

## **Dreaming in Colour.**

Uvile Ximba.

Cape Town: Modjaji, 2021. 148 pp.

ISBN 9781928433170.

Uvile Ximba's fallist novel, *Dreaming in Colour* (2021), deals with a young woman who is at war with her memory, her dreams, and her desires. Her conflict is a result of suppressed memories of violence she experienced as a black lesbian living in South Africa.

South Africa is an inhospitable country for women and queer people. According to minister of police Bheki Cele's crime report, 10 006 people were raped between April and June 2021. *Dreaming in Colour* is located within a feminist discourse (see Gqola 90; Geduld and Koraan 1933) reacting to this culture of sexual violence against black lesbians in South Africa.

Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* (1978) explores how we function and behave when we are in love. In the book, Barthes (22) writes: "Despite the difficulties of my story, despite discomforts, doubts, despairs, despite impulses to be done with it, I unceasingly affirm love, within myself, as a value".

*Dreaming in Colour* is more than just a dark novel about sexual violence, it is also a book about the love, memory, "discomforts, doubts and despair" that Barthes (22) views as related. In the rest of this review, I explore lesbian love, pleasure, sexual violence, coming out and the homogenising stereotype of black male masculinity as depicted in the novel. I started this review by calling *Dreaming in Colour* a 'fallist novel', because it is set during the student protest movement that is popularly known as fallism. This term is derived from the #rhodesmustfall and #feesmustfall hashtags which were used during the student protests which were calling for the removal of Cecil Rhodes's statue at UCT, the renaming of Rhodes university, the reduction or scrapping of fees at universities and institutions of higher learning across the country and for the development of afri-centric curricula.

*Dreaming in Colour* is Ximba's debut novel, it explores the lives of Langa, and her lover, Khwezi in post-apartheid South Africa and post-colonial Zimbabwe. The novel also deals with identity formation in multi-cultural and multi-racial societies with all the trappings and contradictions of upward mobility, integration and legalised same-sex marriage. The story follows their romantic relationship from when they are teenagers in a predominately white, upper-middle-class high school in Johannesburg where they are exposed to a hostile, racialised, gendered and classed environment which is intent on enforcing Eu-

rocentric standards of femininity and "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 11). Girls were "not allowed to hug each other, hold hands and shave their heads because this would make them look masculine and unattractive and black girls were especially singled out for criticism because they had 'prominent body types'" (25). It also explores their lives as young adults in their twenties at what the fallist students call the 'University currently known as Rhodes', popularly abbreviated as 'UCKAR'.

The novel is written like a play. It is rich in dialogue, which makes the language flexible, dynamic and accommodates different characters' language use and their expression of their lived experiences. This means characters have a voice and autonomy. This is important because the stories are not relayed through the voice of the protagonist but through each character's own voice.

Sexual violence against lesbians, an important contemporary issue in South Africa, runs through the narrative. In this respect, the novel is reminiscent of visual artist Zanele Muholi's work on violence against lesbians in South Africa and Pumla Gqola's already-mentioned *Rape: A South African Nightmare* (2015), in which she argues that "[l]esbian women are marked as inappropriately sexual and the motivation or justification for raping and/or killing them often surfaces the desire to render them heterosexual" (92). In *Dreaming in Colour*, Langa has suppressed the sexual violence she experienced. Her suppression could be interpreted as a survival technique, but she is ultimately unable to escape from her past. The suppressed events haunt her in her dreams and causes tension between her and her girlfriend, Khwezi.

Even though the novel exposes queerphobia enacted by both heterosexual men and women, there is an overrepresentation of queerphobia from black men. This leaves the reader with the feeling that black men are irredeemably queerphobic. Granted, there are vast numbers of homophobic black heterosexual men in society. However, black men are not a homogenous group; uncomplicated, one-sided violent savages. As the rape statistics show, in South Africa, there is a serious problem with black masculine violence. This review does not seek to use the 'not all men'-excuse, however, I do want to highlight that the novel does not depict black men with any type of complexity and nuance. Instead, it plays directly into well-known tropes and stereotypes. As bell hooks (x) contends, black men are often "[s]een as animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers, black men have had no real dramatic say when it comes to the way they are represented". Langa's father, for example, "was a very unwell man

[...] who had too many urges and one of them was to always be wondering” (136). Chris, a black man, is a serial rapist who “was stabbed to death by one of his victims” (129). Mavuso, a black man from Makhanda, is a violent, homophobic, rapist and misogynist, who has a fight with Khwezi while visiting her and Langa in their apartment because they dare challenge his queerphobia and use of violent language (42). He is also alleged to have been a rapist named on the #RURReferenceList (94), a real-life confession page by Rhodes university students who had suffered various kinds of violations in and around the campus and named their perpetrators on the list. Then there is Nkosi, another black man from Melville in Johannesburg, who is also portrayed as a raging queerphobe who proclaims to “not understand these people” (107), meaning gay people. Lastly, there is uTa'mnci, Langa's uncle who also violates her. Ximba describes him as having a “look that borders between a smirk and a wounded dog's grimace” (139), he has “faded acne and an abnormally large nose, with slightly grey lips and a tongue that occasionally poked out to dry them” (139). In contrast, the only white man in the novel is deified; he is a saviour. The narrator describes him as “clairvoyant, a swooping Superman” (131). This kind of characterisation of white people has been widely critiqued in visual art, literature and movies. As Hughey (12), for example, states, “over time, the white saviour metaphor has stabilized and reduced the complexity of an array of interracial and intercultural interactions into a digestible narrative of redemption, individuality, and sacrifice.”

Ximba's strength in writing a queer narrative is in how she represents Langa and Khwezi's sexual life as ordinary and healthy. The couple's intimacy is handled with care, the representation of it is not voyeuristic nor distasteful. One hopes she continues in this style.

*Dreaming in Colour* is an important contribution to South African literature. It's exploration of the dangers of queerphobia, religious bigotry, black male violent masculinity, rape and race. These are important contemporary and urgent issues facing the country and the rest of the continent. Despite its limitations, *Dreaming in Colour* is also the documentation of a beautiful (South African, lesbian) lovers' discourse.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v59i1.13948>