

*Rape: A South African Nightmare*, by  
 Pumla Dineo Gqola. Johannesburg: MF Books,  
 an imprint of Jacana Media (PTY) Ltd, 2015

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I make the assertion that rape is not a moment but a language...  
 and I untangle and decipher the knots and codes of this language,  
 to surface its structure, underline its histories, understand its rules.  
 (Gqola, 2015: 22)

In the two years since the publication of Pumla Gqola's third book, *Rape: A South African Nightmare*, the quotation above is the one most cited in the myriad reviews of her work and in the conversations that the book has inspired in public space. The metaphor – rape as language – draws on notions of the symbolic as communication, and on the idea that a willingness to accept the terms of a language constitutes a powerful route to the fiction of a community. So, argues Gqola, the fiction of a South African nation involves prescribed relationships between sexual violence and citizenship.

At the same time, the questions which intrigue linguists – such as the ways in which languages obscure as much as they are able to facilitate communication and the impossibility of representing embodied intensity (pain, ecstasy) “in” language – are also Gqola's. She is harassed, puzzled, and frustrated by the seeming circularity of discussions about rape – the hopelessness experienced by activists who have been working for decades only to witness the escalation of incidents and the expansion of the forms “rape” might take, the misunderstandings (still) about what constitutes rape, the seeming jocularly about rape from some alleged perpetrators and, perhaps most poignantly, the wariness and disbelief on the faces of those to whom a survivor may confide their story. If “rape [is]... a language” for Gqola, then her book is driven by a passionate conviction that such language tells lies – about

histories, about those who experience rape, and about the “inevitability” of rape. Perhaps, for Gqola, the most egregious lie is exposed in the conversation that she develops across the volume about what it means to live in a country whose daily vision for itself is enshrined in a Constitution full of commitment to freedoms and whose “nightmare” hauls a very particular form of gender-based violence up from the unconscious to terrorise any possibility of safety.

Pumla Gqola is a well-known figure within African feminist critical theory. She has just been appointed as Dean of Research at the University of Fort Hare, in South Africa, an institution which figures as the intellectual home of some of the continent’s most distinguished thinkers (Julius Nyerere, Oliver Tambo, Kenneth Kaunda), but she has spent the past decade within the department of African Literature. To introduce her like this is, however, to fly in the face of her own words in an earlier volume on the meaning of the musician, Simphiwe Dana: “I will not be policed and corralled to present in a particular way. I will not be a ‘boring’ academic who is restrained to think and write in one way. I too will write what I like... I will talk about the condition of black women even if you would prefer not to hear me. Black women are complex and represent in more ways than you would like. Your envy is misplaced. Work on yourself and don’t worry about me. Deal with it. *Ndiqondisise! [Recognise me!]*” (Gqola, 2013: 54).

Such recognition demands a reading of Gqola’s writing that acknowledges how deeply her writing is fuelled by an integrity that is not simply personal. Instead, it is embodied within a wide and complex network of activisms and engagements through which black women in South Africa (and beyond) continue to fight for acknowledgement as intellectual and imaginative inspirations beyond the mere cipher of homogenising equity legislation around “disadvantaged groups”. As I write this review, an image of Pumla Gqola comes to mind. I was co-facilitating, a few years ago, a workshop of the One in Nine Project, a South African activist group born of the desire to fight alongside “Khwezi” as she stood firm, in 2006, in the court case that accused Jacob Zuma of raping her. We were into the second morning, and dealing with difficult material, when a small excited rustling among the participants seated nearest the glass doors open to the garden grew into calls of pleasure, “Sisi!!”

Dozens jumped up to welcome Pumla as she arrived, doing her utmost to be inconspicuous. Many of the workshop participants were young black

lesbians, some were older and dear comrades in the battles against sexual violence, and “Khwezi” and her mother were also present, seated at a back table with tears running down both faces in their delight at seeing her. Pumla shot me a glance and whispered, “Sorry, Jane!” (she has done enough facilitation herself to know what such interruptions can do), but of course there was no need for any kind of apology because the welcome given to Pumla concretised something subterranean already in the room. While the occasion of the workshop was the acknowledgment of the stakes of fighting for worlds free of rape (a sobering and even anguished acknowledgement), no one was in fact merely “anguished”. The activists in that room, all familiar with the meaning of rape, knew deeply the pleasure of concrete engagement with strategy, storytelling, and rebellion. Pumla Gqola’s arrival allowed that joy to flow. Her feistiness, laughter, and wit settled everyone back into the work of finding a language through which to defy the national statistics on the prevalence of rape.

The enigma of discovering pleasure and hope within serious and experienced activist debates on strategising against rape is replicated in the encounter with *Rape: A South African Nightmare*, published in August 2015. It is a book I assign frequently to Honours students in a postgraduate elective seminar on “Gender and Violence”. The curriculum includes (as carefully as possible) material which asks serious questions about that linkage (“Gender *and* Violence”). The seminar participants are always smart, maverick and invested in their work, and yet, there are moments when energies flag, and the weight of the issues makes their shoulder muscles clench. To a reader, however, they relish Gqola’s writing, usually reading all 193 pages in one go. Although some have critiques about the singular focus on South African discourses (they come from many different countries, most of them continental), and others long for more engagement with the meaning of counter-heteronormativity for understanding rape, the book remains their favourite: “*I was scared to read it; my sister was raped but I couldn’t stop; this is the most important book I have ever read*”. I get lambasted, “*Why did I have to wait till my Honours year to read this?*” My own copies disappear. In her acceptance speech on winning the 2016 Alan Paton award for the book, Gqola recalls a family member’s riposte, “*Who on earth wants to read about rape, are you insane?*” as she began work on the volume. It turns out that she has, in fact, written a book “about rape”

that not only wins awards but which is popular, accessible, full of energy, and, indeed, a pleasure to read.

