

## Critical Analysis of Sex At Dawn: The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality

The book “Sex At Dawn: The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality” by Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá discussed the notion that human society is subject to a specific standard of sexual behaviour, and this notion collapses once one looks at the evolutionary history of sexual behaviour. As it stands now, sexual behaviour is skewed to favour men with females at a disadvantage, as a result of a transition of social structure that occurred during the agricultural revolution. The evidence to support this stems from the similarities of human behaviour with their primate counterparts, the ancestral history of sexual behaviour, and the incongruity of this behaviour found in people now. Males and females are built to be hypersexual, and this paper will go into detail as to why the current standard of sexual behaviour is skewed to stigmatize female promiscuity.

Today exists a society where women are given the negative branding of ‘slut’ for their promiscuous behaviour, while men are given the positive/neutral branding of ‘pimp’ or ‘player’ for the same type of behaviour. It is clear that this society expresses a standard of sexuality where men are at an advantage while women suffer a disadvantage. This standard is not however based on any innate or biological process that dictates that women are to be more chaste than men, rather, this standard is entirely socially constructed.

To start off this topic, the standard of human sexuality needs to be defined. Researchers believe that the standard narrative goes a little something like this: The boy meets the girl, and the boy assesses the girl for how fertile, youthful, and healthy they are, while the girl assesses the boy for wealth, social status, health, and paternal investment (Ryan and Jethá 7). The boy forms a bond with the girl as long as they meet each other’s criteria (Ryan and Jethá 7). The girl will be sensitive to any form of escape by the boy with jealous and more paranoid behaviour, while also looking out for more genetically suitable counterparts during ovulation (Ryan and Jethá 7). The

boy will be sensitive to the girl's sexual infidelities and is also looking for extra-pair copulations outside of their relationship (Ryan and Jethá 7). A key component to recognize here is that while the female seeks resources and status from the male, the male tends to only seek what the female can offer with her body. While this narrative may be supported by researchers across the world, these assessments are not the result of an innate biological process, but rather a social structure that dictates it.

Human society has been under the impression for years that humans are above other species, unique in their nature and behaviour (Ryan and Jethá 1). The natural world is perceived to either lie below humans, where animal life is a downgrade from the human species, or the world is perceived to be above us, where nature is imagined to be the be all end all of things. When the world is seen this way, similarities between humans and animals in terms of behaviour are essentially ignored. However, human beings share a common ancestor with apes, so evolutionarily there is a species that is very alike to the Homo sapiens. It can be assumed, therefore, that these two species may have many similarities in their traits and behaviour. The standard holds that human sexual behaviour is intended to be monogamous, as a balance of sexual interests. However, in chimpanzees, who are cousins to human beings, the females have sex many times a day with many different males (Ryan and Jethá 12). Sometimes even, group sex involving multiple males with multiple females can occur which leaves everyone in the group more relaxed and builds on their interdependence with each other (Ryan and Jethá 12). This brings the question that if both these species are so similar, why is there such a vast difference in sexual behaviour? The answer is that while primate counterparts act on instinct, human sexuality is overridden by conformation to social constructs, even if human beings are evolutionarily advantaged to be promiscuous.

Evidence can also be obtained from the way the human body has been anatomically constructed over evolution. Males possess testicles hang outside the body due to the cooler temperatures that help preserve standby sperm cells, they also possess penises that are the largest of any primate in existence, and are quick to ejaculate (Ryan and Jethá 12-13). The availability of sperm, large penises, and quick sperm release all support the idea that males are supposed to be promiscuous in nature, that is, are to seek multiple opportunities to spread their genes (Ryan and Jethá 12-13). Females possess large breasts to attract males as a sign of their health and fertility (although large breasts do not have any impact on the ability to breastfeed children), orgasmic cries of delight to signal to males that their efforts sexually are helping the female to reproduce, and multiple orgasmic capacity to be able to perform sexual acts multiple times (Ryan and Jethá 12-13). Rather than adaptations for reproduction or paternal investment, these are actually adaptations solely for promiscuous behaviour. Where in modern society, the standard calls for women's attractive features to be signs of reproductive value, they are actually a sign of sexual competency. The clitoris has absolutely nothing to do with reproduction, but the sole stimulation of this area of the body can result in multiple orgasms for a woman, meaning pleasure of women is favoured anatomically over reproductive value in this case. However this isn't the case in the modern social construct of sexuality, where male pleasure is more important than their reproductive value, while the opposite is the case for women. If this anatomical evidence is not sufficient, maybe behavioural evidence can help support the idea of a hypersexual human species.

