



Brothel And Brotherhood: Identity Politics In K. Sello Duiker

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Introduction

K. Sello Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001) is a seminal examination of 'non-normative' sexualities in the post-apartheid South Africa. The text is a complex work of fiction that seamlessly weaves together a complex range of thematic interest including questions of sexualities, madness, psychiatry, drug (ab)use, trauma, race etc. Duiker's ability to intertwine these diverse elements within the fabric of his storytelling makes the novel a profoundly engaging and thought-provoking work. Amongst other things, Duiker's text confronts the dynamics that is produced in the intersection of race and sexuality, unraveling the intricate web of power dynamics, historical contexts, and personal narratives. This paper is an attempt to interrogate the intersection of sexuality and race through a close study of "brotherhood" within the narrative. Brotherhood refers to the sense of camaraderie and solidarity that emerges from shared experiences and struggles in the "massage parlour" cum "brothel" that the central protagonist Tshepo works in. Duiker's exploration of brotherhood constitutes a fair example in what Stockton describes as the "intrusion of narratives on narratives" (117). The brotherhood in Duiker is built on a series of paradox: permissive yet restricted, expansive yet confined, liberal yet narrow and accessible yet distant. This complex binaries underscores the multifaceted and often contradictory nature of human connections, particularly within the context of black men's interaction with white people. The brotherhood embodies a sense of freedom that is paradoxically coupled with restraint, and a spirit of solidarity that coexists with prejudice. This paper posits that the foundation of the brotherhood lies deeply intertwined with intricate power dynamics, where relationships are shaped and defined by strategic maneuvers, negotiations of authority, and the constant flux of dominance and submission. This paper will use the framework provide by draw on the works of Foucault and Butler. Western models of sexual studies are valuable tools for analyzing identity formation, yet they may not fully capture the intricate complexities and subtleties specific to different contexts. In Africa, where issues of race and compulsory heterosexuality intersect and intertwine, it is essential to explore alternative frameworks that offer deeper insights and understanding. Keeping in mind context specificity, it will also draw on the works of African-American scholars such as E. Patrick Johnson, Mae G. Henderson and Devon W Carbado amongst others. This study will factor in best practices of 'intersectionality' research to illuminate the unique experiences of queer Africans.

“Intersectionality” as a framework makes “visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it.” (Phoenix and Pattynama, 187) This study is built on the premise that “major systems of oppression are interlocking.” (Taylor, 15)

Sello Duiker, together with Phaswane Mpe and Zakes Mda is, “part of what has now become something of a regular triumvirate forming the kernel of a new canon for the new nation.” (Green, 334) Duiker has two books to his credit: *Thirteen Cents* (2000) and *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* and both these works have earned him considerable fame. The paper deals with his second text *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*. *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* constitutes essentially a project in contesting essentialized identities in the post-apartheid world of South Africa. The novel explores Tshepo-Angelo's evolving awareness and his coming to understanding of his sexuality, sexual orientation, and the pervasive racism that intersects with his journey of self-discovery and his place in the world. The novel delves into Tshepo-Angelo's journey of self-discovery, intricately weaving together his exploration of sexuality and the pervasive racial dynamics that intricately intersect with his evolving awareness and quest to define his identity within the broader societal framework. In it, Duiker interrogates what it means to embody and negotiate queer subjectivity, confronting the intersectional challenges posed by historical legacies, cultural norms, and power dynamics. Steam Windows, where Tshepo is employed, that operates as a ‘massage parlour’ and brothel serves as a metaphorical space for the exploration and interrogation of black queer subjectivity. The parlour initially comes across as a striking singularity against the animosity and division that defines the rest of Cape Town. However, as the narrative unfolds, Duiker meticulously unveils the veneer of congeniality and respectability, revealing the brotherhood for what it actually is.

What is brotherhood?

‘Brotherhood’ forms an important part of the discourse in *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*. Brotherhood refers to the deep-seated sense of camaraderie and collective identity that permeates the workforce at Steamy Windows, the male massage parlour cum brothel that Tshepo is a part of. Steamy Windows is an exclusive men’s club, particularly attuned to alternate sexuality. The massage parlor, the readers are given to know, exists to serve the needs of men. For Tshepo the relations with men, even if they are clients, are beyond sexual gratification or even necessity. They are a relief to his life where, “...I have always had something to be sad about, my whole life” (Duiker, 298).

