

## THE CASE OF AZIZ ANSARI: BRIDGING THE PLEASURE GAP

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For any fan of romantic comedies, the following visual is easily recognizable: a girl, in her quest to find ‘the one,’ subjects herself to an awkward and upsetting first date with a male considerably more obnoxious and unpleasant than the movie’s main love interest. Cut to the next sequence, where our female protagonist storms out of the venue in tears, perhaps in the rain for dramatic flair. It is a scene so trite and overdone that it practically screams ‘summertime box-office hit.’ Yet despite the cheesy excesses, this scene of a girl in tears after an atrocious date is far more common than one might think. Indeed, this was precisely the case for a woman publicly known as “Grace,” who retold her encounter with actor and comedian Aziz Ansari in a *Babe.net* article titled “I Went On A Date With Aziz Ansari. It Turned Into The Worst Night Of My Life.”

In the week leading up to their date, Grace had been excited to see the celebrity again after they had met at a party. However, when they ended the night at Ansari’s apartment, she immediately felt uncomfortable with his overbearing sexual approach. Despite the fact that Grace had displayed her discomfort through many non-verbal cues—her “hand stopped moving” and her lips “turned cold”—Ansari repeatedly made aggressive sexual advances, such as “physically pull[ing] her hand towards his penis multiple times” (Way). Even after she explicitly said, “I don’t want to feel forced because then I’ll hate you,” Ansari motioned for Grace to perform oral sex on him, to which she obliged under pressure (qtd. in Way). This back-and-forth dynamic continued throughout the night until Grace finally “stood up and said no, I don’t think I’m ready to do this” and left shortly after (qtd. in Way). Unfortunately for Grace and for countless women like her, what should have been a fun and enjoyable night left her feeling violated and helpless.

At a time when movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp are dominating the discussion of sexual harassment, it is unsurprising that the published details of Grace's date have sparked a fiery debate largely centered on Ansari's behavior and whether it constituted sexual misconduct. At the core of this debate, there seems to be a fundamental disagreement on whether bad dates like Grace's are just that—an experience that, while disappointing, should be expected—or something indicative of a larger issue.

Bari Weiss, staff editor for *The New York Times*, is one of many in favor of the former standpoint. She argues that Grace's nonverbal cues throughout the night were vague if not misleading, and that women like Grace should be “more verbal” when expressing their discomfort: “If he pressures you to do something you don't want to do, use a four-letter word, stand up on your two legs and walk out his door” (Weiss). From Weiss's perspective, the backlash against Ansari isn't due to the fact that the encounter was nonconsensual. Rather, it is because modern-day feminists have “radically redefin[ed]” what consent is and have introduced “new yet deeply retrograde ideas about what constitutes . . . sexual violence” (Weiss). For this reason, Weiss believes that labelling Grace's encounter as sexual assault “trivializes what [movements like] #MeToo first stood for.” She makes it clear that, far from being a case of actual sexual assault, Grace's experience with Ansari was simply a fact of life that all women must experience: “I too have had lousy romantic encounters, as has every adult woman I know . . . There is a useful term for what this woman experienced on her night with Mr. Ansari. It's called ‘bad sex’” (Weiss).

Many women agree with Weiss. Editor of *The Atlantic* Caitlin Flanagan laments for Ansari, writing “there is a whole country full of young women who don't know how to call a cab.” HLN anchor and former CNN host Ashleigh Banfield went on air to directly address Ansari's accuser: “By your own clear description, this wasn't a rape, nor was it a sexual assault . . . You had an unpleasant date and you did not leave. That is on you” (qtd. in Ricci). There seems to be a consensus among the opposition that Grace's choice to not explicitly say no and to remain at Ansari's apartment made her largely at fault and that, in comparison to victims of rape and workplace harassment, Grace's experience was trivial.

