

“She Had Agony Written All over Her Face”: Representations of Rape in the Work of Rozena Maart

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Summary

The threat and reality of sexual violence structure the daily lives of South African women, and gendered assumptions about women continue to inform our experience of rape as well as public discourses surrounding sexual violence. This article uses both seminal and contemporary feminist research on rape as a theoretical lens for reading Rozena Maart's *The Writing Circle* (2008). Although the salience of race in the South African context shapes our reading of rape, the article demonstrates that the primary category of analysis in such readings must be gender as women's vulnerability to rape flows from gendered imbalances of power. The article explores the extent to which women are victimised in their own homes and in their family relationships, and thus aims to challenge the popular conception that the greatest threat of sexual violence emanates from strangers. A number of rape myths inform the attitudes of both women and rapists. The article identifies these myths and illustrates how they operate in the lives of Maart's characters. It emerges that the myths, and the misogynist assumptions about women that underlie them, are deeply embedded in the contemporary South African society that is depicted in Maart's novel.

Opsomming

Die bedreiging en realiteit van seksuele geweld beïnvloed die daaglikse aktiwiteite van Suid-Afrikaanse vroue, en genderraannames oor vroue bepaal steeds ons ervaring van verkragting sowel as openbare diskoerse oor seksuele geweld. Hierdie artikel gebruik seminale en eietydse feministiese navorsing oor verkragting as 'n teoretiese lens om Rozena Maart se *The Writing Circle* (2008) te lees. Alhoewel die belangrikheid van ras in die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks ons verstaan van verkragting bepaal, wys die artikel dat gender die primêre analitiese kategorie moet wees wanneer ons representasies van verkragting lees aangesien vroue se seksuele kwesbaarheid teruggevoer kan word na gendermagswanbalanse. Die artikel ondersoek die mate waartoe vroue kwesbaar is in hul eie huise en binne hul families en bevraagteken sodoende die algemene opvatting dat vreemdelinge die grootste bedreiging inhou in terme van seksuele geweld. 'n Aantal verkragtingsmities bepaal die houdings van sowel vroue as verkragters. Die artikel identifiseer hierdie mities en hul uitwerking op die lewens van Maart se karakters. Dit blyk dat die mities, en die negatiewe aannames oor vroue waarop die mities berus, steeds wye aanvaarding geniet in die hedendaagse Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing wat Maart in haar teks skets.

It is now widely recognised that sexual violence is a ubiquitous part of the lived reality of women in South Africa. Helen Moffett notes the “grim findings” of “survey after survey suggesting that South Africa has higher levels of rape of women and children than anywhere else in the world not at war or embroiled in civil conflict” (2006: 129). A number of South African authors have addressed the issue of rape in their fiction. Examples of such fictional representations of rape include André Brink’s *The Rights of Desire* (2000), Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), Zakes Mda’s *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2004), Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit* (2001), Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story* (2001), Yvette Christiansë’s *Unconfessed* (2006), Farida Karodia’s *Other Secrets* (2000) and Marlene van Niekerk’s *Triomf* (1999). In addition, South African literary scholars have made important contributions to academic discourses that grapple with the challenges that emerge when authors use fiction to represent rape. A great deal of this scholarly engagement has focused on J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999). Some of the most important analyses of Coetzee’s text deal with the extent to which race features in South African narratives of rape. In her analysis of literary representations of rape in the period of South Africa’s political transition, Meg Samuelson explains that this body of fiction “relentlessly inserts race into the scene of rape by focusing almost exclusively on interracial rape” (2002: 88). Lucy Graham cautions that this focus potentially “obscures the fact that most rapes in South Africa are intraracial” (2003: 435). The salience of race in South Africa’s history has made it virtually impossible for scholars to read representations of rape without taking race into account. This is as it should be for, as Judith Butler reminds us, “racial presumptions invariably underwrite the discourse on gender” (1990: xvi). She does, however, draw our attention to the complexity of this theoretical manoeuvre by insisting that “race and gender ought not to be treated as simple analogies”. Indeed, the female body is always simultaneously inscribed by race, gender, class, geographic location and sexual orientation and, when we read the experiences of such a body, we thus need to use “multiple lenses at once” (Butler 1990: xvii).

