

A call to action

[B O O K R E V I E W]

Gqola, Pumla Dineo (2015) **Rape: A South African nightmare**. Auckland Park: MFBooks Joburg (Jacana Media imprint). ISBN 978-1-920601-52-2 pbk. Pages x + 192.

“It is time to apply pressure on men who rape, those who make excuses for rapists, those who make rape ‘jokes’, and to pressure our government to create a criminal justice system that works to bring the possibility of justice to rape survivors and all other survivors of violence.”

– Gqola (2015: 15-16)

Tamaryn Jane Nicholson

Discipline of Psychology
University of
KwaZulu-Natal
Pietermaritzburg

Pumla Dineo Gqola’s book is a thoughtful interrogation of how the language and practices of past and contemporary South Africa produce a context in which gender violence is not only possible but routinely excused. She introduces her work by reflecting on her recollections of two televised interviews with rapists, providing a chilling account of how these men speak of rape without remorse, as a sexual act to which they are entitled. Gqola goes on to point out that these men did not incur true social costs as a result of their actions, and they may have gone to prison, but their relationships with others remained broadly untouched and their actions as rapists did not leave them excluded from their communities or shamed. She makes an appeal to South Africans that we view rape as a societal horror, made possible by patriarchy and perpetuated by a willingness to turn a blind eye towards violence enacted against all forms of the feminine.

Her first chapter, *A recurring nightmare*, predominantly focuses on how accounts of rape are evaluated based on the credibility of the speaker and the degree to which the hearer finds the account plausible. Credibility and

plausibility are contingent upon the degree to which the account echoes preconceived ideas about 1) Who can be raped, 2) What rape looks like, and, 3) What a rapist looks like. Gqola uses the example of South African cricketer Makhaya Ntini's rape conviction (later successfully appealed) to show how women who report rape are required to produce incontestable, and likely impossible, narratives of sexual innocence (or non-womanhood) to avoid being made responsible for being raped. The chapter demonstrates why the myth that false reports of rape are common is so absurd. The repeated costs incurred for reporting this violation are unspeakably high for women with a price paid at every stage of the process, while the ramifications for the accused are paltry in comparison.

Chapter 2, *What's race got to do with rape?*, traces the history of rape in South Africa, locating its origins in colonial conquest and the use of rape as a weapon meant to shame the conquered. Colonial obsessions with African sexuality led to the labelling of slave women as unrapable through constructions of Africans as "excessively sexual and impossible to satiate" (p 43). Gqola notes that this construction of African women as hypersexual is still at play in contemporary society and is extremely damaging to black women who face the threat of being deemed "impossible to rape"; and therefore legitimate targets for sexual violence. The chapter as a whole shows how the stereotypes of the unrapable black women and the rapist black man came into being under conditions of colonial slavery, and how the colonial "register of rape" (p 50) which was further entrenched under apartheid is still with us.

The female fear factory (Chapter 4) demonstrates how female identities are shaped by the omnipresent fear of rape. Gqola provides four examples of public reactions to gendered violence looking at how - within the bounds of a deeply patriarchal society saturated by a rape culture which trivialises sexual violence enacted upon feminised bodies - women's reports of rape are inevitably countered by a barrage of questions and comments aimed to place the blame at their feet. Questions such as: "Why was she alone at night?"; "Why was she drunk?"; "What was she wearing?"; provide the broken formulae by which "good women" should live, ostensibly to avoid placing themselves at risk of, and being held accountable for rape.

Chapter 5 expands on this theme providing an in depth account and analysis of public reactions to the Jacob Zuma rape trial. Gqola shows how the language of violence was used to silence potential voices of support for the accuser. She also points to the way in which the experience of the accuser was silenced by competing agendas using her report of a brutal crime as political fodder to perpetuate racial prejudice or, alternatively, to provide evidence of a conspiracy against the ANC, with no regard for the victim/survivor of the crime. In addition to this, Gqola looks at how feminist contributors entered the debate, challenging assumptions that the burden of evidence should be borne by the

accuser and ensuring that the woman they named “Khwezi” would not lack voices of belief and support.

In *Forked tongue on child rape* (Chapter 6) Gqola examines the way that some rapes are treated as more serious than others, as is evident in the public outcry that follows reports of sexual violence against children and the elderly. When those “outside the bounds of sexual availability” (p 8) are raped, the notion that rape is about sex is exposed as myth and the perpetrators are unable, as is done in other cases, to claim that the “sexual” act is in any way consensual. These crimes expose rape for what it always is, a brutal exercise of violent patriarchal power. Gqola argues that when we speak about some rapes as inexplicable and as more worthy of punishment, we simultaneously frame other rapes as more “understandable”, minimising their impact on survivors/victims. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this chapter is the evidence that even those who commit crimes our society deems the most abhorrent are routinely excused by our judicial system. One example provided is the reduction in sentencing of a convicted rapist of a seven year old girl from five to three years on the grounds that her physical injuries were not particularly severe due to the rapist’s “tender approach” (p 141). The use of words like tender or gentle in relation to rape is inexcusable and should be unutterable, but that this is not the case shows that in patriarchal societies rape and violence are constructed as distinct concepts, allowing for the routine violation of the feminine provided care is taken and the object left relatively “undamaged”.

While Chapter 6 obliquely tackles the myth that rape is a form of sex, Chapter 7 (*Rape myths*) presents and directly responds to a number of rape myths that work to “embolden perpetrators and re-traumatise victims and survivors” (p 143). Myths covered include: rape is inappropriate sex; rape is about male arousal and the need to have sex; dressing a certain way or being visibly drunk invites rape; women are accidentally raped because they play hard-to-get; and, rape myths are just harmless ignorance. In addition to outlining and responding to individual rape myths, Gqola presents a strong case for the need to dismantle rape myths so that rape and all forms of gender violence can no longer be excused and normalised.

Chapters 3 (*Ruling violence*) and 8 (*Violent masculinities and war talk*) examine how violent contemporary southern Africa cultures produce a context that encourages rape. In Chapter 3, Gqola contrasts the promise of our constitution and public discourse around female empowerment with the harassment experienced by women in public spaces. She argues that no woman can be empowered when her body and psyche are routinely subjected to acts of war, and how warnings to women about how we must protect ourselves against violence serve as constant reminders that South African spaces do not belong to us. Chapter 8 expands on the idea that violent masculinities

need to be challenged. Gqola traces the origins of the violent hyper-masculinities to white systems of oppression that endorsed and promoted violence as legitimate means of subjugation. She also argues that black hyper-masculinities are rooted in resistance to the infantilisation of African men at the hands of these oppressors. Gqola uses the examples of Oscar Pistorius, Jacob Zuma, Julius Malema and Kenny Kunene to show that in societies shaped by violent hyper-masculinities, perpetrators are fully aware that it is the victims rather than the perpetrators of rape and violence who are problematized. The disavowal of these toxic masculinities is critical to ending gender violence in South Africa.

The subject matter of the book lends itself to frustration and despair but Gqola's style, coherence and commitment to an unashamedly feminist argument makes for a remarkably compelling read. She tackles a topic that is easily sensationalised with sensitivity and respect for the many victims/survivors of gender violence in South Africa. She provides a succinct overview of feminist concepts related to gender violence and rape in conversational tones that welcome academic and non-academic readers, using examples to aid understanding of theory which can be dense. For me, the book reads as a call to action and a reminder of the importance of retaining a feminist identity and sense of sisterhood in a country where victims and survivors of gender violence are subject to yet further violence at the hands of a hostile and ineffectual judicial system and a patriarchal society all too inclined to excuse perpetrators while problematizing the vulnerable.