Yet many people argue that this critique fails to take into account the immense societal pressures that dictate how men and women should act in situations like that of Grace and Ansari. In her article “The Aziz Ansari Story Is Ordinary. That’s Why We Have To Talk About It,” *Vox* senior reporter Anna North describes what is expected of each gender: that women be accommodating and that men pursue the opposite sex relentlessly, even by means of “repeated small violations of [women’s] boundaries.” She comments on how frequently romance movies “depict men overcoming women’s initial lack of interest through persistent effort” and, as a result, how these movies have encouraged men to do the same in real life. North argues that girls in America often receive a different message. Not only are they taught that it is “rude to reject boys,” but they are seldom taught “how to ask for what they want, or even how to think about what that is. . . . The result is that situations like the one Grace describes, in which a man keeps pushing and a woman, though uncomfortable, doesn’t immediately leave, happen all the time” (North). North, along with many other writers, contends that while saying “no” is certainly an option, society teaches women not to use it and men not to hear it. Megan Garber, staff writer for *The Atlantic*, echoes this sentiment: “No’ is, in theory, available to anyone, at any time; in practice, however, it is a word of last resort—a word of legality.” Put simply, contrary to what writers like Weiss and Flanagan believe, just saying “no” and leaving is easier said than done when one has been taught their entire life not to do it. For this reason, North believes that “reckon[ing] with stories like Grace’s” is necessary. Doing so facilitates a “social conversation about the importance of communication, consent, and actually caring about one’s partner’s experience” and demands that men “do better . . . so that badgering and pressuring women into sex is deplored, not endorsed” (North).

For both parties, the overall conversation surrounding the case of Aziz Ansari seems largely focused on Grace’s sense of agency in the situation and on how consent should be defined. However, is it productive to argue about whether the encounter was consensual, given that the very concept of consent has widely varying definitions? Erin Murphy, a professor at New York University School of Law, elaborates on the lack of consensus concerning what constitutes consent:

“One person’s idea of consent is that no one is screaming or crying. Another person’s idea of consent is someone saying, ‘Yes, I want to do this.’ In between is an enormous spectrum of behavior, both verbal and nonverbal, that people engage in to communicate desire or lack of desire” (qtd. in Associated Press). Regardless of what people believe consent is, its execution is often messy and confusing in practice. A 1999 study by researchers Hickman and Muehlenhard showed a large discrepancy between how people perceive consent versus how those same individuals express it. Researchers found that although participants listed certain behaviors such as verbal affirmations as most indicative of giving consent, they also reported using these behaviors least when engaging in sexual activity. On the other hand, although participants rated a lack of response as least indicative of consent, it was also the most frequently used means of doing so. This suggests that attempts to assign formal and all-encompassing definitions to consensual sex are extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Therefore, despite our fixation on whether Grace’s encounter was consensual, it is perhaps more useful to question the fundamental ideas that make experiences like Grace’s possible in the first place. Her story as well as the ensuing reaction bring to light a problematic mindset that continues to permeate our conversations about sex. Banfield’s open letter is perhaps the best example of a flawed preconception. “By your own clear description, this wasn’t a rape, nor was it a sexual assault,” she claims (qtd. in Ricci). Despite being a powerful crusader for the #MeToo movement, Banfield and others like her tend to point to society’s worst offenders in their condemnation of sexual misconduct, but are seldom willing to carry the argument to a more nuanced place. While these movements certainly benefit women, their efforts all too often result in a binary view of sex: it is either consensual or it is not.

What is lost in the codification of the issue is our ability to critique bad sex—which, although consensual, is still worthy of our criticism. As Garber puts it, “It’s an awful irony: women spent so much of their time and energy and capital reminding the world of their right not to be raped, that the next obvious step in their sexual liberation—discussions about what makes sex good, in every sense, for all involved—got obstructed.” Culture critic Lili Loofbourow discusses

society's tendency to only evaluate the extremes and, in the process, normalize bad sex:

The Aziz Ansari case hit a nerve because . . . we're only comfortable with movements like #MeToo so long as the men in question are absolute monsters [whom] we can easily separate from the pack. Once we move past the "few bad apples" argument and start to suspect that this is more a trend than a blip, our instinct is to . . . insist that this is just how men are, and how sex is.  
(Loofbourow)

In other words, while people can easily discuss the wrongdoings of Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby, few are willing to analyze the content of their everyday lives by looking inward and challenging their own notions and preconceptions about sex. Therefore, when Weiss trivializes Grace's experience by simply calling it "bad sex," or when Banfield characterizes the sexual encounter as merely "unpleasant," they fail to acknowledge that bad sex in and of itself is still worth talking about and can still be indicative of a larger problem.

