

# Redefining Identity: A Survey of Afrikaans Women Writers

Pieter Conradie

## Introduction

The title of my paper implies a certain correspondence between gender and the body of writing produced by Afrikaans women writers. Such an undertaking homogenises women as writers, and establishes an essentialistic approach to the subject or creator and cultural production. In lieu of generalisations I prefer to give a brief outline of the history of women within the literary and textual production of the Afrikaans language. Having done this I will return to the role of the body, or its cultural derivative gender, within textual production.

## Historical Background

Afrikanerdom as an ideology resulted out of a particular ethnic-religious nationalism which propagated its own brand of Christian life-style and abhorred miscegenation. The Afrikaner- or Boervrou was regarded as the pillar of the nation. She was a metaphor for purity, the sacrificial lamb, who would safeguard the nation, its culture and civilisation. She would remind the husband of his duties towards the fatherland and inspire him by her braveness, sense of freedom and spiritual support. The reproductive powers of the Boerwoman became pivotal within the Christian-national ideology as she was held up as the mother of the nation.

During the first half of our century Afrikaner professionals, and especially the middle class, strived to uplift the poor whites who were in the majority. Afrikaners were mobilised by the portrayal of a heroic past in which the Afrikaner fought against English imperialism and indigenous tribes. The Afrikaner's belief in being God's chosen people; the binding force of a mother tongue Afrikaans and cultural and economical empowerment, all these went into the vindication of the nation's right to existence.

Within the Afrikaner history characterised by wars, strife and survival males seem to be the sole actors. Authors of history and educators—teachers—were mostly male so that the ideology of Christian-national education in fact paid homage to the male warrior cum pioneer. Whenever women were involved their supportive role was exemplified. Their contribution was amplified within the context of the role of motherhood as inferred from the Bible. The role of women in the early Dutch and Afrikaner history became legendary. Afrikaner women supported their men and each other in the wars against the British. Women like Mrs J.H. Neethling, Mrs Brandt (nee Van Warmeloo), E. Murray and others wrote books, memoirs and poems on these wars. Before them South African Dutch women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Catharina van Lier, Matilda Smith and Susanna Smit) wrote diaries in which their particular brand of religious pietism came to the fore. Recent studies of these women's texts suggest that the personal guilt expressed by these women, and which is intrinsic to pietism, 'reflects their restricted role in their religious and social culture' (Landman 1992:198). A cookbook was published by a Miss Dijkstra in the previous century and again its field of specialisation is attributed to social circumstances. The mere fact that many of the above-mentioned authors were wives or daughters of religious ministers supports the view that women played an equally important role in securing an Afrikaner identity. The role of Afrikaner women in resistance politics is well-known. At times they vehemently rejected the submissive behaviour of their men when agreements with the British were negotiated. The British themselves documented the obstinacy of these women in their war-memoirs. Recent research confirms the cultural and political importance of the role Afrikaner women played on the platteland in their Christian organisations (Butler 1989:55-81). These women fought tenaciously for the upliftment of the poor, the uneducated and the unemployed. By undertaking welfare duties they fostered ethnic and racial consciousness without openly participating in party political policy. Some of the prominent women in the Afrikaans Christian Women's Movement (ACVV) came from well-to-do backgrounds and represented a bourgeois element. The economic incentive underlying their contribution, as well as the conflict amongst well-to-do families, do not lead to easy class debate. It is nevertheless clear that women's contribution towards cultural and material empowerment enhanced the explicit philosophic-political program of their men in attaining nationhood.

Historical reflection on the emergence of Afrikaans as an official language in 1925, as well as of a literary aesthetic consciousness in the thirties, i.e. the consciousness of a craft and of the prophetic impulses of the poet, requires caution where gender is concerned. It has been noted that women did contribute in writing on social and religious experiences, and like

Afrikaner men wrote poetry on the war, even in English (Stockenström 1921:268-269). A Boerwoman, Johanna van Warmelo (nee Brandt), also wrote on life in the concentration camps and on spying during the war (Stockenström 1921:269-271). Most of these texts were broadly read whilst others with a more personal religious tone were distributed for private use. The same criticism that befell some of the women's work, e.g. that a poem had no significant literary value (Stockenström 1921:269) was also levelled at the prominent male poets of the time whose work represents the beginning of an Afrikaans poetic genre (Kannemeyer 1978:113). It may be argued that anthologies on the work of men were published whilst women's contributions did not represent an oeuvre or genre as such. In addition the poems written by women were regarded as personal writings with no incentive for publication. Another explanation may point to the explicit attempts by male poets in the first decade of this century, after the Anglo-Boer war, to create artistic expression in a language yearning for official recognition. These considerations bring one closer to the concept of the aesthetic proper and may cast more light on sexual textual production.

