

*The Presentation of Rape in Laurie Halse Anderson's Speak*

Kamonwan Chummee, Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand  
Supaporn Yimwilai, Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand

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**Abstract**

With the raising number of reported rape cases, rape becomes one of the crucial social problems in worldwide. Mostly, women and girls are the main target of this violent crime. The violation on women's body is an issue which has been discussed in many ways. Children's literature is one of the powerful tools used for raising awareness of sexual assault in readers. This paper focuses on the presentation of rape in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*. It also discusses the effects of rape culture on a rape victim. The study shows that rape myth acceptance considerably impacts victim, people surrounding a victim and rapist's attitudes toward rape, rape victim, and rapist

Keywords: Children's literature, patriarchy, rape, sexual assault, rape myths, SPEAK

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## **Introduction**

Rape becomes one of the crucial social problems worldwide. Because of the surging number of rape cases reported each year, it is a crisis that many countries try to solve thoroughly. Women and girls can be sexually harmed by all surrounding men. Not just strangers can sexually harm them; however, all male siblings and kinship could even be women and girls' surrounding dangers. Few of rape victims are brave to report about rape because of many reasons. Therefore, learning about the danger of sexual violence and its prevention has been focused nowadays.

Literature is a powerful tool to change people and societies. Literature is creatively written by an author for entertainment and appreciation; however, sometimes it directly and indirectly informs readers with profundity of thought in order to effectively change societies. According to Fox (1993), "Texts are important influences that shape us by reflecting politics and values of our society." They are not just passive texts which we actively interpret meaning from it, but they are created to mold us through letters (p. 656). Therefore, literary works have had a great impact on readers and the development of society. Children's literature is a powerful tool to raise awareness among young people. Rovenger (1988) stated that children's literature is like a moral compass; it is not only "the stuff of memories, but it also can be vital compass point along the byways of life" (p. 45-46). There are many children books related to sexual assault theme in the market. Many of them got awards because of their popularity and profundity of thought. Among them, *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson is chosen to study.

*Speak* is a story about Melinda Sordino, a high school girl, who is raped by an upper-class boy at an end-of-summer party. She is friendless and outcast as a result of breaking up the summer party by calling the police as a will to report her rape incident. However, she flees before reporting the crime and keeps it secretly. Consequently, she starts her life in a high school with trauma. She feels safe by living alone. *Speak* by Anderson is a children's literature that can distinctly expose false beliefs held in our societies. Because of the influences of rape myth acceptance, Melinda, the protagonist, people surrounding her and Evans, the rapist, have distorted beliefs about rape, rape victim and rapist

## **Rape Myths**

Rape myths are false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists that perpetuate an accepted rape culture. Many people have inaccurate ideas about rape. Unfortunately, some men use these myths to justify their sexually violent actions. Crosby (2011) suggested that rape myth can be divided into three groups: myths of victim blaming, myths of the rapist's exoneration, and myths of the rape's surrounding environment.

Myths of blaming the victims include many prejudicial beliefs about women. These myths subscribe to the misconception that it is the woman's fault for being raped. Blame is placed on the female survivors of rape, rather than on the perpetrators of the crime. For example, there is a belief that if there is no physical injury as a result of the victim's resistance, she should not be treated as a rape victim because women cannot be assaulted against their will. They can supposedly prevent rape if they want

to by fighting hard. False reporting is another rape myth that makes it easy to blame the victims. Some think that women lie about being raped because they feel guilty after having sex, or they want to seek revenge against their partners. There is also the idea that women “ask for it.” The belief is that because of their provocative dress and actions, women deserve to be raped (Sherwood, 2011; Mulliken, 2006; Curran & Renzetti, 1993). Women’s beauty and charm are often blamed for arousing men’s sexual desire. Sometimes a woman’s friendliness may be misinterpreted as an invitation to have sex with a man. According to Shotland and Goodstein (1983), they found that rape by an acquaintance is questioned as being a genuine rape. They stated:

Several authors suggest that it is commonly accepted for a woman to conceal her genuine interest in sexual contact and merely suggest her intentions in subtle or symbolic ways....Conversely, cultural beliefs about the dating situation hold that a woman is expected to resist a man’s advances at least in the beginning stages of a sexual encounter, even though she may be responsive and ultimately consent to having sexual relations....It appears that some men may underrate a woman’s verbal protests and overrate her expressions of friendliness in their attempts to facilitate a sexual encounter (p. 5-6).