Loofbourow explores this problem in her opinion piece, "The Female Price Of Male Pleasure," in which she analyzes and criticizes our sex culture and, more specifically, how we prioritize the fulfillment of male pleasure, often at the cost of female pain. She claims that our refusal to recognize female discomfort in the pursuit of the "straight male orgasm" is pervasive in many aspects of our everyday lives. It is evident in our beauty standards, which demand that women wear clothes "designed to wrench the bodies" so that they can be sexually appealing to men (Loofbourow). It is evident in our sexual education, which teaches young women that losing their virginity is meant to hurt. It is even evident in our medical research, which publishes more studies on erectile dysfunction than it does on dyspareunia, vaginismus, and vulvodynia—conditions all characterized by severe physical pain during sex—combined (Loofbourow). Perhaps what's most revealing is the vast difference between how men and women characterize bad sex: "A casual survey of forums where people discuss 'bad sex' suggests that men tend to use the term to describe a passive partner or a boring experience . . . But when most women talk

about 'bad sex,' they tend to mean coercion, or emotional discomfort or, even more commonly, *physical pain*" (Loofbourow). The result is that women have been "enculturated" to expect little satisfaction out of their sexual encounters and, unfortunately, to endure physical or mental discomfort so their male counterparts can experience pleasure (Loofbourow). It is important to note that Loofbourow does not even mention the word 'consent,' precisely because affirmative consent should not negate the pain a woman may experience in the process. While consent is absolutely required before one can even think of initiating sex, it should not be the sole requirement for decent sex. Loofbourow makes an unconventional yet important statement in her article, arguing that consensual sex can still cause pain and discomfort for the parties involved, and that this pain is often meaningful in our social context and worthy of a broader discussion. Therefore, when people like Weiss and Banfield discredit experiences like Grace's, it encourages women to suck it up, get over it, and accept painful sex as a fact of life.

The consequences of prioritizing male pleasure over female pleasure go beyond what Loofbourow has listed and range from the unassuming to the grotesque. In Rebecca Traister's article "The Game is Rigged," she lists multiple ways in which "male sexual entitlement" manifests itself among college students. She asserts that the "male climax remains the accepted finish of hetero encounters; a woman's orgasm is still the elusive, optional bonus round." She also discusses the negative social consequences for women who wish to seek sexual pleasure: "A woman in pursuit is loose or hard up." On the contrary, men who do the same are "healthy and horny" (Traister). Both of these scenarios reveal the unfortunate reality that female pleasure isn't offered the same priority as that of males. Further reflection on our sex culture reveals that valuing male pleasure and ignoring female pain often go hand in hand. In 2016, a clinical trial for a male birth control injection that proved to be 96% effective was terminated due to subsequent adverse effects on male participants, including "mood changes, depression . . . and increased libido." However, many researchers were quick to note that these adverse effects were extremely similar to those that women must regularly face when taking birth control (Dicker). In other words, what society considers a

safety risk for men is socially acceptable for and even expected of women. This difference is no longer *just* a bias and can be more accurately described as an institution. Even in the supposedly objective world of research, the neglect of female pain still pervades.

The dismissal of female pain can have tangible and even traumatizing consequences. These are perhaps most evident in how our legal system treats rape victims. For example, there exists a troubling tendency for police to disregard the distress of the victim. Instances like an Ohio 911 dispatcher's telling a woman to "quit crying" are all too common (Sun). Even more distressing is the fact that victims are often blamed for the rape itself. In the field of public health, this phenomenon is termed "secondary victimization," which is defined as "the victim-blaming attitudes, behaviors, and practices . . . which results in additional trauma for sexual assault survivors" (Campbell and Raja). These practices include "questioning victims about their prior sexual histories, asking them how they were dressed, or encouraging them not to prosecute" (Campbell and Raja). These legal tactics reveal not only our insensitivity to female suffering, but also the great lengths to which society is willing to go to defend the pursuit of male pleasure—as if a short skirt or a history of promiscuity were reason enough to cause immense physical and emotional harm to women. This type of behavior relates to what Grace now faces. "If you are uncomfortable, then leave!" one *New York Times* commenter wrote. "Aziz was just led on by . . . 'a tease' who should be exposed for what she is," wrote another.