The brotherhood initially manifests as a locus of peace, serenity, and security. For Tshepo, whose life is fraught with a litany of personal tragedies and tumultuous past, with a history of madness, drug abuse, rape, hospital and homophobia, the brotherhood offers an alternative reality, starkly different from he had lived or envisaged. The brotherhood at Steamy Windows, characterized by its remarkable ability to avoid judging others, offers a refreshing contrast to a world that is often quick to pass judgment. In a society where same-sex relationships are often perceived as venturing into ‘dark’ and ‘unorthodox’ realms, the brotherhood embodies ‘truth,’ ‘beauty,’ ‘tenderness,’ and ‘simplicity.’ Working in the massage parlour, where transgression is an integral part of the experience, the brotherhood becomes a realization that “...we cannot walk in each other’s shoes.” (Duiker, 431)

Steamy Windows, for Duiker, serves a site to contest hegemonic ideas of masculinity and patriarchy. For Tshepo, who is constantly under pressure to perform his masculinity, the brotherhood feels

free from it. The brotherhood offers him a rare freedom from these constraints, allowing him to explore and express facets of himself that defy societal norms and stereotypes. The brotherhood embrace a state of unpretentiousness, embracing qualities of innocence, folly, and vulnerability and even uncertainty, for, “Who knows really what it means to be a man?” (Duiker, 433) West observes in course of the text that “The first boundary to transcend is within” (Duiker, 432), encapsulating the core mission of the brotherhood. This dissolution of internal boundaries signifies a profound shift towards unity and solidarity, challenging conventional notions of selfhood and fostering a communal identity rooted in mutual understanding and shared experience.

Why brotherhood is important?

Duiker's novel explores the intricate tension between African identity and homosexuality. De Palma and Francis write that “African culture has been essentialised in movements to reclaim an imaginary version of African culture interrupted by Western colonialism.” (548) In Africa, where the tension between colonial legacies and notions of African 'authenticities' complicates the discourse on the relationship between the continent and homosexuality, Duiker made a profound impact in reshaping the African homosexual literary tradition. The novel takes up the question of whether homosexuality is African or Un-African, particularly in the context of the colonial legacy.

The *Quiet Violence of Dreams* disrupts the normative boundaries of compulsory heterosexuality, inviting readers to engage in a process of constructing and deconstructing meanings within the text. Referring to *Steamy Windows*, West tells Tshepo that, “this is the last place for men. How can I say? A bastion” and goes on to say “our fathers don't have anywhere left for them, where men can be on their own without women. You know what I mean? This place, it's like club, an exclusive men's club” (322) “One must learn to be a man in this society because manhood is a socially produced category. Manhood is a performance and a script. It is accomplished and re-enacted in everyday social relationships.” (E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, 155) Duiker challenges and negotiates the question of Un-African nature of homosexuality and the performance of gender and shows what it also can mean to be an African, a homosexual and not perform gender in traditional ways. Duiker allows his readers to see through the binary division of gender and sexes as his characters confront and navigate diverse and non-traditional realities. Sebastian tells Tshepo in course of the text: “men really haven't been given the chance to explore their sexuality. Men are either married or expected to be. There is no in between. There's no place for them” (Duiker, 328) Such narrowly definitions of manhood leaves little room for African men to openly explore and express their sexuality outside of prescribed roles. On a similar note, in course of the narrative, Sebastian remarks that homosexuality, “is sex in its most liberated form because you're not answering to a wife or a husband or partner. What the client does in there, what you do, is fleeting, it has no restrictions, no agendas” (328). Duiker strips sexuality of its procreational utilitarianism and relational commitments and sees homosexuality as a liberated expression, as a transient exploration devoid of agendas. In cosmopolitan Cape Town, where Duiker works out his homosexual discursivities through the character of Tshepo, the body thus becomes a locus of control and power dynamics. It is within this context that brotherhood gains significance.

