

Review

The Kanga and the Kangaroo Court

Mmatshilo Motsei (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2007)

Reviewed by Delphine Serumaga

I approach this review with two minds: one of praise and another of disappointment.

The title is truly inviting to anyone who had even a remote interest in the Zuma rape trial. The Kanga (Sarong) played a central role in the trial and the notion of a Kangaroo court could be making reference to the High Court and its surrounding activities as much as reference to the 'court' in its actual deliberations.

The book explores the status of the African woman versus her African male counterpart and the socio-political spaces they all occupy.

The author, Mmatshilo Motsei, shares her wealth of experience, and gives examples and situations in South Africa, even better, in an African context exploring African women's sexuality and the discourse of the personal being political. She takes wide turns in this discussion about women and their sexuality to include explanations and examples of hip hop language, music and its history, descriptions of male genitalia and a glossary of the various forms of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). As much as the author may have wanted to appeal to a wide spectrum of readers, she exhausts the reader through elaborate descriptions that slow or halt the flow of engagement.

As a result, the reader detaches from what originally drew you to the book: the title. I expected greater reflections on elements of

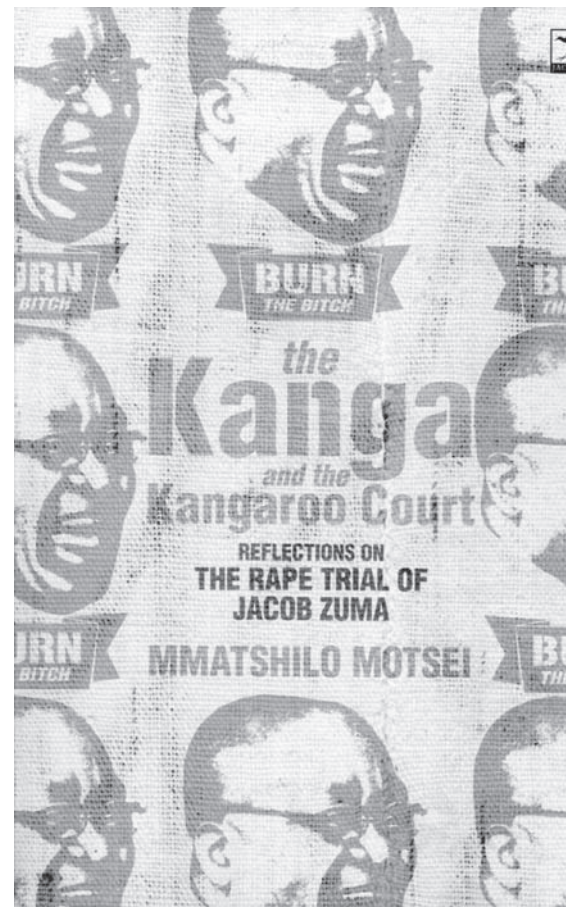
the trial such as interesting insights and debates about Kemp J. Kemp's manipulation of patriarchal religion to further his cause and the judgement of Kwezi's mental capacity based on western psychometric testing. These she records as points of reference in the trial but without reflection as the title suggests.

Therefore, unfortunately, this book does not bring new insights into gender or violence against women. Nonetheless, the book would be suitable for required reading for an introductory course on gender, gender-based violence, or women in development where debates could be explored and activists cultivated.

Mmatshilo Motsei is a member of a small but hopefully growing breed of black African woman activists turned author. It is clear from her writing that she is not only well versed in African gender issues but well referenced in the matter too. It is refreshing to read someone who bridges the activist/academic cavern.

Due to the respect I hold for the author as a pan-Africanist and more importantly as a strong and proven African woman activist, I felt it was necessary to read deeper than the argument and gain insight into her principles on the personal being political.

A dichotomy seems to exist between Motsei as a religious person who subscribes to the teachings of the church and bible as well as her extensive knowledge, and active practise of African



culture and customs, with being an African woman activist.

This not only seems to threaten her ability to firmly give her opinion of the Zuma rape trial verdict and its impact on South African society today, but also makes her multiple identities a contradiction in itself. Both the bible (and by extension the church) and African culture are patriarchal institutions which she reveres. I then question how she can exist within such staunch patriarchy

and at the same time be unbiased towards the social impacts of the rape trial.

Due to the author's multiple identities, she is able to discuss women in religious, cultural and judicial contexts. While doing so however, she contradicts herself as an individual holding certain views with the ideas that run through her book.

In her chapter 'Lucifer, deliver us from evil' she concludes with a biblical story about an attempted rape of Susanna saying that *'ultimately truth prevailed'*. More poignantly, she states that *'this principle of truth should apply to men who are convicted of rape they did not commit, or acquitted for rape they did commit'*. Her reference to the Bible, which is not only steeped in patriarchy but also used to promote patriarchy and the oppression of women, is used as a tool to subtly indicate, or gives the impression that, the rape trial verdict was correct: divine truth prevailed.

In her final chapter 'After the verdict, what next? Justice as part of the moral and spiritual healing agenda' she discusses western judicial systems that are based on seeking punishment versus the African or indigenous justice systems that seek healing. She explores the lack of closure in the rape case suggesting that apologies (as part of the healing process) would have been desirable.

An interesting concept. However, the author disappoints by suggesting which specific individuals apologies should go to.

Outside of Zuma's wives she suggests only men: President Mbeki, Barney Pityana, Njabulo Ndebele and Archbishop Tutu. I believe the argument she puts forward for who deserves apologies could be used to apologise to women of South Africa for the trauma caused by Zuma's poor decisions - 'Kwezi's mother or even any supporters of Kwezi's plight.

Such omissions demonstrate the sub-conscious patriarchal positions women hold; and this includes Motsei's sub-conscious.

Another example of her sub-conscious patriarchal position is the constant reference to African men's anger and hurting as a result of social oppressions thus making them violent and abusive towards women. Despite this being partially true, great importance is placed on men's healing and men's reasons for being abusers. There is failure to acknowledge that African women also grew up under the same social conditions so her arguments only provide excuses for African men's abusive behaviour.

In her chapter on tradition, 'Women ask for it', Motsei talks about *'motherism'* in African feminism. She unfortunately, refers to the proverb *'woman holds the knife at the sharp point'* saying that this *'in itself is not negative'* within African tradition - except for the fact that in the unequal African society it limits women's potential. What is not articulated is the sacrificial element of a woman according to this proverb which is about holding pain for men and children. This is an oppressive state

spurred on by patriarchal thinking. It is not about women's potential, it is about the burden or pain women carry. The value of the sacrifice is negative.

Motsei superficially discusses the *'racial'* tension that was raging behind the scenes during the Zuma rape trial. This is one aspect that would have given justice to her title and validity to the book as a reflection on the trial. This is where I would have liked to see much greater exploration.

If she had explored this in more depth, she would have been able to discuss not only the gender or sexuality space that African women occupy, but also the racial and political corner she has been painted into. In fact, by superficially addressing the issue she further promotes the limitation of our space as African women. Unfortunately, she acknowledges African women only as *'research subjects'* and not as skilled, articulate and published activists in solidarity, except for one reference to Dabi Nkululeko's 1987 work.

Ultimately, her reflections are based within religious and African cultural teachings and understandings. Both of these firmly hold onto moralities and spiritualities that oppress women or ignite morality conflicts around women's freedoms and social status. LB

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