This shows that gender patterns constructed by society can affect the attitudes of men on how to interpret women’s signals or words. Women’s rejection signals and words may be ignored because some men think that women pretend to be “hard to get.” Men misinterpret this as flirting. The word *no* from a woman may mean nothing to a man, and he may ignore her protests in favor of his own desires.

There are many notions that support the myths that exonerate rapists. These beliefs benefit rapists by negating accusations against them. An illustration of this type of myth is that if an incident does not involve a weapon or a violent physical attack, some people, even some victims, do not consider the event a rape (Mulliken, 2006). Without sufficient, accurate knowledge about rape, many people do not know what is considered rape. Some victims do not think that they have been raped; therefore, they do not report the incident as a crime. Moreover, there is the belief that a wife cannot be raped by her husband because the husband has a right to do whatever he wants to his spouse. Another commonly held rape myth is that women are usually raped by strangers. However, some researchers’ data show evidence contrary to this belief. Bureau of Justice Statistics Selected Findings (2009) reveals that fifty seven percent of rape crime are committed by people known to the victims. According to Curran and Renzetti (1993), it is also believed that only men with mental illness commit this violent crime. Media sometimes publicize the idea that rapists are psychotic. The thinking is that normal men cannot commit this crime. Consequently, a rapist may be treated as a sick person rather than as a criminal. Moreover, they emphasize that there is a belief that rapists are not Caucasians, but people of color. Most rapes are interracial crimes, and men of certain races are more likely be accused of rape than others. As a result, white people are generally not accused of rape. Mulliken (2006) describes the finding of Williams and Holmes’s study as an irrefutable evidence that men from minority groups, African Americans and Mexicans in particular, often see themselves as scapegoats in rape accusations. It produces stereotypes in people’s mind that a rapist cannot be a white man.

There are myths about the site of the rape and its surrounding environment. Some believe that being in certain places increases a woman's chance of being raped. In reality, rape can occur anywhere: at home, at school, on public transport, in temples, etc. But a myth exists that rape only occurs in dark and isolated places outside of the home, and it usually happens in lower-class neighborhoods (Crosby, 2011; Curran & Renzetti, 1993). Therefore, it is a woman's responsibility to avoid such places to lessen her chance of being raped. Staying at home, women will be safe. So, when they go to risky places, such as a bar or an isolated area, they are responsible if they are raped.

Through these three false myths, rape culture is perpetuated by misconceptions regarding rape, rapists, and rape victims. Moreover, society discourages rape victims from reporting the crime. Rape experiences are minimized by rape myths as unimportant experiences. Although police officers are trained to deal with rape cases effectively, victim-blaming attitudes have not totally disappeared from every police department. Victims will not get the proper help they need if they keep the rape secret, nor will the perpetrators be punished. In addition, victims can become embarrassed and blame themselves for what happened. Consequently, male sexual aggression against women is accepted and justified in some societies while it is also being constantly perpetuated in those societies.

### **The Role of Rape Myth Acceptance in *Speak***

Rape myths do not only encourage men to commit sex crimes by giving them accusations, but it also discourages rape victims to report the crime. Because of a consequence of social learning, the way people think about rape, rape victims, and rapists are shaped. The acceptance of rape myths considerably influences people, societies and authorities to have distorted attitude toward rape, rape victim and rapist.