It is interesting to note how Duiker casts brotherhood not just in terms of a site to freely exercise one's present, but also carve a queer future. The workers at *Steamy Windows* perceive themselves as

architects of a transformative future. As Sebastian tells Tshepo: “I think gay men are going to play a more prominent role in the future” and this is because “straight men are tired, burnt out, raising kids but failing to equip them as best they can.” (335) The statement subtly critiques compulsory heterosexuality. While it challenges the societal expectation of heterosexual norms, its primary focus is on presenting a favorable depiction of homosexuality. It is in this that the text cites such scholars as Wilde and Baldwin to impress upon the righteousness of the act i.e. homosexuality and the utilitarian values it provides in terms of scholarship

The brotherhood at Steamy Windows thus emerges as a liberating site and allows the central protagonist to explore his own sexuality without fear or shame, the two driving force that had hitherto exercised immense pressure on him. The parlour's discreet and non-judgmental environment provides Tshepo with a unique sanctuary that allows him to confront and embrace aspects of his sexuality and be on his own self. It allows him to take charge of his body.

Cape Town in which Brotherhood is situated:

Duiker casts the ‘brotherhood’ against the general hostile environment of Cape Town. In *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, Duiker intricately examines the fragmented and contentious socio-geographic landscape of Cape Town, highlighting the city's stark divisions and the underlying tensions that shape its diverse neighborhoods and communities. Cape Town emerges as a city that continues to struggle with spatial apartheid. Despite its cosmopolitan and ostensibly liberal ethos, the city reveals underlying currents of homophobia. Within Cape Town, the text marks those “bigots, hypocrites, heterofascists who only want to further their own prejudices and intolerance of life.” (Duiker, 444)

Tshepo and his companions, in their naivety, remain oblivious to the harsh realities of how the township operates. They come to believe that “no one really cares you’re black...No one really cares that you’re white...People want to make their own reference about who they are and where they fit in or not.” (Duiker, 37) Tshepo's ignorance of the township's underlying issues, coupled with his excessive optimism, makes him an easy target for sarcasm and ridicule. Tshepo, who in his naivety and innocence had become accustomed to the sincerity and openness of the brotherhood, begins to realize that the world is not easy after all. With the realization that, “Cape Town never ceases to remind us who we are” (Duiker, 458), his transformation his complete.

Criticism of Brotherhood

One of the significant and influential concepts that Foucault introduces in his work is ‘bio-politics’. Bio-politics refers to the ways in which power and authority are exercised over bodies through policies, regulations, and practices that govern and control bodies, health, reproduction, and life itself. Bio-politics also encompasses how bodies are represented in media, art, and popular culture, and how these representations shape perceptions of identity, beauty standards, and social hierarchies. In *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, Duiker's exploration of body politics unfolds along two distinct yet interconnected paths: one scrutinizing the complexities of sexuality, and the other delving into the intricate dynamics of racism. This dual interrogation not only underscores how these identity markers operate on their own but also underscores how these can intersect and influence one another within broader social contexts. While

Duiker introduces the issue of race early in the text, it is in the context of sexuality that it gets a distinct importance.

The text invites the readers to partake in the dynamics that are produced in the intersection of race and sexuality. Mmabatho remarks in the preliminary course of the text that, "I think I came to Cape Town so that I could run away from that whole race thing...But it's here, even in Cape Town. You can't really avoid it." (Duiker, 36) As the narrative unfolds, it becomes increasingly apparent to readers that the brotherhood is not exempt from the influence of bio-politics. Bio-politics, in this context, manifests through mechanisms of normalization, surveillance, and control that affect how individuals within the brotherhood navigate their identities and relationships. This includes the ways in which societal norms around sexuality, race, and other facets of identity permeate and influence the interactions and dynamics within the group. The brotherhood's internal dynamics reflect broader power structures and inequalities that impact its members, shaping their experiences of belonging and agency. It reflects narrow perspective, representing the tensions and contradictions inherent in the intersection of race and sexuality within the complex social milieu of South Africa. Cole, whose eyes and ears are open to the racial discrimination, explains this in such a way:

This whole brotherhood thing is very convenient...But make no mistake...This thing is about power and about who has it and who doesn't. We don't have it... we don't really have any power. It's just sex cleaned up, given a better look. You see that, don't you? (Duiker, 462)