Rozena Maart’s *The Writing Circle* provides a useful opportunity for analysis as it brings all the markers of difference that make up the bodies of her female characters into sharp relief. Her work demands a reading through the “multiple lenses” that Butler calls for. While I read *The Writing Circle* first and foremost as a literary text, it is clear that Maart is using the genre of fiction to respond to the phenomenon of (non-fictional) rape in South Africa. This, however, does not imply that her text constitutes an exact representation of social facts. Rather, fiction becomes the mode through which she explores this social phenomenon and, crucially, it is a medium that allows her to expose a number of common rape myths. Although Maart has received critical acclaim and popular exposure in her adopted country Canada, her work remains relatively unexplored in the country of her birth.

This article offers a close textual analysis of Maart's novel through the rubric of both seminal and contemporary feminist research on rape.

Maart signals her concern with rape by dedicating the novel to Anne Mayne "for her courage and determination in starting Rape Crisis in Cape Town, South Africa, with three women, in 1976, when no one else dared to". The novel is set in a suburb of Cape Town where five women meet weekly to support each other's writing. The women all take turns to narrate the chapters. The first narrator is Isabel, who is raped as she pulls into her garage while the rest of the writing group is waiting a mere few metres away in her home, unaware of what is happening to Isabel. In what remains one of the most comprehensive studies of rape, Susan Brownmiller argues that rape "is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear" (1975: 15). Isabel is well aware of the constant presence of this threat as she reflects on the vulnerability of her teenage nieces. Although she "had gone through all sorts of procedures" (Maart 2008: 101)¹ with her nieces to keep them safe, she was "unable to give them any hope of being free of this horrible situation" as she knows that they will always have "to look over their shoulders and live in fear of rape and sexual assault" (*WC* 102).

In the opening chapter Isabel reflects on the security precautions that structure her daily movements even as she is being raped. She "never drove home at night unaccompanied" (*WC* 6) and, before she leaves work, she usually calls "the security watch ... to alert them to the time of [her] arrival" (*WC* 7). Her normal routine also involves her lover, Tom, following her on her drive home to "check if everything was all right" (*WC* 7). On the night that Isabel neglects to adhere to these comprehensive precautions, she is raped. The reader learns how the rapist uses the precautions that she does follow to his own advantage. He uses the "remote control attached to the keys" of her car to double lock her "remote-controlled electronic gates" (*WC* 6) to isolate her in the space that becomes the scene of the crime. Isabel notes that the other women in her writing group also have cars that are "secured by rather expensive alarm systems" and that they also use male friends and relatives to check on their movements because "one has to be so careful these days" (*WC* 5). Rape, and the fear of rape, clearly act as a social control mechanism that determines even the most mundane daily choices of these women. Lemanski notes that the fear of crime is "spatially, socially and temporally distributed" and that people often attempt to allay these fears by modifying their daily lives through the restriction of their spatial movements (2004: 101). Those who are in a financial position to do so also tend to enhance their sense of security by altering their homes with, for example, high walls and alarm systems (Lemanski 2004: 101).

1. Subsequent references to *Writing Circle* (Maart 2008) will be indicated by *WC* followed by the page number(s).

Maart reveals that, despite the best protective measures that money can buy, Isabel and her friends remain vulnerable to rape. The characters are all professionally successful women and their relative affluence is emphasised throughout the novel. The names of expensive brand names crop up repeatedly in the descriptions of the group of friends who might be depicted as wearing “a Fendi scarf” (*WC* 34) or leaving a scent of “Chanel No. 19 perfume” (*WC* 35) in their wakes. As Isabel is being raped, she feels the “daintiness of [the] black silk” (*WC* 3) of her clothing and the rapist shoves her “bag of shopping from Woolworths to the floor” (*WC* 6) of the car. She also notices the “expensive-looking luminous white trainers” (*WC* 4) that the rapist is wearing.

Research has consistently shown that working-class and poor women are disproportionately affected by sexual violence (Wojcicki 2002; Vogelmann & Lewis 1993). These findings are also true for other types of violent crimes (Shaw & Gastrow 2001). This, however, does not change the fact that “sexual violence is widespread in South Africa” (Wojcicki 2002: 271), and Maart’s text shows that women’s money may be able to buy some sense of security, but that this feeling proves to be an illusion. Rape remains a problem that “rests at every level of society” (Bourke 2007: 410).