Melinda who also holds rape myths knows how the societies will judge her after revealing about the rape. For this reason, she is the first one who blames herself of being raped. Because of the influence of rape myths acceptance, Melinda kept her rape experience in secret. There are many reasons that make Melinda feel that she should take the responsibility of being raped.

First, bringing herself into the risky places is one reason that stops Melinda to report the crime. One rape myth that some people believe is that in some certain places, especially in dark and isolated places, women have high risk of being raped (Crosby, 2011; Curran & Renzetti, 1993). They should avoid being in these places. If they decide to go to the risky places, they have to be responsible for the outcome. Women who voluntarily bring themselves to risky places will increase the degree of suspicion and doubt in people as rape victims in people because women's self-protection is one element that people use for judging them. In Melinda's case, she realized that she was the one who walked into a risk situation herself, being out late at night and going to the party with her friends without parents' permission. A party where people can assume that it relates to alcohol, sometimes drugs and drunkards is one of the risk areas that a good girl or a good woman should not go. Moreover, Melinda made herself getting in a higher risk by going to the woods with a man while she was drunk. She went into the woods where she described, "somebody giggled, hidden beyond the dark, quite boygirl whispers" (Anderson, 2008, p. 156). She knew it is a place that

couples whisper sweet nothings and exchange kisses to each other. In that isolated area, she did not detect any danger. She could not say to anybody that she was forced to go to the party and to the woods. She made her own decision to walk into troubles. Therefore, by her decisions to put herself into the unsafe places, she was reluctant to report the crime. Because of the rape myth acceptance, she thought that it was her responsibility for being assaulted.

Drinking alcohol is another reason that prevents Melinda to report the sexual assault. Some people believe that women who drink are not good women (Sherwood, 2011; Mulliken, 2006; Curran & Renzetti, 1993). Besides, women who go to a bar with provocative dresses are sometimes seen as gullible women who have less value, and they deserve to be raped. With slightest respectability toward females in patriarchal societies, drinking is enough to discredit rape victims in the eyes of authorities. Women and alcohol are not a good combination of good women. Many people think that women who are willingness to drink a lot of alcohol should not complain of being raped. As a fourteen-years-old girl, Melinda could not legally drink, but she did drink. Because she drank, she jeopardized herself. With half-conscious state, she could not make a good decision to prevent herself from an unsafe position as she recalls the event, "I tested a beer. Another beer and one more, then I worried I would throw up" (Anderson, 2008, p.156). Because she was incapacitated by alcohol, she was unable to give consent or prevent to have a sex. Therefore, by deciding to go to a party and drinking alcohol, it is difficult to make other people believe that she does not "ask for it" as one of the rape myths always blame on rape victims. Some men seize an opportunity to have sex with drunken women by implying their unconsciousness means consent, while women who willingly drank lots of alcohol should not complain about being raped. In Melinda's case, it cannot be denied that if she tells the truth, some people might think that she deserves to be raped. As a result, because she held this rape myth, she believed that no one would believe her rape experience.

Another myth that affected Melinda's willingness to report the crime is that the rapist is not a stranger. It is always complicated in a case that a rape victim knows the offenders. Shotland and Goodstein (1983) also suggest that rapes that were committed by someone whom rape victims knew were often questioned. Previous relationships between women and offenders were always used as one of the evidences for judging the crime. It often has affected judgments of people, society and authorities. In Melinda's case, the truth is that she flirted with the rapist at first. The meeting between Melinda and the rapist started with the flirting of a boy and a girl. Therefore, he was not a complete stranger. This becomes to be troublesomeness for Melinda, who holds a false belief that the rapist must be a stranger, to explain to other people about her unfortunate situation. While being flirted by a "gorgeous cover-model guy" whom she thought her friend would be jealous of her, she was happy. She let him flirted, touched and kissed at first (Anderson, 2008, p.156). Montgomery suggested that flirting often has different meaning between men and women. Sometimes men and women flirt to build friendly relationship, but mostly men flirt women because of sexual intention (as cited in Grauerholz, 1994). Montgomery's idea seems to fit well with Melinda's case. Melinda's intention was just to have a handsome boyfriend in order to start a bright high school life like other teenage girls. On the other hand, Evans, the rapist, interpreted Melinda's previous actions as consensual signs to have sex with him. Consequently, because of the different