Human beings have a history of promiscuity. Throughout the existence of the Homo sapien species, which dates about 200,000 years of existence, monogamy wasn't much of an option (Ryan and Jethá 9). It wasn't until about 10,000 years ago that the switch from multiple

pair copulations switched to a standard one-pair copulation configuration (Ryan and Jethá 9). While sexual behaviour in prehistoric times cannot necessarily be mapped with ancestral history, there is still much support of the idea of a hypersexual prehistoric society from what evolution has left fragments of.

Initially, the Homo ancestors a few million years ago were involved in a mating system similar to gorillas, where the dominant male would fight to win a harem of females, and this process shifted to one where most males are granted access to most females (Ryan and Jethá 10). The standard notion of sexuality claims that this is when long-term pair bonding began, where two options were available for humans: one male - one female configuration, or one male - many females configuration (Ryan and Jethá 11). While men prefer the latter configuration, women want the former, which leads to the sexual conflict. But the standard notion fails to recognize promiscuity as an option, and chalk it up to morality judgement on the behaviour of human copulation in those times.

What actually occurred during this initial shift is the emergence of groups. The more evolutionarily advantageous strategy for survival and reproduction for humans was to work together as a society to share resources. This began what was known as the hunter-gatherer era, where regardless of gender, all resources that were accumulated were shared amongst all the members of the community (Ryan and Jethá 11). Everything that was done was in reference to group survival, rather than individual survival. All protection is done for the sake of the group, rather than every individual fending for themselves. The reason for this sharing was that it was necessary to reduce and distribute risk evenly between each member of the community, rather than one individual holding all the risk (Ryan and Jethá 11). From this group structure did

humans evolve to what they are today, where a sense of community and group was essential to human survival for a good portion of approximately 192,000 years.

This communal living in the hunter-gatherer era wasn't in any way a noble trait, but rather mandatory for societies to grow this way as it was the only way they could grow (Ryan and Jethá 9). Individuals could not sustain themselves in foraging societies, and thus this behaviour could not be carried on to the next generation. Traits that are heritable, variable, and are associated with more reproduction can be passed on to the next generation through evolution by natural selection. Individuality was not a trait that could be heritable as most individuals would not be able to survive well enough to reproduce. This is how group behaviour became advantageous, as many people can help sustain one group. Any of those who acted against the will of the group were shunned, and were left to survive on their own. Those who were ostracized by their societies had a low likelihood of survival alone.

During this hunter-gatherer era, the allocation of resources to both genders was essentially the same (Ryan and Jethá 8). Women had the same access to food, land, shelter, and protection that men had. As for sexual activity, men and women would be equally promiscuous, that is, both genders would have multiple ongoing sexual relationships within the community. It was not that these pairs were just random nor did it mean that sexual relationships were just casual. Rather, the group mentality of pre-historic communities dictated that it was mandatory and advantageous to share and behave with respect to the group (Ryan and Jethá 10). No individual was to own another, and no two people could act outside of the group. Thus, all individuals were one individual. This meant that not only was sexual activity a group shared activity, but so was maternal and paternal investment. Men would take care of any women in the community during their pregnancy, and women would breastfeed and care for the children of any

women within the community (Ryan and Jethá 11). There was no privacy involved, no notion of individual responsibility, but rather public and group dependence on one another (Ryan and Jethá 11-12). The shift toward monogamy, where coupled pairs would take care of one another and there is offspring, is actually a behaviour that only began to occur at the agricultural revolution.