Although she structured her spatial arrangements so carefully to avoid rape, Isabel’s first reaction is to revert to self-blame. She asks: “Why didn’t I close the gate faster? Why didn’t I see him standing there? Why did I smoke? If only I was paying more attention ... I shouldn’t have had the music on so loud” (*WC* 31). Bourke explains that a common rape myth suggests that it is “the responsibility of female rape victims to ensure that they [are] not attacked” (2007: 76). Isabel’s reflections reveal that she is castigating herself for somehow failing to fulfil this responsibility. It is significant that she blames herself even though her rapist is a stranger. Bourke notes the tendency for “stranger rape” to be “erroneously dubbed real rape” (p. 298). When the victim knows her rapist, a number of factors come into play to exacerbate the opportunities for blame by both the victim herself and society at large. Women are regarded as bearing the “responsibility to act as gatekeeper to sex by ensuring that men act ‘correctly’” (p. 45). This misplaced notion of female responsibility for men’s “sexual behaviour” can lead to a woman being blamed, and blaming herself, for things as wide-ranging as wearing revealing clothing, drinking alcohol or letting a man into her home after a date. Bourke finds that “there is no crime more difficult to prove than rape and no injured party more distrusted than the rape victim” (p. 23). In the case of “stranger rape”, there is less of a likelihood that the woman will be blamed for leading the perpetrator on or for saying no and meaning yes. Yet the impulse to self-blame is so strong that, even in this case, Isabel immediately assumes that she is somehow at fault for the attack.

In her detailed study of the history of rape, Joanna Bourke discusses the home under a section entitled “Violent Institutions” (pp. 305-328). Shaw and Gastrow find that, “while the majority of South Africans fear violent crime perpetrated by strangers, they are more likely to be victimised within their own homes, by people they know” (2001: 236). Isabel’s rape by a stranger is not her first experience of sexual assault. When she was a little girl, her “uncle Reggie” had put her “hand between his legs, then forcibly held [her] hand down with his hand, the left one that had the tattoos on it, and jerked [her] hand up and down on his penis” (*WC* 10). The child’s confusion is only exacerbated because the same hand with which uncle Reggie victimises her had “minutes earlier held a delicious chocolate ice cream cone, which he had bought” (*WC* 10). It appears that the uncle had used his position in the family circle to groom Isabel for the attack. Gillespie defines grooming as the “process by which a child is befriended by a would-be abuser in an attempt to gain the child’s confidence and trust, enabling them to get the child to acquiesce to abusive activity” (2002: 411). Paine and Hansen find that abusers often use material enticements, such as sweets or ice cream, to ingratiate themselves with the child they have targeted for abuse (2002). Isabel’s sister Dolores was also attacked by an authority figure in a space where she should have been safe as she was raped by a high school teacher (*WC* 11).

Studies of gender violence confirm that a woman is more likely to be attacked by an intimate partner than by all other groups of perpetrators combined (Kellerman & Mercy 1992; Browne, Williams & Dutton 1999; McFarlane, Campbell & Watson 2002). One of the friends in the writing group, Amina, illustrates this intimate threat in her reflections on her marriage. Her husband treated her with “utmost cruelty” (*WC* 76) and she was “relieved” when he died in a car accident as this enabled her “to get safely out of a marriage [she] had dreaded” (*WC* 77). She remembers that Faud beat her so severely that “there were times when [she] blacked out” (*WC* 84). The vulnerability of women in their homes must be connected with the gendered imbalance of power in families. Amina recalls that most of the girls she “went to madressa with said their fathers decided everything in their house” (*WC* 75). She finds this surprising as “it was [her] mother who made the major decisions in [their] house” (*WC* 75).

Simone de Beauvoir notes that the “relative rank, the hierarchy of the sexes, is first brought to her [the little girl’s] attention in family life; little by little she realises that if the father’s authority is not that which is most often felt in daily affairs, it is actually supreme” (1949: 314). De Beauvoir’s work contains important cautions for those who would read too much into the fact that Amina’s mother seemed to have considerable power in their household. De Beauvoir explains that the father’s authority “only takes on more dignity from not being degraded to daily use; and even if it is in fact the mother who rules as mistress of the household, she is commonly clever enough to