interpretation of flirting between Evans and Melinda, she ended up with being raped by a senior boy from her school. Therefore, with all of her actions, it is hard for her to persuade people to believe that she does not consent or “ask for it.” Moreover, other people who hold rape myths may think that she deserves to be raped because her flirting provokes the man to have sex with her. Rape is a crime that victims must prove themselves as victims, and they have to prove that they do not consent (Curran & Renzetti, 1993; Sheffield, 1984). Similarly, Melinda questioned whether her flirting mean consent. Therefore, it is troublous for her to prove herself that she is the victim of this sexual crime because people usually blame date rape victims. It is illogical because people overlook the right to say no of the victim at any time. Legally, previous relationship between victims and offenders cannot use to judge this sexual crime. Willingness to be flirt, to kiss, and to embrace is not always mean consent to have sexual relation (Kring, Davison, Neale & Johnson, 2013).

Not fighting hard enough to protect herself from being raped is another reason that stop Melinda to report her rape experience. Some people hold an idea that women cannot be raped against their will. They can protect themselves from being assaulted by fighting hard (Sherwood, 2011; Mulliken, 2006; Curran & Renzetti, 1993). According to Sheffield (1984), rape is considered as a sexual act that need evidence to prove that there have forcible actions or resistances. To convict rapists, victims are demanded to have evidence of forcibility and resistance to prove. Victim’s words are not sufficient to convict a crime. In Melinda’s case, when she realized that the situation was too much to handle, she could not resist and take control anything. Because of the drunkenness and differentiation of physical strength, she could not strongly refuse and prevent herself from the unconsent sexual activity. She could only mumble about leaving her alone that she knew it sounds like “a deranged drunk” (Anderson, 2008, p.158). When she wanted to scream, her mouth was shut by his hand, and her rejection was intentionally ignored. After being rape, although she decided to call the police, she fled before reporting the crime because of doubt in the event. “Was I raped?” is a question popped up in some victims who held some rape myths, and Melinda is also one of them (Anderson, 2008, p. 190).

Malinda’s rape case is not the only unreported rape case, but many victims decided to unreport their crimes. Crowell and Burgess (1996) inform that thirteen to twenty-five percent of American women will be sexual assaulted during their life (p. 1). However, rape is one of the least reported crimes according to information published by police. Twenty-five percent of victims consider rape an intimate problem that they want to deal and conceal with themselves (Glynn et al., 1996). When women are raped on a date, which the rapist is someone known to the victims, they seem to less likely report the incidents. On the other hand, random rapes by a stranger are ten times more likely to be reported by the victims (Curran & Renzetti, 1993). Moreover, according to Koss and Harvey, sixty percent of rape victims are worried of being blamed for being raped (as cited in Kornblum, Julian, & Smith, 1995). Therefore, the number of reported rape cases is not correct with circumstances nowadays.

The acts of people surrounding Melinda essentially affect her willingness to report the crime. Firstly, to be accepted into a group of friend and community is one reason for keeping Melinda from telling someone about rape. Social rejection was one of the results she encountered from trying to speak. For example, when she was crying with tears on her face and bruise on her lips, however she was slapped by a person who

