Review of Pumla Dineo Gqola’s *Female Fear Factory*

*Jamie Martin*
Wits Centre for Diversity Studies, University of the Witwatersrand

**Pumla Dineo Gqola, Female Fear Factory**
ISBN: 978-1990973093

**ABSTRACT**
This paper reviews the book *Female Fear Factory* (2021) by Pumla Dineo Gqola. An overview and evaluation of the book are provided, emphasising the important deepening of the central concept and its relevance to anti-rape and feminist work, activism and scholarship across the world.

**KEYWORDS**
*Female Fear Factory* (book); gender-based violence; rape; non-fiction; Pumla Dineo Gqola (author)

*Female Fear Factory* is another timely and critical contribution to Pumla Dineo Gqola’s already deep feminist oeuvre. She has earned her place as one of South Africa’s greatest feminist thinkers, and with good reason. Gqola’s ability to articulate the ways patriarchy infects and inflicts violence, capturing both the brutality and possibilities of freedom, enable her to think through rape and gendered violence in novel and important ways. Such thinking and articulation make possible different ways of understanding and addressing the very real and urgent concern of ongoing patriarchal violence in a context like South Africa.

Importantly, Gqola has expanded the geographical and contextual realms in her most current book, opening up not only the applicability of her insights beyond the borders of South Africa, but also further opening up channels of solidarity and transnational feminist work. In her previous book, *Rape: A South African Nightmare* (2015), which is the starting point for her thinking on the concept of the Female Fear Factory, she squarely stays within the bounds of South Africa. There, she unpacks centuries of history, from slavery and early
colonialism through apartheid and the dawn of democracy, to demonstrate the unique contours of South Africa and how it has earned the infamous title of “rape capital of the world”. In *Female Fear Factory*, the analysis draws on and finds home in contexts like El Salvador, Saudi Arabia, the US and India. As Gqola so poignantly argues, “patriarchy does not respect national boundaries. It is unabashedly promiscuous in its influences and tethers” (p. 46). What she sets out to do in expanding the geographical and contextual resources and reach of the Female Fear Factory, is illustrate how patriarchy is ubiquitous across the globe and the factory functions regardless of borders. The sites and specifics vary, of course, but as she importantly argues, the examples from different spaces and places are not in service of easy comparisons such as ‘patriarchy is worse here than there’. Rather, the take away from seemingly disparate locations serve to illuminate how the factory functions to enable institutions and subjectivities to take up patriarchal violence in global and lethal ways.

And central to this important transnational work is the conceptualisation of the Female Fear Factory itself. Crucially, each of the three alliterative words is independently unpacked while it is explained how together they operate as a powerful patriarchal tool of violence and control. Central to Gqola’s conceptualisation is the performative, public and policing nature of this factory.

It is a theatrical and public performance of patriarchal policing of and violence toward women and others cast as female, who are, therefore, considered safe to violate. It requires an audience, and relies on a series of recognisable cues to communicate with those who watch, because patriarchy ensures that we are socialised to recognise these cues in a process of fluency. (p. 18)

This public declaration of the safety of aggressors and those deemed “safe to violate” provide the impetus for understanding how the production of everyday and institutionalised gendered violence is so nefarious and saturated in society. The Female Fear Factory also relies on the meanings and machinations of its metaphoric factory. It produces meaning, subjectivities, languages and possibilities: a site of manufacture and production. There is an element of human-making in this factory which points not only to how female fear is produced, cultivated and sold to the public, but also to possibilities of its unmaking by our same human hands. The metaphor of the factory makes possible a more nuanced understanding of how phenomena like rape culture, intimate partner violence, street harassment, oppressive laws restricting women’s movements and actions, and all other gendered violence, from the quotidian everyday to the systemic, all work cumulatively to control and render rape-able those deemed female.

And, while at first glance one may assume the meaning of “female” aligns solely with women, Gqola complicates this by arguing that different genders and sexually minoritised people are also made female. The Female Fear Factory not only produces fear, but also females. Gqola importantly takes time to explain longstanding feminist work which differentiates between biological sex and socially constructed gender. Often times, but not always, when slippages in language are made, conflating sex and gender through references to women as female and vice versa, this is a tool of patriarchy which does not want to recognise the important differences. Yet, although this is the common result of such slippages, Gqola argues her use of female to refer to women and those made female under patriarchy serves
to disrupt this repetitive patriarchal lie. She makes clear that “the Female Fear Factory is not a synonym for the ‘women fear factory’ because ‘female’ does not ‘woman’ equal” (p. 54). Rather, she uses “female” as an act of naming and exposing what patriarchy tries to hide and obfuscate; that the Female Fear Factory relies on essentialist, binary thinking of gender and sex to further enact violence. She is using the language and logic of patriarchy to bring this silent power to the surface, making it more visible and able to be undone.