The collection of essays in the book is not so much “about rape” as about what one might term the textures of “rape culture” in South Africa. The concept of “rape culture” (long part of feminist vocabularies) arises from the recognition that environments themselves may thrive on prevailing social norms which normalise or trivialise sexual assault. Such an idea moves the question of “perpetration” away from the delinquent or deviant man into the interrogation of how gender itself operates as systemic, and invested, ontological brutality. The book opens with Gqola’s memory of watching a recent TV programme in which men “who readily admitted on camera to having raped” were interviewed, and she puzzles over their open discussion of rape as “sex”, and “sex” to which they were entitled, despite unwillingness from a partner. She notes their ordinariness as figures (“they could have been anybody’s brother, boyfriend, or son”) and while stressing that she is not invoking the memory to homogenise a “typical rapist”, finds herself stuck on the idea driving the men’s talk, that “women’s pain is negotiable”. The eight chapters that follow, *work* at that idea, worrying it, puzzling over its shape and implications, watching its influence within very public trials of particular rapists, and demanding accountability for its impact on what it is that women who have experienced rape are given permission to say.

The collection of chapters addresses a set of discursive dilemmas, moving from the politics of credibility for the autobiographical narrative of rape to the circulation of “myths” (lies) about who gets raped, by whom, and why (long established by anti-rape activists as key to recognising the meaning of rape). The collection also includes undaunted engagement with some of South Africa’s most egregious public moments of “rape consciousness”.

The first of these explores the ways in which the charge of rape against (then Deputy-) President Zuma fuelled a nationwide debate on the politics of gender, sex, and violence. Fezeka Khuzwayo (known as “Khwezi” during the very public trial and its aftermath), a 31-year-old lesbian and HIV activist when she laid formal charges against Zuma for raping her, at night in his own home, in late 2005. The trial came to court in May 2006. The court proceedings were highly publicised, and embedded in ferocious political engagements (live, in demonstrations outside the courtroom, within the media, and in all e-spaces) which polarised the country into two basic positions: *Khwezi is a liar*

versus *We believe Khwezi*. Zuma's acquittal was a triumph for the former, a devastation for the latter. The first book to be published immediately after the verdict was Mmatshilo Motsei's *The Kanga and the Kangaroo Court*, in 2007, a profoundly reflective collation of enquiries fuelled by grief and the courage to explore not simply patriarchal power, but religious and "traditional" powers. Motsei was attacked, in many ways, after the publication of the book (despite its welcome in activist, especially feminist, circles), and forced to withdraw from public life for a while. Others have written of the trial since then, but although this is not explicit (Motsei is not cited), I would suggest that it is Gqola who most boldly takes up Motsei's challenge to interrogate the turn taken by South African societies' seeming readiness to displace black women from any form of cultural, political, or indeed, spiritual power. Gqola analyses the discourses of the media and commentators around the trial, and its verdict, suggesting that despite their differences, it was feminists' voices alone which "attempted to unsettle the patriarchal elision of the woman whose life was made a living hell within the public sphere and beyond" (Gqola, 2015: 124). This strikes one as a move towards what it may entail to be "in solidarity" as feminists – the work of such "unsettling" involves being "unsettled", and being ready for what Gqola rightly terms "rage and disregard for personal safety".

It is "rage" which allows Gqola to travel into the second of South Africa's recent "public debates" concerning the meaning of rape. Over the past few years, several cases of "baby- and child-rape" have received enormous publicity. The story of a nine-month-old girl, of white schoolboys raping a black peer, of a white farmer paying nine-year-olds for being raped, and more – Gqola summarises the public facts of the cases, and proceeds to a devastating question: why are such events presented as "the most horrendous forms of rape"? (Gqola, 2015: 141). The assaults are very far from being prosecuted with any extra seriousness, and that may be worth interrogation; what Gqola is asking, however, goes beyond legal outcomes. Her interrogation of the reception of such cases in the media (always, horror) illuminates the notion of a "rape scale", where some forms of "rape" happen to "the innocent" (babies) which must logically mean that others occur to the "less innocent": grown women, older girls, lesbians, transgender people.

*Rape: A South African Nightmare* is less a book "about rape" than it is about the discourses circulating within one country which Gqola sees as

implicated in the “ordinariness” of the multiple forms of sexual violence experienced. In my seminar discussions with students, challenges to Gqola’s approach are raised. What if you are not South African – how will you grasp the references and assumptions? Why is there so very little about counter-heteronormativity and the massive work of queer activism against sexual violence? Why does she not solve the problem? Why...? I understand these responses as the counterpart of the immense faith generated by the book that Gqola knows what she is talking about and the concomitant desire for her to write about everything. For so many of us, rape has been a version of “everything”, at one point or another. This book isn’t about “everything”; it is perhaps not “everything” that is needed for fierce solidarity on the exigencies of rape cultures; it is courage we need. That the book celebrates, and that the book exudes.

## References

- Gqola, Pumla Dineo. 2013. *A Renegade Called Simphiwe*. Johannesburg: MFBooks.
- Motsei, Mmatshilo. 2007. *The Kanga and the Kangaroo Court: Reflections on the Rape Trial of Jacob Zuma*. Auckland Park: Jacana Media.