heard when she called to the cops at the party and became mad by her friend, Rachel (Anderson, 2008). Without asking for a reason, she was banned by other students. To be a teenager is about to be a part of a clan. However, Melinda started her high school life with clanless and became to be a pariah in the school. She did not want to be friendless as she thinks “I need a new friend. I need a friend...Not a true friend...Just a pseudo-friend, disposable friend. Friend as accessory. Just so don’t feel and look so stupid” (Anderson, 2008, p. 25). She still cared about what people think and judge about her. She only wanted to be a normal teenager who has a friend to “confess everything, hand over the guilt and mistake and anger to” (Anderson, 2008, p.59). An addition of being banned in the school, bullying is another effect she gets from trying to tell the truth. Although she did it to protect her right on her body and her right to be safe, she was physically and verbally bullied by other students as she thought, “Rachel and every other person I’ve known for nine years continue to ignore me. I’m getting bumped a lot in the halls. A few times my books were accidentally ripped from my arms and pitched to the floor” (Anderson, 2008, p.16). She also hurt by mean children who got the effect of Melinda’s call as she said, “When the pep rally ends, I am accidentally knocked down three rows of bleachers” (Anderson, 2008, p.35). Truly, these are not accidents, but they intentionally assault her. She realized that social judgment and word of mouth are powerful since she called the police in the night of the party. She was not sure that everyone will believe her if she tells them what happened to her in that night. Therefore, before telling the truth that can harshly affect her social life, she has to think twice. Finally, concealing her rape event as a mystery is what she chose for her safety.

The acceptance of rape myths of Rachel significantly has impact on Malinda’s courage to report the sexual crime. After telling the truth about rape, sometimes rape victims are looked down as a liar for some reasons. Some people think that women lie about being rape because they feel guilty after having sex, or they want to seek revenge (Sherwood, 2011; Mulliken, 2006; Curran & Renzetti, 1993). This idea shows clearly in Melinda’s case. Because of the concernedness about safety, Melinda decided to tell Rachel, her ex-best friend, who now dates with Andy Evans, the rapist, about her rape incident at the party in order to warn her not to step on Melinda’s footprint. She hoped that Rachel would believe in her and get away from him. Rachel unfortunately thought that Melinda made up a story because of jealousy and anger. Melinda’s goodwill was viewed as a plan for revenge of a jealous girl. Rachel intensely believed that her boyfriend, Andy Evans, could not be a rapist. Evans, a good looking, rich and white man, is a man with some characteristics that are always looked over of rape accusation by people. Curran and Renzetti (1993) state that people often believe that rapists are not Caucasians, and according to Mulliken (2006), African Americans and Mexicans who hold bad images in Societies are always accused of being rapists. With this kind of belief, Evans was hardly seen as a rapist. Therefore, Rachel was really mad at Melinda and said, “Lair! I can’t believe you. You are jealous that I’m popular and I’m going to prom and so you lie to me like this. And you sent me a note, didn’t you? You are so sick” (Anderson, 2008, p. 213). It shows that Melinda’s goodwill is worthless because Rachel sees it as a revenge of her jealous ex-friend. Besides, Rachel’s words destroy her courage to speak the truth. Her rape case is seen as a lie of a jealous and vindictive girl who only does it for her own benefit. Her experience is minimized as unimportant, and it reaffirms her that people may not believe her as she thought “I got my hopes up halfway through the conversation with Rachel – that was my mistake. It was like

smelling the perfect Christmas feast and having the door slammed in your face, leaving you alone in the cold” (Anderson, 2008, p.214).

The acceptance of rape myths has a great impact on Andy Evans’ attitudes, the rapist, about rape. According to Sheffield (1984), victim blaming is pervasive in male dominated societies. Rape myths are established to justify the sexual violence of men against women, and to ensure that men will not be punished by their sexual violent actions. Some rapists justify their sexual violent activities toward victims with rape myths. As being widely accepted in societies, sometimes rape myths are used for breaking loose from accusations by rapists. In Evans’ perspective, he also thought he did not do anything wrong. Evans believed that Melinda’s sexual assault experience was not rape, but it was just misunderstanding and disagreement between Melinda and him. Evans, the rapist, also justified his sexual violence actions and placed blame on Melinda. He stated:

You have a big mouth, you know it? Rachel blew me out the prom, giving me some bullshit story about how I raped you. You know that’s a lie. I never raped anybody. I don’t have to. You wanted it just as bad as I did. But your feelings got hurt, so you started spreading lies, and now every girl in school is talking about me like I’m some kind of pervert. You’ve been spreading that bullshit story for weeks. What’s wrong, ugly, you jealous? Can’t you get a date? (Anderson, 2008, p.24).

