's assertion. In an interview he gave to *AZ Central*, Brewer told news correspondents that before becoming involved with Prepaid Legal and the Mormon Church [15], Arias was a kind, sensitive and caring person who was wonderful with his son [1]. He reported that she was good with her friends and got along well with her coworkers. Brewer also told *AZ Central* newscasters that Arias was very hard working, and after holding down two different jobs, had managed to save \$12,000. "She wasn't taking me for a ride," he stated, "Because I didn't have any money... I don't know what happened to her in that last year-and-a-half, but something changed radically."

In the end, it is important to remember that Arias is a young woman from a working class background who held the occupation of waitress

for most of her adult life. At the time of the murder, she did not even have a high school diploma. Accordingly, she did not appear to have been politicized in any way nor did she seem to have developed any sort of feminist consciousness. With that being said, I wish she could have taken a gender and women's studies course because in doing so, she would have learned to deconstruct gender rules and roles. As such, she may have been able to discern just why she was so drawn to Alexander, and why she had such a hard time letting go of a man who treated her so poorly. For if she had greater insight into the way she was feeling, she might have been able to stop herself from committing the heinous crime that ruined her entire life.

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