This defense of male pleasure is also demonstrated in the media's protective attitude towards rapists. The case of Brock Turner and his rape of an unconscious twenty-two-year-old woman is a salient example in recent history of how media chooses to represent rapists. A 2016 article by The Washington Post best demonstrates this tendency; its title alone, "All-American Swimmer Found Guilty Of Sexually Assaulting Unconscious Woman On Stanford Campus," focuses the case on Turner's achievements. The article portrays Turner's crime less as an egregious offense and more as a "stunning fall from grace" (Miller, "All-American"). This impression management seeks to humanize rapists and alleviate the severity of their actions on the basis of their prior reputations. A statement written by Turner's father best

exhibits this social tendency; he claims that Turner paid “a steep price . . . for 20 minutes of action” (qtd. in Miller, “A steep”). This is the extent to which we will defend male pleasure and minimize female pain, to the point where the debilitating act of sexual assault is reduced to “20 minutes of action.” It is scary to see how quickly critics of Grace launched a similar defense of Ansari’s actions. “Aziz Ansari was a man whom many people admired . . . Now he has been—in a professional sense—assassinated, on the basis of one woman’s anonymous account,” Flanagan wrote. Banfield also lists Ansari’s achievements prior to the Babe.net article, mentioning his award for his Netflix series *Master of None* at the 75th Golden Globes.

It is precisely this defense of male pleasure and minimization of female pain that make the polarization of sex fundamentally possible. This polarization protects many men from having to acknowledge the entitled and even harmful nature of their sexual encounters; it also allows men like Ansari to straddle the border between consensual sex and harassment without criticism. Perhaps it is for this reason that Grace’s article has been so controversial and threatening, for it “involves a situation in which many men can imagine themselves” (North). Her night of “bad sex” forces everyday men who aren’t typically grouped with the “Harvey Weinsteins and Kevin Spaceys of the world” to reconcile the fact that what they believed to be normal, socially acceptable sex is not as harmless as they assumed (Banfield qtd. in Ricci). Up until now, this limited understanding of appropriate sexual behavior allowed men to assume that as long as they weren’t “absolute monsters,” they were guiltless. However, without challenging this idea and having these difficult conversations, men will continue to push women’s boundaries during sexual pursuit, thinking that what they’re doing is excusable. Further, the toxic notion that male pleasure should override women’s desire and justify their pain will persist and wreak havoc. Continuing to ignore women’s suffering will only reinforce it.

I have no doubt that current discussions surrounding Grace’s encounter with Aziz Ansari are well-intentioned. However, these discussions, by focusing solely on the nuanced issue of consent, have missed an opportunity to open a new discussion on “bad sex”—a topic that many try too often to avoid. The conversation that we need to be

having must go beyond consent by first and foremost breaking down the false equivalency that exists between consensual sex and good sex. Only after we pass this stage can we begin to deconstruct the pervasive and toxic mentality that enables male pleasure to erase and even justify female pain. Contrary to Grace's opponents, having this discussion does not entail "women torching men for failing to understand their 'nonverbal cues'" (Weiss). Rather, it simply calls upon men to do better: to self-analyze and see if they've contributed to our harmful sex culture, and, if they have, to do something about it. It implores society to acknowledge female pain beyond instances when their sexual boundaries are so thoroughly and severely breached as to call the encounter rape. It demands that men and women alike adopt higher standards for sex that don't just fulfill affirmative consent, so that the desires of both parties are fulfilled. As Maya Dusenbery, editorial director of *Feministing*, puts it, "I don't want us to ever lose sight of the fact that consent is not the goal. Seriously, God help us if the best we can say about the sex we have is that it was consensual" (qtd. in Traister).

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