see to it that the father’s wishes come first; in important matters the mother demands, rewards, and punishes in his name and through his authority” (p. 314). A close reading of Amina’s family dynamics confirms de Beauvoir’s theory. Amina’s sister Janup elopes with her Christian boyfriend, and their mother “felt the pain of her decision sharply” (*WC* 76). The “shame” that Janup brings on the family is clearly related to the impact her actions have on the father’s status in the community. The Muslim community uses Janup’s behaviour as an opportunity to “ridicule” and “mock” their father. The mother, who gains her limited power through the father’s authority, is thus threatened and hurt by the harm that has been done to *his* standing. We also see how the mother ensures that “the father’s wishes come first”. She stands by her husband in protest against their daughter’s affront to his authority and joins him in refusing “to acknowledge that Janup has a husband” (*WC* 76). Yet she “sent Janup money clandestinely, without [their] father’s knowledge”. Even though she wants to support her daughter, she cannot do so openly because this would contravene “the father’s wishes”. The father’s authority continues to structure Amina’s choices even after the death of her abusive husband as she has to keep her new relationship a secret because her father “would disown [her] if he found out” (*WC* 77) about it.

According to Brownmiller, “the patriarchal philosophy of sexual private property” entails that “woman was man’s original corporeal property” and this means that children are regarded as a “wholly owned subsidiary” (1975: 281). This lack of power leaves children particularly vulnerable in their homes. Although most people react with revulsion to the sexual exploitation of children, there is a persistent belief that the “stereotypical child rapist” is a stranger or, as Brownmiller describes him, “the dirty old man who lurks outside the schoolyard” (p. 272). This enables society to ignore the “routine occurrence” of child abuse (p. 272) within the family. These factors contribute to the “unholy silence that shrouds the interfamily abuse of children” (p. 281). Maart tackles this silence by showing how memories of family rape surface for Carmen when she finds out that Isabel was raped. Brownmiller critiques the term “incest” as a misnomer that carries connotations of mutuality and she prefers the phrase “father rape” (p. 281). Maart is similarly explicit in her descriptions of the abuse that these characters experience at the hand of fathers and other “friends of the family”. Carmen recalls that her “father first raped [her] when [she] was twelve” (*WC* 43). By saying that this was the “first” time he raped her, Maart sends a chilling signal that this crime was a repeated fact of Carmen’s childhood. Carmen’s mother “always insisted” that Carmen and her sister “be properly dressed, without revealing an arm, knee or clavicle” (*WC* 43). The mother seems to be perpetuating the notion that women and girls should not act “provocatively, especially in matters of (un)dress” (Bourke 2007: 75). Yet the greatest threat is shown to be within Carmen’s home. Despite the mother’s insistence on her daughters’

public display of sexual modesty, the little girl is being violated in the private sphere of the family. When Carmen's mother finds out about the rapes on the day she turns sixteen, she assures Carmen of her love for her and Carmen realises that she "bloody well knows. She's always known" (*WC* 43). After five years of sexual abuse, Carmen's mother finally confronts her husband the day after her 16th birthday party. The father then reverts to what Bourke identifies as a common rape myth, namely that women lie about being raped (2007: 28). He draws on the familiar misogynist script that women are crazy and hysterical when he claims that "anorexia made [Carmen] ill in those early adolescent years and even added that [she] was delusional" (*WC* 45).

Jazz, who is a successful neurosurgeon at the time of Isabel's rape, is also struggling with memories of sexual assault by a "friend of the family". Her father's friend, Dr Singh, had attacked her when she was nineteen and "then blamed it on his drunken state" (*WC* 120). In a study of acquaintance rape among university students, Bourke found that "[d]rink was a favourite excuse" (2007: 46). However, in her review of surveys exploring the links between alcohol and rape, it emerges that "the disinhibitory effect of alcohol was at least partially socially constructed" (p. 46). The students in the studies were given either alcohol or non-alcoholic placebos and researchers then observed their responses to slides containing images of violence and erotica. The students who were under the impression that they were drinking alcohol (even if they were in fact taking the placebo), were more likely to respond to the slides in ways that indicated sexual violence. The researchers discovered that the men who had taken alcohol believed that they could use their inebriated state to explain their sexually violent behaviour, rather than taking real responsibility for their actions. In other words, drinking served as "both the impetus and alibi for inappropriate behavior" (p. 47). Jazz's recollections similarly reveal that Dr Singh's "drunkenness" is merely a convenient alibi. His other actions make it clear that he continued to victimise Jazz, long after the effects of alcohol must have worn off. He "harassed" Jazz through letters and "even followed [her] about at Medical School" (*WC* 120). He also tries to sabotage her career by refusing to give her a reference when she applies for a position at Groote Schuur. These are the premeditated actions of a man who abuses his power to victimise a woman.

