

GEMS (Gender, Education, Music, & Society)

Volume 8, Number 4, April 2015

The Jodi Arias Saga: A Tragic Opera

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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. 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. Instead, her story can be likened to the most tragic of operas.

In June of 2013, Jodi Arias was convicted of killing her former lover, Travis Alexander. Because the jury deadlocked on whether she should be executed or sentenced to life in prison on two separate occasions, on April 13, 2014 judge Sherry Stephens will sentence Arias to either life in prison or life in prison with the eligibility of parole after 25 years. To say that this case has been sensational would be an understatement. Both trials garnered wide spread media coverage and three 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. When looks at the case from a feminist perspective, the story reads like a tragic opera. With that being said, I am not excusing Arias for the murder of Travis Alexander. What I instead hope to do is shed light on the gendered social and psychological forces that may have led a woman with no previous criminal history to engage in such a brutally violent action.

Act I

In act one, we meet a twenty-six –year-old woman who would like to get married and have children, and at the same time is 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 twenty years her senior. Brewer admittedly has no interest in marrying Arias (Williams, 2013). 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 had 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. Arias must have learned that Alexander owned a home in Mesa Arizona and that he drove a BMW. It is clear to me that Arias felt like she found her prince charming.

Nevertheless, Arias resists Alexander's sexual advances as she is still in a committed relationship with Darryl Brewer. Because 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 her romance with Alexander will lead to marriage.

Analysis Of Act I

In act one, feminist themes are already evident. The fact that Arias was looking to marry and start a family children 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 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 objective. 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. Marriage to a successful is the culminating event in a whole host of cultural trajectories and 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. It takes a while for Alexander to fully commit to Arias, but for about five months they are an official couple.

During this time period Arias begins to speak like Alexander and 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

Alexander 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 actions are examined through the use of a feminist lens, one begins to see that her behaviors are not necessarily so unusual after all. It appears that Arias was simply following a cultural trajectory so amply put 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" (Weitz, 1995, p. 450). 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. In addition, 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 commonly happens to females when they enter into romantic relationships (Chodorow, 1978). 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. As they grow older, children gradually learn that they are separate individuals. In doing so, they develop ego boundaries.

At the beginning of this developmental process, girls and boys want to be just like their mothers. 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 before they are ready to sever their close ties with their primary caregiver. For little boys, this abrupt and painful split causes them to develop very rigid ego boundaries, and they come to see themselves as completely separate from others.

When little girls begin to act their mothers, they are playing their proper gender roles and so mothers

do not become frightened. Yet when it comes to forming an identity separate from one's mother, little girls experience a different set of problems. Because the girls' primary caregiver is her mother, she may never form a completely individual identity. All told, women's ego boundaries are often diffuse and they may not see themselves as separate from others. Taken as a whole, Chodorow's theory can be used to explain why it seemed as though Arias was "becoming" Alexander.

A passage from Actress Angelica Huston's autobiography, Watch Me, provides us with 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" (Huston, 1994, p.9).

Nevertheless, Arias' behaviors appear to be at extreme end of the continuum and she may indeed be suffering from some kind of mental disorder. In this regard, a number of researchers have shown that a person's quest to meet rigid gender rules and roles can lead to a number of different psychopathologies. Although such works are too numerous to expound upon in this short essay, 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. In an attempt to fit in with their peers, girls follow these rules 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 disorders (Pipher, 1994).

Other social scientists have examined the ways in which gender roles impact adult women. In an 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 mid-century 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 (Warren, 1987).

These studies demonstrate that different types of gender rules can lead to a variety of mental illnesses as women have diverse life- circumstances and varying vulnerabilities. The pathological anger, which undoubtedly prompted Arias to murder her lover, is just one of the many maladaptive responses humans sometimes display when they find it impossible to meet society's rigid gender norms. Other psychological disorders that have been directly linked to peoples' failure to realize these goals include eating disorders, nervous breakdowns, and even suicide.¹

Act III

After about five months as an official pair, both Arias and Alexander mutually decide 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 Arias cannot let go of her dream of marrying and starting a family with him. So she decides to move from California to Mesa Arizona to be closer to Alexander.

Though Alexander tells his friends he is unhappy about Arias' plans and that she irritates him, he helps 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. The couple continues to take trips together, just as they had when they were an official couple.

Meanwhile, Alexander is openly looking for a chaste Mormon wife and he begins to date Lisa, an 18-year-old woman who is 11 years his junior. The fact that he is sleeping with Jodi and continuing to take

trips with her is kept secret from most of his friends. Arias suspects Alexander and Lisa are dating, but he tells Jodi that they are only friends. Lisa also suspects that Alexander is cheating on her with Jodi, because he talks about Jodi so much (Lohr, nd.).

On two occasions Alexander's tires are slashed while he is with Lisa, and on a third occasion, her tires are lacerated. Lisa suspects that Jodi is the culprit, but Alexander refused 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 Marie. He tells Jodi that he feels God wants Mimi to be his future wife and he also tells her the truth about his relationship with Lisa. Because Jodi 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, a number of gender issues become apparent. First, since Arias clearly suspected that Lisa was Alexander's official girlfriend, and was cognizant of the fact that their sexual relationship was a secret, one wonders just why she would stay in the relationship? I believe that Arias was convinced that Alexander would eventually come to see her as that special one and would ultimately end his relationships with this other woman and marry her. In spite of the changes made as a result of the women's liberation movement, American women are still taught that a prime way to attract a man is through their sexual attractiveness. Therefore, 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.

