

Discussant's comments on Helen Moffett's "Political economy of sexual violence in post-apartheid South Africa"

by Dr AnnMarie Wolpe
(Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust)

Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust's Tenth Anniversary Colloquium, "Engaging silences and unresolved issues in the political economy of South Africa", 21-23 September 2006, Cape Town, South Africa

Helen Moffett heavily criticised this particular colloquium in the course of an intervention on the first day's deliberations for not addressing issues of gender. I countered this on the basis that issues of gender would have to deal with specific examples of the silences that the colloquium set out to examine in relation to socio-economic conditions, an aspect that is not tackled in Moffett's paper at all.

Moffett's paper is on sexual violence, a phenomenon of considerable importance for a number of reasons. Not only is the high rate of rape extremely alarming, but there is also the violation experienced by the victims, and this and other aspects all are indicative of greater maladies in our society that are related to socio-economic conditions. She claims that her paper deals with the "nuanced explanatory framework for the current South African experience of pervasive sexual violence". However, as will be seen from my comments, her paper was largely speculative, filled with empirical data and assertions that were not borne out by theoretical constructs.

In this paper she makes two main assertions, viz

- 1) "...that there is a case for arguing that during periods of overt nationalist fervour, political regeneration, emancipation, and other arguably more laudable forms of political restructuring, the rates of sexual violence against women and children also rise alarmingly, often for reasons that have to do with the immediate past" and
- 2) "...that the pernicious and overtly racially ranked hierarchies endorsed and enforced during ...apartheid regime continue to have profound implications for women and their experience of gender-based and sexual violence".

There is no attempt to back up the first of these claims. Is nationalist fervour, for example, a "laudable form of political restructuring"? Was it the case in Nazi Germany, for example? Is emancipation automatically followed by rape? What examples can be taken from other societies? How immediate is the past and what aspects of the past are relevant?

The second assertion is crucial to her argument when she says that there is a need to establish "whether there is a theoretical relation between South Africa's apartheid narratives, which were based on vigorous, even frantic principles of 'othering' and our current climate of sexual violence". Her theoretical argument is that

"Sexual violence in post -1994 South Africa is fuelled by justificatory narratives that are rooted in apartheid discourses at the same time that

discourses of race, including accusations of racism, have stifled open scrutiny of the function of rape as a source of patriarchal control.”

Her argument is somewhat convoluted. In the first place the "narratives" are none other than a set of discourses rooted in other discourses. She does not conduct an analysis that examines this proposition. What she discusses is the commercial made in 1999 starring the South African Hollywood star, Charleze Theron, which set out to point to the horrors of rape. Moffett said that the producers should have attended a conference where the activists noted that "during the transition...the rhetoric of equality ...tends to mask the reconstruction of patriarchal power" that operated in spite of discourses on equality. Unfortunately there is no definition or discussion of what constitutes "patriarchal power".

In the second place she briefly refers to President Mbeki's clash with Charlene Smith's writing on rape and his claim that her work was "racist". These two examples of two incidents 5 years apart lead Moffett to say that she has "established that efforts to critique rape lead to backlash, whether from civil society or the highest elected public official in the land"!

These two events she sees as leading to "paralysis", and in support of this claim moves to a discussion she attended at a private home to listen to and comment on the views of a well known writer who had recently returned to Cape Town. This group was "a fair representation of Cape Town's progressive intelligentsia". The subsequent discussions focused on "possible causes for ...sexual violence" emphasizing the breakdown of African family life, and the degradation and humiliation of apartheid. There "was an unspoken assumption that rapists were black".

Whilst Moffett recognizes that the majority of rapists are black because the majority of the population is black, she says that "Ten years of transformation have failed to deconstruct the old apartheid narratives of sexual violence that demonise black men..." She adds further down that this masks patriarchal violence".

This conclusion is somewhat strange given her dismissive attitude towards Western feminist work of the 70s and 80s when she said that they "did not take fully into account the acute and complex forms of 'othering' present in society with a history of racial and ethnic conflict", nor that there is a complex literature dealing with patriarchy and its legacies.

In a section headed "Rape and the anxiety inherited from apartheid" she tackles ideologies relating to the justification of rape by men, such as the old adage that "women ask for it" or they are "cheeky"! Yet again she does not delve more deeply into the theoretical underpinnings of sets of ideologies, and contradictorily she is somewhat dismissive of accounts that focus on the construction of masculinities and their expression. Surely the complexity of the socialization process, and cultural formations are highly relevant to any discussion of this nature? These are complex processes and are the outcome of a range of structural elements.

Her conclusion again is not backed up by any serious theoretical discussion but rather another assertion. "Acts of violence are therefore seen as necessary, not only to keep the unstable subclass of women in their ordained places, as discussed above, but to confirm and remind them of their membership in a specific community". Suffice it to say that she does not demonstrate that women are a subclass, that they are unstable, nor how violence operates to control women. The very disparate forms of rape should surely have been considered just to mention two distinct categories,

viz. rape associated with unprovoked violence and aggression often associated with criminality, rape as practiced by initiation into gangs, rape as conducted in homes by men known to the victim and so on. And, finally, how would she account for the blatant and worrying support by so many women for the former Deputy President of the country! She dealt with the backlash witnessed at the trial, but not with this other extremely worrying aspect to the trial.

On her section on rape and gender equality she sees a “devil’s bargain being struck” which is that “women are accepted as having equal political status, even within structures like Parliament as long as they remain subordinate in the private and domestic realms.” Who strikes the bargain?

Throughout this paper reference is made to patriarchy and “the unmasking of patriarchal violence”. We do not know how Moffett would theorise patriarchy beyond an assertion of its capacity. However, she did say, in response to some comments I made, that this paper is a chapter in a long book which does discuss patriarchy elsewhere. Perhaps she should have considered the need to expand on this point during her presentation.