The reactions to Jazz's exposure of Dr Singh illustrate that women can also be guilty of perpetuating the rape myths that Bourke identifies. Jazz finds that her aunt treated her "horribly" (*WC* 120) and refuses to believe her account of Dr Singh's harassment. Bourke shows that "the pervasiveness of false accusations [of rape] has no basis in fact" (2007: 28). Of course she does acknowledge that some women do lie about being raped. Her point is that society and the media pay a disproportionate amount of attention to false accusations and that this obscures the fact that lying about rape is the exception rather than the norm. Jazz's aunt goes further and

actually constructs Jazz as the agent of victimisation when she notes that Jazz was “playing tricks on Dr Singh in order to get attention” (*WC* 120). Bourke argues that such responses to rape accusations are shaped by stereotypical and profoundly misogynist constructions of women as devious, attention-seeking, hysterical or just plain crazy (2007: 34). Although feminist scholars and activists have done a great deal to challenge rape myths and such negative images of women, Maart’s text emphasises how deeply embedded these gendered assumptions are in contemporary South African society.

The memories that emerge for Beauty after Isabel’s rape draw the reader’s attention to interracial rape as she was a “seventeen-year-old Black girl from Khayelitsha, in the car of a White man, in the front seat, in 1987” (*WC* 55). For the purposes of this article, I will focus on how gendered power relations and popular rape myths can inform the way we read Beauty’s experience of rape. The rapist, Mr. Pirelli, is the employer of Beauty’s grandmother and she remembers how she used to miss school to help her grandmother clean Mr. Pirelli’s shop, “like all good children who assist their parents and grandparents who work as domestics in White homes and cleaners in White businesses” (*WC* 54). As Mr. Pirelli “forced himself” on Beauty, he dismisses her “protestations” by saying that she was “making a fuss over nothing” (*WC* 56). He goes on to insist that he is “a nice man” who had “asked nicely, and he would not be mean or violent” (*WC* 56). Bourke explains that a common rape myth denies that some acts of rape are really rape and that a “true” rapist is a stranger who uses “physical violence” (2007: 41). Acts of rape that do not exhibit these characteristics thus tend to be regarded as less serious. Mr. Pirelli certainly seems to think that his attack on Beauty was not serious enough to warrant her making “a fuss”.

After the description of the rape and Mr. Pirelli’s justifications, Beauty mentions two reasons why this was indeed rape: “I had never had sexual intercourse before. I knew that I did not want to have sexual intercourse with him” (*WC* 56). The fact that she did not want to have sex but was forced is enough to label this attack rape. It is significant that she precedes this clear-cut definition of rape with an assertion of her virginity. Bourke explains that victims of rape “are sorted into a hierarchy of suffering” whereby some rapes are regarded as less serious than others (2007: 48). Victims are slotted into various rungs on this hierarchy according to their moral character. Bourke notes that a widespread rape myth suggests that previous sexual experience means that a woman is “fair game” for sexual overtures from any other man. Beauty’s insistence that she was a virgin anticipates this myth and she states it upfront. Bourke contends that the “various items in the rapists’ charter [such as some rapes are not serious, women lie, women ask for it] are so widely accepted within society that they attain the status of myths, or commonplace and unquestioned ways of looking at the world”. The pervasiveness of these myths means that, even

when a man admits that he forced a woman to have sex, he could still resist the label of rape (p. 49). Beauty's virginity is thus posited as an explanation for why she "deserves" the status of a "real" rape victim.

Mr. Pirelli clearly utilises a number of rape myths to resist the label of rapist. In addition to suggesting that his actions were not serious, he tells Beauty that he had "done [their] family so many favours over the years" that she should "grant him this one" (*WC* 56). In this statement, he trivialises his assault by describing it as a "favour" rather than as the rape that it clearly is. Beauty's grandmother had also told her that Mr. Pirelli was "not like other people" because he gave them so much "stuff" (*WC* 54). He suggests that his generosity, which itself flows from his higher socio-economic status, entitles him to access to Beauty's body. He also uses race and constructions of black women's sexuality to exonerate himself as he "tried to convince [Beauty] that it would be [her] only time with a White man, and that [she] should see it as a learning experience" (*WC* 56). Once again, he reinforces the idea that he is actually doing her a "favour" rather than raping her. He knows that "you people like to do it" (*WC* 56). Here he is referring to black people in general and black women in particular. He assumes that, by virtue of her being black, she is always "asking for it". He is drawing on familiar colonial constructions of black people's sexuality which assumed that "the darker races or non-Europeans were immoral, promiscuous, libidinous and always desired white people" (Loomba 1998: 158). Brownmiller similarly shows how "the reputation for lasciviousness and promiscuity" continues to "haunt" black women in contemporary societies (1975: 124). When Beauty reflects on the rape as an adult, she makes an explicit link between this racist construction of black women's sexuality and Mr. Pirelli's suggestions that he was entitled to use her body when she reflects that Mr. Pirelli spoke to her in "that patronising, colonial, overbearing sort of way" (*WC* 37). Bourke notes that, in the case of the rape of black women, two rape myths often operate simultaneously: namely that the woman was overly sexual and that she "asked for it" (2007: 78). Lest the reader think that interracial rape is Beauty's only experience of sexual assault, Maart notes that Beauty's paintings and sculptures depict "various women at different stages of sexual and physical abuse, the kind my mother was accustomed to and the kind I had witnessed at the hands of her boyfriends" (*WC* 57).