Second, although Arias was a willing participant in this love triangle, at some level, Arias had to have known she was degrading herself. It is therefore logical to wonder why a person would remain in a situation where she was 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" (Weitz, 1995).

It seems to me that Arias saw herself as part of a competition that she could definitely win, and that her willingness to have sex with Alexander would

¹ Although the root causes of Anorexia are subject to debate, the symptoms of the disease are certainly intertwined with cultural standards for beauty.

ultimately give her the competitive edge. However, this became an exercise in futility, for instead of drawing him closer to her, he instead came to look at her with disdain.

Third, 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 *were* 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. He tells her he'll come for a visit. Their conversations become erotic and they even had phone sex. However, they also continue to argue and Arias feels that Alexander is becoming increasingly mean. In one text message he calls her a "three holed wonder" and tells her that she is at least "good for something" (Duke, 2014).

Arias and Alexander are scheduled to travel to Cancun together to tour the nearby Mayan ruins, but Travis tells Jodi he wants to go alone. What he doesn't tell Jodi is that he has invited Mimi to be his traveling companion and she has accepted. Jodi will later discover the truth.

During this period of time Arias logs into Alexander's Facebook page, and he becomes extremely upset that she has violated his privacy. A few weeks later they have another fight, though no one is sure what caused it, Travis does state that Arias did something so horrible that it left him in emotional ruin. He confronts Arias with a series of verbal denunciations. He calls her evil, a sociopath, a slut and a whore. He goes on to tell her 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.²

² A lot happens after the murder. For one, Arias goes on to tell a series of lies in an attempt to get herself out of trouble. Her sentence would not have been so severe if she had initially come

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. So being called a whore provoked feelings of both anger and pain. When Alexander includes invectives such as sociopath and liar to this 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.³

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 such as a husband or boyfriend (Jensen, 2001). The precipitating event is often an argument that is coupled with physical/emotional abuse. While men commit far more murders than do women, and these murders can occur in the context of their domestic sphere, sociological research shows that males are far more likely than females to kill for economic gain. This comes as no surprise as American gender rules for men continue to equate status with wealth and power.

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, and murdered Alexander in a state of 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

clean. The murder trial in itself is a media spectacle. These events make for another story.

³ After reviewing these text messages, Dr. L.C. Miccio Fonseca, sexual relationship expert and witness for the defense, stated that at this point in time, Arias was in extreme emotional distress.

Gonzalez-Angulo – a woman who was convicted of aggravated assault for poisoning her lover, Dr. George Blumenchein, with a sweet tasting chemical found in antifreeze on September 29, 2014 (Rogers, 2014). Similar to Arias, Gonzalez-Angulo found herself at the bottom of lover's relationship hierarchy as Blumenchein had a live-in girlfriend while maintaining a sexual relationship with Anna Maria. 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 (Kouri, 2014).

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 after being scorned 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' unspeakable act of brutality has led many journalists to assert that she is 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 her character (Hogan, 2013, p.336). 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. In addition to the analytic points I make earlier in this paper, I will now turn to the work of psychologists Neil Jacobson and John Gottman to give further credence to this point of view.

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 (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998). One type of batterer referred to as a "pitbull", is a man completely emotionally dependent on his wife or girlfriend. The "pitbull" is the type of batterer who continues to obsess about and even stalk his wife or girlfriend long after they have ended their relationship.

"Cobras" by contrast, are a group of men who

have a long history of antisocial behavior and are generally unable to hold down a job. Jacobson and Gottman assert that some of the men that fall into this category are true sociopaths. Since this type of batterer is incapable of forming any kind of true connection with their wives or girlfriends, they only form attachments with females to secure economic benefits, social rewards and sexual gratification. If the relationship should end, the "cobra" quickly moves on to his next target. Hence, if Arias were a true sociopath, she would not have become so attached to Alexander and she would not have held onto him for so long.

In an article he penned for *Psychology Today*, Psychiatrist Dale Archer M.D. also asserts that Arias cannot be defined as a sociopath, though he qualifies this statement by making it clear that he has never met Arias and can only offer his opinion rather than make an official diagnosis (Archer, 2013). He begins by noting that the term, "sociopath" is nothing other than a "lay term for the psychiatric diagnosis *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*. Although some parts of the diagnostic criteria do seem to correspond to what is known about Arias, he maintains that her story does not match the most important part of the criteria: She did not display antisocial behaviors in her teen years. Archer 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 Dr. 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, Arias was a kind, sensitive and caring person who was wonderful with his son (Williams, nd.). He reported that she was good with her friends and would go bowling with her restaurant coworkers on a weekly basis. Brewer also told the AZ Central newscasters that Arias was very hard working. After working two different jobs she 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 spent most of her adult life working as a waitress. At the time of the murder, she did not even have a high school diploma. It is also evident that she had not been politicized in any way and, in effect, did not have any kind of feminist consciousness. With that being said, I wish she had been in a position to take a gender and women's studies course so she would have learned to deconstruct gender rules and roles. In this way, she may have been able to develop an understanding as to 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 insights into the way she was feeling, she may have been able to stop herself from committing the heinous crime that ruined her entire life.

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