He clearly has held false beliefs of rape, rape victim and rapist in his mind. His logic was distorted by his beliefs and high self-esteem. He negated the accusation of being a rapist by telling Melinda that he was a boy that everyone wanted to know and date with him. There was no need for him to rape anyone. Therefore, Melinda was blamed as a liar who wanted to seek revenge. Evans’ distorted thought was similar to an idea of rape in *Playboy*, published in October 1990, which stated, “the new definition of rape gives women a simple way of thinking about sex that externalizes guilt, remorse, or conflict. Bad feelings after sex become someone else’s fault (Dworkin, 1999). Evans accused that Melinda was mad and spread a rumor about being raped because she was not the chosen one. Moreover, for Evans, it was not considered raped by Evans because he thought she enjoyed it as he stated, “You didn’t scream before. You like it. You’re jealous that I took out your friend and not you” (Anderson, 2008, p. 25). He overlooked the truth that she said “No” even though it sounds like a mumble because of being drunk. Moreover, he covered his hand on her mouth in order to prevent her from screaming. Shotland and Goodstein’s study (1983) obviously reveals that women’s verbal rejection may be underrated by men. Her weary resistances were ignored and somehow interpreted as she wanted it as he asked her, “Do you want to?” (Anderson, 2008, p. 157). Evans’ question showed his distorted belief about women that women secretly want to be raped, and they enjoy it. Therefore, he did not feel guilty about all of his actions toward Melinda because he thought he did nothing wrong.

Because of insufficient knowledge about rape, Melinda, a thirteen-year-old girl, felt ashamed, and thought it was her fault of being raped. She truly believed that she had to take responsibility for being raped. Her embarrassment and ashamedness were shown through her thought about herself. She thought that she was similar to Hester, the protagonist, in *The Scarlet Letter* taught in English class. Hester Prynne has been

found of guilty of adultery. To expose this humiliation publicly, she must wear a scarlet A on her dress to mark her shame as a punishment and stand on a scaffold for hours. However, her secret lover remains unidentified. He tortures with anguish as a result of the unconfessed sin. With embarrassment and guilt in Melinda's mind, she thought she had a similarity to Hester in *The Scarlet Letter* as she thought, "I can see us, living in the wood, her wearing that A, me with an S maybe, S for silent, for stupid, for scared. S for silly. For shame" (Anderson, 2008, p. 118). Instead of branding herself with a letter A like Hester, Melinda disgracefully branded herself with a letter S to stand for her silly, stupid and scared. It suggests that she blames herself for going to that party, and she should be silenced. Consequently, her heart was slowly dying as she described her feeling, "they [feelings] are chewing me alive like an infestation of thought, shame, mistake (Anderson, 2008, p. 146)."

## **Conclusion**

Melinda is a good example of a person who does not understand the realities of sexual violence. According to Kring et al. (2013), a person who is below the age required cannot legally have any sexual activities, even with consent—Statutory rape. Because of the consequence of social learning and insufficient guidance, Melinda has inaccurate ideas about rape. She does not know that she is protected by the law in all coercive sexual circumstances. She is too young to know that it is not her fault of being raped, and the use of force is enough to sue him. Sex is always a controversial topic to accurately and truthfully teach to young people, however Bott (2003) argued that "trying to pretend rape does not exist is dangerously ignorant" (p. 26). Consequently, to protect children from distorted beliefs and potential bad circumstances as Melinda, school, parents and authorities should help preparing children to become to be socially responsible people who can live in realities. The study clearly shows that the acceptance of rape myths affect people's attitudes toward rape, rape victim and rapist. The influence of rape myth acceptance considerably is a consequence of social learning. Because the violated female body is a vital issue, people should aware of the impact of rape myth acceptance.

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