As in the cases of Isabel and Beauty, Carmen's narrative reveals that she had experienced sexual violence at the hands of strangers as well as in the home. Her description of the rape by her father is preceded by her memories of an attack in the "parking lot of a theatre" (*WC* 40). She recalls how she was "knocked out" by her attacker who "forced [her] into the back of his van" and threw her "into the parking lot, like a used, soiled rag" after "he was done" (*WC* 40). When a woman tries to comfort her after she is found in the parking lot she reflects on the earlier rape by her father when she thinks that the woman did not realise "that it was the second time a man had

raped [her]” (*WC* 43). The woman is aware of rape victims’ tendency to blame themselves, and she “kept telling [Carmen] that it was not [her] fault”. She adds that “men of all ages, creeds and colours raped women” (*WC* 43). Maart’s text is concerned with drawing attention to the ubiquity of rape in the lives of South African women, rather than dwelling on interracial rape. In order to emphasise this reality, she repeats the phrase “all ages, creeds and colours” four times in two paragraphs detailing Carmen’s thoughts after her second rape.

Carmen notes that she “appreciated” the woman’s repeated insistence that the rape was not her fault and that she should not blame herself. Rape is a notoriously underreported crime both globally and in the South African context. The most commonly cited reason for this is that women are “afraid that they would not be believed, that it would be they and not the men who raped who would be on trial” (Wood & Rennie 1994: 145). The rape myths that Joanna Burke identifies and that were discussed in the preceding part of this article all contribute to women’s concerns about not being believed. These myths direct the focus to the victim rather than the perpetrator once an accusation of rape is made. Brownmiller similarly argues that society is “composed of citizens who believe the many myths about rape, and they judge the female according to these cherished myths” (1975: 373). Isabel’s sister Dolores articulates this fear after being raped by a teacher when she says that “[n]ot being believed is the worst fate a woman can suffer ... and everyone knows it” (*WC* 11). Isabel recognises the courage it took her sister to take her rapist to court and she remembers that “Dolores had guts” (*WC* 11). Rather than receiving support from her community, however, Dolores found herself judged and questioned “each and every day” as “she faced the stares, the sniggers and the remarks of those who praised Mr. Jacobs [the rapist] for being such a wonderful teacher” (*WC* 11). Isabel remembers her sister as someone who “challenges everyone and everything” and who “was not afraid of anything”. Yet the “stares”, “sniggers” and “remarks” clearly took their toll and Dolores committed suicide.

Women’s fears of not being believed must thus be connected to the discourses about rape and gender relations that circulate within the larger society in which women are situated. Maart alerts the reader to South African reactions to rape accusations in the first chapter describing Isabel’s rape. As the rapist forces Isabel into the back seat of her car he notices the *Argus* and the latest issue of the *Cape Times* before he “shove[s] them with his left foot” (*WC* 6). Isabel details his every move and she sees that he “caught a glimpse of both front pages, each of which featured the beloved deputy president [now the president] Zuma who had been charged with rape” (*WC* 6). The rapist “smirked” as he saw these cover stories (*WC* 6). His smirk suggests that he knows just how heavily both public opinion and the justice system would be weighted in his favour if Isabel were to defy the statistics and actually report the rape. Steven Robins uses an analysis of the