The agricultural revolution involved the transition from hunter-gatherer societies to private property and individual harvesting communities. It was not until 8000 BCE, where the transition from foraging to agriculture began to occur (Ryan and Jethá 9). The reason this revolution was successful was because it involved the shift from group sustainability to individuals being able to take care of themselves and their offspring. Agriculture allowed people to reuse an area of land in order to gather resources for food, shelter, and growth. The reason private property was introduced was because farmers kept using the same land over and over again (Ryan and Jethá 13). Thus those who occupied that land their entire lives with their harvesting efforts came to own that land, rather than the community sharing it. The land area itself would be enough to help sustain an individual. In the past, being shunned from society meant the eventual death for the one who has been rejected, but with the rise of agriculture, people were able to survive alone. The risk is thoroughly reduced when one does not need to hunt as much for food, when they can grow a majority of their diet.

The revolution gave rise to a number of changes in community structure. Politics intervened, with hierarchal structures determining the distribution of resources and wealth. A shift from public to private property arose, where the individual could determine how to use their land, and the resources that come with it. Population began to rise as people were being fed better and more nutritiously, yet the quality of group life diminished (Ryan and Jethá 13). A world where men and women had equal access to resources in the community did not exist

anymore. The shift toward male dominance was in motion, where women were at a disadvantage and had to trade what they had for access to resources. Women were no longer granted access to community resources by default, as they would have been in hunter-gatherer societies. Recall the standard narrative, where a woman will assess a man for their resources, while a man only needs to assess the health and reproductive status of the woman. This however is not a result of some innate biological process, as women in the past would have access to resources despite the status of the male. This assessment of wealth is actually is a behavioural adaptation to societal values. In current human society, men control the majority of the world's resources, and thus women have to go through men to access them (Ryan and Jethá 8). This is where the standard view of sexuality began, and wrongfully associated with the nature of the human species.

Marriages seem to collapse and divorce rates in the population are high. 42% of women are said to suffer from sexual dysfunction (Ryan and Jethá 2). Men refer to marriage and their wives as the 'ball and chain', shining the whole concept of a monogamous relationship in a negative light (Ryan and Jethá 2). Men generally don't love the idea of being with one woman for the rest of their life nor do woman want to be the ones apologizing for that (Ryan and Jethá 2). The common reason given for these dysfunctions above is that there is an incompatibility of interests between the man and the woman. In reality, the two sexes are led to *think* their interests are in conflict, when in reality they both want the same thing. Society leads couples to believe that there is a problem with them individually, when in reality the incompatibility lies with the configuration of their sexual relationship. This results with women being demanded to reproduce in a trade for male resources. Women are only attempting to balance what was essentially their former right to resources, by providing their reproductive assets to men, while men have the freedom to reproduce with as many as they like, as they control the wealth.

In response to this supposed conflict of interest, markets and media respond with solutions to these problems. Essentially, the problem itself is a marketable entity, and the longer this conflict exists, the more revenue that goes to “relationship assistance” industries (Ryan and Jethá 3). This would include couples therapy, pharmaceutical drugs, and cosmopolitan-type magazines, which would outline the solutions woman have to utilize to *keep their man*. While men are taught ways to “get girls”, women are taught ways to “get the man you want”. This further escalates the idea that promiscuity is acceptable among men, but not among women, who have to keep their man to keep their resources. This continues an inner struggle in women who are innately hypersexual, yet have to match an external and incompatible monogamous standard, encouraging them to seek marketed solutions. Yet these marketed solutions don’t necessarily handle their inner desire to be promiscuous, but rather further conforms them to the social standard of sexuality.

Women in contemporary society suffer the disadvantage of a standard socially-constructed sexuality. There is enough evolutionary, anatomical, social, and historical evidence that is in support of the promiscuous nature of human sexuality. However modern society accepts men to be promiscuous, while women suffer the stigmatization of following their hypersexual nature. However, we currently live in an age of sexual liberation. Just as the human race over time accepted that the world revolved around the sun rather than the earth, or that human beings are the creation of natural law rather than intelligent design, they may also soon accept that a monogamous living style isn’t necessarily the ‘right’ way of existence. There is hope that one day society will be able to accept the nature of sexual activity for what it really is, and free women from being denounced for being human.

## Works Cited

Ryan, Christopher and Cacilda Jethá. *Sex at Dawn: The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality*. New York: Harper, 2010.