Foucault's ideas on power are instrumental in understanding the dynamics at play in the excerpt. Foucault's theory of power posits that power is pervasive and embedded within societal structures, relationships, and discourses rather than merely being held by specific individuals or groups helps us. Foucault's notion of power is not just about top-down domination but about a network of relations and practices that produce and sustain particular realities. As Foucault says, "Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations." (94) Race becomes intricately linked to questions of authority and control, granting Shaun (emblematic of white privilege and power) the ability to determine inclusion and exclusion within the brotherhood. This authority extends to judgments on merit and dismissal, positioning race as a decisive factor in shaping organizational dynamics. In this context, the purported brotherhood functions as a mechanism that upholds a power structure where genuine control resides with those who command the societal narratives. Consequently, the brotherhood is exposed as a superficial construct designed to maintain and disguise deeper power dynamics. Duiker slowly and gradually deconstructs the façade of brotherhood, delicately stripping away its veneer, layer by layer, revealing the intricate complexities that lie beneath. Tshepo's growing awareness perfectly captures the power dynamics within the brotherhood as dictated by white individuals like Shaun, who wield significant influence.

Tshepo's experience at the New Yorkers Gay Club, where he is met with hostility, manhandled and expelled further reifies the persistent racial animosities that black men endure within the ostensibly post-apartheid landscape of South Africa. The lingering tensions are not merely remnants of a bygone era but are actively reconstituted in the lived experiences of those who continue to navigate this complex and fraught terrain. Tshepo's assertion that "They are white before they are gay" (458) resonates with a

profound sense of emotion in course of the narrative, encapsulating the intersectional tensions that permeate the characters' lived experiences.

With all their moaning, crying and campaigning for equal rights gay men are also just as bigoted. With all the organizations we have and the AIDS centers, especially aimed at addressing the individual needs of gay men, gay friendly places are still a white male preserve. (556)

Classifications are not disinterested divisions but rather involve intricate power dynamics and strategic maneuvers. It is hierarchal in nature and involves bias, prejudice and bigotry and as Jenkins would remind us, to identify someone could be enough to decide how to treat her or him (6). The classification of black people, with a long and troubling history of transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, and the era of scientific racism, continues to define the contours of engagement in South Africa even today. The idea that “gay friendly places are still a white male preserve” constitutes a major observation on the discursive development of race and how it continues to inform the relation between the blacks and the whites, even in gay spaces. It is this classification of blacks and whites into two distinct groups, even in gay spaces, which compounds marginalization of people like Tshepo. In contrary to Tshepo's hopes for a sense of camaraderie with the broader queer community, he is instead confronted with the enduring legacy of South Africa's racial classifications. He must come to terms with the fact that these divisions persist even within spaces that are ostensibly inclusive and queer.

It is these realizations that prompt Tshepo to confront his own identity within this purported 'brotherhood,' where he begins to grasp the implications of his racial identity and the stark realities of racial dynamics, to confront the stark contradictions between the brotherhood's professed ethos and its actual practices. To Tshepo, these realizations are a rude awakening to which he must reconcile: “I feel hopeless. Someone just tore up a beautiful image I had in my mind. It is offensive, even ludicrous...It is like a rude awakening.” (Duiker, 458) Duiker allows his reader to understand how the intersection of race and sexuality produces complexities for Tshepo and by extension to other black people.

Conclusion: Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* is a complex work of art that fuses many thematic interests in course of the narrative. Sexuality, a central motif within the text, acquires deeper layers of meaning when examined through the lens of racial dynamics. Duiker interrogates the intersection of race and sexuality in post-apartheid South Africa and shows how the intrusion of institutions such as race complicates the entire discursivities on sex. In this exploration, the "Steamy Windows" the massage parlour in Cape Town functions as a critical locus for examining these dynamics. Initially, the text situates Cape Town and the brotherhood in a stark binary: while Cape Town stands for prejudice, biasness and hostility, the brotherhood stood for unity, love and neutrality. This binary framework serves as a foundational contrast, setting up a complex interplay between the external societal forces represented by Cape Town and the internal solidarity and inclusivity embodied by the brotherhood. As the text progresses towards its logical conclusion, these seemingly disparate entities are forged together in prejudice and biasness. Cape Town and the brotherhood become one insolvable entity that hides ugly truth behind the veneer of civility. The massage parlour becomes a microcosm through which the interplay of racial and sexual identities is scrutinized, revealing how institutional and societal pressures shape and distort the experiences of intimacy and desire.

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