This analytic manoeuvre, however, does raise questions about queer and trans people which Gqola addresses in theory, but less so in examples. She makes clear that the Female Fear Factory targets all women, but not exclusively. Those who are not women—sexually minoritised men, transgender and non-binary people and men who step outside of strict confines of hegemonic masculinity—may be made female. Under patriarchy’s stringent regulation of femininity, masculinity and heterosexuality, those who fall outside and perform gender and sexuality in contradiction to these scripts can be deemed and treated as female. Therefore, transgender, non-binary and cisgender queer men are made potential targets of violence and rape. Gqola does thorough work of articulating this reality and making it clear that women are not the only victims of the Female Fear Factory. However, what she does less of is detailing examples and illustrations of these experiences which may provide richer and deeper illuminations of the operations and effects of the Female Fear Factory and ways to challenge it. Gqola clearly states she “makes no apologies for focusing on how patriarchy terrorises women, because we are always rendered female” (p. 54), while simultaneously making it clear that women are not the only victims. My critique here is not that she does not make that important acknowledgement, but rather that she may have missed opportunities to further explicate the workings of the Female Fear Factory for lack of emphasis on its rendering and impact on queer and trans people made female. And, crucially, what may emerge from an analysis which centres, even momentarily, on people who are not women, is potentially useful for all who live under this constant threat of violence.

The final aspect underpinning the name and theory of the Female Fear Factory is fear and one which Gqola articulates with chilling effect. Drawing on the affective turn in cultural, critical and feminist scholarship, she enunciates that the feeling and language of fear is both individual and social. Fear is deeply felt, embodied and, as Sara Ahmed has described, “impresses upon us in the present, as an anticipated pain in the future” (2014, p. 65). Gqola similarly articulates that the Female Fear Factory is a memory; a past experience, felt in the present and which we take with us into the future. Patriarchal violence, whether inflicted physically or enunciated verbally as a threat, is a persistent reminder to women and those rendered female that the possibility of rape and violence is ever present. Throughout the book, Gqola demonstrates this working of fear through examples of xenophobia, rape, inadequate institutional responses and walking through cities as female. Even if we are not victims of these violent acts ourselves, we gain fluency in seeing it all around us, and therefore fear the possibility that we are likely its next target. Finally, Gqola explains that centring and “paying attention to fear, its sites of generation, its targets, its beneficiaries, and the stories through which it is made sense of, help us understand much about the structure of society” (p. 46). Through understanding how structuring of patriarchal societies relies on fear as a means of control, we can find ways to interrupt and disrupt the reiteration of females living in constant fear.
The central concepts and terms underpinning the Female Fear Factory are unpacked and argued in the first three chapters of the book. This foundational work demonstrates Gqola’s deep knowledge of feminist and related scholarship and her ability to weave together insights, arguments and refutations. The remaining eight chapters that make up the body of the book highlight a particular foci for examining and articulating the operation of the Female Fear Factory. Some topics include the epidemic of femicide in El Salvador, the gang rape in India known as Nirbhaya, the Nigerian #SexForMarks scandal and a gendered analysis of xenophobic violence in South Africa. While each chapter does illuminate an issue many readers may not have deep knowledge on and enables learning from distant contexts, Gqola makes it clear this is not the sole purpose:

The stories through which I explore the Female Fear Factory are not examples for illustration. It is my hope that the stories themselves, as well as how I analyse them, using them to highlight the facets of patriarchal logic which undergirds fear, will enable recognition and widen strategies for anti-patriarchal work. In other words, because it is possible to see ourselves in the stories of others who are superficially nothing like ourselves, we can learn and imagine freeing ways of being. (p. 44)

And this final point is perhaps Gqola’s greatest triumph in Female Fear Factory; never letting up on possibilities and ways to interrupt the production and brutal effects of the Female Fear Factory. Her decades of work as an anti-rape and feminist activist scholar enable her analysis of the lethal threat and violence of patriarchy to be more than just reiterating this reality. Her eye is on imagining and enacting a patriarchy-free future. This book is not merely a recounting of the ways patriarchy violates, maims and brutalises. It is a call to understand how we got here, how it continues and ways we can interrupt its production. She makes clear that there cannot be description of patriarchal violence without resistance. Taking it back to the metaphor of the factory, after reading this book, one feels the fire under foot to throw wrenches and spanners in the wheels of patriarchy’s production, even in the face of fear. Gqola once again places herself at the helm of this feminist resistance, articulating how we can make this production strange and imagine and make possible a world without the Female Fear Factory.

REFERENCES