

REVIEW

State of peril: race and rape in South African literature, by Lucy Valerie Graham, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, 253 pp., £40, ISBN 978 0 1997 9637 3

In 1999, Thabo Mbeki charged a white journalist, Charlene Smith, with racism for describing rape as “endemic” in South Africa. Smith had been calling for a change in public attitudes to sexual violence as she also publicized her own recent experience of rape. The ensuing furore became emblematic of a crisis in gender and sexual representation in South Africa that has also become the focus of much post-apartheid writing, including, for instance, J. M. Coetzee’s controversial and celebrated novel *Disgrace* (1999). Here Lucy Graham frames her discussion of contemporary South African writing with reference to hegemonic turn-of-the-century “black peril” discourses (1890–1914) which deployed accounts of white women raped by black men to justify a range of state-sanctioned racial and political injustices. In treating rape both as a criminal act and as a literary trope that gives complex expression to a range of social anxieties related to governance, law, education, and reading culture in South Africa, Graham generates an innovative and invigorating discussion of South African literature and history.

One of Graham’s central goals is to explore why South African texts typically depict inter-racial rape despite the statistical evidence that most rapes within the state are intra-racial. She begins by considering a range of early to mid-century writers, including Olive Schreiner, Sarah Gertrude Millen and Sol Plaatje, who interrogated and subverted “black peril” myths by representing alternative situations and points of view. These sometimes include “white peril” scenarios representing the rape of black women by white men which, Graham argues, tended for the most part to denigrate populations of mixed race as the unwanted products of rape rather than to challenge racism. Later chapters consider writers such as Coetzee, Zoë Wicomb and K. Sello Duiker, who dismantle the schematic and heteronormative construction of rape in the earlier literature including, for instance, the myth that rape happens only to women.

Part of Graham’s achievement here consists in successfully addressing the allegorical, social and political dimensions of South African rape narratives without at the same time dismissing the efforts of writers to represent the traumatic effects of rape on individual targets. Although her methods are largely historical, Graham handles psychoanalytic theory with great care. She construes rape narratives in Butlerian terms as the “melancholy” expression of desires that have been foreclosed and losses that have been rendered ungrievable by the social order even as they also discipline and regulate South African social groups and shape how they interact. Drawing upon psychoanalysis, Graham highlights in particular “the ungrievable status of intraracial rape in the South African [literary] imaginary and of the black woman as rape victim” (93). Indeed, while the long historical framework initially threatens to be somewhat restrictive in terms of

the range of South African voices it can allow, from page to page, Graham unfolds new information and insights which culminate in a persuasive, cogent and compassionate analysis of the contemporary crisis. This book will no doubt facilitate a more extended, more inclusive and egalitarian, discussion of sexual politics in contemporary South African literature and society.

Íde Corley

National University of Ireland, Maynooth

Email: Ide.Corley@nuim.ie

© 2013, Íde Corley

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2013.848086>