Zuma rape trial to show that “while sexual rights and equality are enshrined in the constitution and accepted within certain sectors of the public, popular responses to gender and sexual equality [continue to be] extremely conservative” (2006: 151). During Zuma’s trial in 2006, the defence counsellors certainly played on rape myths when they argued that the “rape accuser had seduced Zuma by wearing ‘revealing clothes’” (Robins 2006: 152). This argument employs “[c]ommonly held notions about male sexual needs and female seductiveness” (Bourke 2007: 43) and it assumes that the woman must be to blame if a man is unable to control his sexual “desire”. The extent to which the accuser, Khwezi, was discredited is revealed in the way she “was portrayed by Justice Willem van der Merwe as a manipulative seductress, a pathological liar and a serial rape accuser” (Robins 2006: 155). The gender-sensitive reader will notice how this brief description combines several rape myths that all draw on extremely misogynist assumptions about women. The accusation that the woman is manipulative suggests that she was in control of the situation and that she used her sexuality to exert this control. The judge pathologises her sexuality and questions her mental state while simultaneously using the familiar rape myth that “false accusations of rape are endemic” (Bourke 2007: 28). If the woman received little sympathy from the justice system, the public reaction was even more explicitly vicious and misogynist as she was exposed to daily demonstrations outside the courtroom where Zuma supporters “burnt photographs and effigies of the rape accuser and chanted ‘burn the bitch’” (Robins 2006: 157). Zuma was acquitted.

Khwezi tells the court that she is “a lesbian and had not been interested in having sex with Zuma” (Robins 2006: 162). This is reminiscent of Beauty’s description of her rape by Mr. Pirelli: she first asserts that she was a virgin and then adds that she did not want to have sex with this man. Similarly, Khwezi’s narrative suggests that she is aware that merely saying that she did not want to have sex would not be regarded as sufficient. She therefore prefaces this statement by stating her sexual orientation. Maart’s text emphasises that if “men of all ages, creeds and colours” (*WC* 43) rape women, women of all ages, colours, creeds, classes and sexual orientations are vulnerable to rape. Jazz is a lesbian and her sexual orientation clearly neither safeguarded her body against the sexual assault by Dr Singh, nor did it convince Dr Singh that she was not interested in his attentions as he persisted in sending her letters and stalking her (*WC* 120).

Moffett (2006: 135) notes an alarming trend in public discourses about rape in contemporary South African society, namely that “any discussion of rape is invariably subsumed in narratives about race or class, not gender”. There appears to be an assumption that the “typical” rapist is a black man who suffers from poverty and is likely to be unemployed. Lemanski (2004: 104) finds that “apartheid’s sociospatial legacy ensures that crime remains concentrated in poor black social groups and spaces”. Moffett explains that,

while unemployment and poverty may aggravate the incidence of sexual violence, these factors do not in themselves cause rape (2006). Maart's text supports Moffett's argument by showing professionally successful and wealthy men perpetrating rape. After Isabel's rape, Beauty asks, "What drives a man to those actions?" (p. 53). She wonders whether the rapist was a "frustrated man who had suffered in his Blackness because his oppression had put him there" (p. 53). She is alluding to the notion that sexual violence by black men can be attributed to their humiliation and emasculation by the apartheid system. If the rapist was black and poor, he was likely frustrated by structural oppression and he took out that frustration on the body of his victim. Maart, however, challenges the validity of this explanation. The women in the writing circle are shocked when they learn that the rapist is the son of Isabel's "godmother, Mary ... Mary who lives in Bishops court! Mary who lives a few avenues away from [them], in this neighbourhood! Mary who used to be a professor" (*WC* 194). When Isabel realises who raped her, she recalls Mary describing her son as "the child to whom they gave everything; the child they sent to private school" (*WC* 171). This is clearly not a man who was driven to rape by poverty and the material deprivations that continue to be a legacy of apartheid for many black South Africans. Rape is fundamentally a crime of gender violence and while factors of race and class can certainly shape the identity and actions of rapists, the primary category of analysis in attempts to understand rape must be gender.

Wood and Rennie note that it "is usually men who name the woman's experience [of rape], and they name it from their perspective" (1994: 145). When women, like Maart, write about rape and explore how female characters experience the assault, they thus make a crucial intervention in discourses surrounding rape and gender. To understand the "agony that was written all over [Isabel's] face" (*WC* 12) during the rape, we must consider how her experience of the assault is informed by more than just the "detestable pounding of [this] man mounting her". Her face becomes a palimpsest that chronicles the layered encounters with sexual violence that has structured her life as well as the lives of her friends in the writing circle.

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