Deconstructing the literary concept allows for a reading of these earlier texts by women as the direct result of women's commitment to struggle. In doing so their writings can be viewed as expressions of 'feminine experience and perception' (Bovenschen 1985:44) which determine the form of their work. Such an acknowledgement is closer to the viewpoint of Elaine Showalter who places women writers within a dominant male culture, but recognises another specifically female tradition and suggests that women participate in both cultures simultaneously (Showalter 1985:264). The application of such an approach implies a specific feminist aesthetic which regards writing as a process (Ecker 1985:18). An inherent value judgement is hereby implied.

### **Canonisation of Women's Writing**

Elisabeth Eybers, the daughter of a clergyman, was the first poet to be included within the canon of Afrikaans literature in spite of the lack of universal perspectives on humanity according to a male literary historian (Kannemeyer 1978:460). Besides poetry on exile and the craft itself she wrote poems on the bond between the sexes, marriage, womanhood and motherhood. The theme of motherhood in particular established a distinct link between anatomy and female identity, whilst reproductive power placed women on the side of nature foreign to man. In her own words 'my father was the clergyman/ my mother flesh and blood' (Eybers 1968:22). The emphasis on male logic and independence versus female sensitivity and attachment however bears traces of irony so that the balance between aggression and empathy in her verse remains subtle.

The assimilation of Eybers within the canon calls for circumspection. Factual evidence on the construction of the canon through influences of Dutch and European concepts of literature, as well as male dominance in institutions of learning and moral instruction is abundant. Her debut coincides with the turn to individualism and concern for the aesthetic form which can be regarded as the beginning of modernism in Afrikaans. Learned and professional women made several contributions to social and cultural debates as the title of a book *Vrou en Feminist - of iets oor die Vrouevraagstuk* by Marié du Toit in 1921 proved. The input of Du Toit and Eybers and its supposed criticism levelled at the male reflected the view of a small petty bourgeoisie. Further investigation into the texts of the canon, especially those of women, seems imperative rather than describing a canon *ad nauseam* (Easthope 1991:46-47). Such an undertaking will have to decide on the definition of literariness which in turn would lead to the descriptive and functionalistic application of texts, but to no inherent proof of the literariness in question. The short stories or novels of Maria Rothmann, which were written partly for newspapers or magazines during the twenties up to the forties, would provide an interesting case history.<sup>1</sup> Rothmann's pioneering work into poor white conditions made her a guardian of her nation. Her stories were commended for their detail and descriptive power, the character studies and dialogue, but the male literary guardian still complained of a limited vision and lack of dramatic power in her art (Kannemeyer 1983:14).

The class position of women writers in Afrikaans literature is of overriding importance. Attempts at artistic writings by working class women in the thirties were brushed aside as sloganeering because these women belonged to a class which threatened Afrikaner unity. The omission of their work from the canon, the latter being modernistic in nature, can be attributed to this fact. Women like Johanna Cornelius, Hester Cornelius, Nellie Raubenheimer and many other working class members blamed capitalism and not the British for their poverty. Although these women fought racial discrimination they simultaneously pledged loyalty to their Boer-heritage. The latter with its strict adherence to male supremacy nevertheless placed women at a disadvantage in the public sphere.

As the Afrikaner gained political and economic power, especially from 1948 onwards, women writers shared in the leisure time and accompanying privileges of the ruling class. In a survey of Afrikaans women between the ages of 25 - 50 most of them remembered not their mothers but rather their grandmothers as 'the driving force in their families' (Green 1990:60). This is mainly due to the surplus time available to the mothers, and what is even

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<sup>1</sup> The foremost woman critic on Afrikaans prose, Elize Botha (1980:502), regards Rothmann as the first and probably greatest woman-intellectual in Afrikaans.

more evident is that the daughters remembered the domestic nanny as the other most important woman in their lives (Green 1990:64).

Afrikaans women writers responded to the new-found leisure time and competed with the leading male writers of the sixties and seventies.<sup>2</sup> While some preferred an essayistic style, the works of others showed journalistic influences whilst authors like Henriette Grové, Berta Smit, Elsa Joubert and Anna M. Louw produced work which matched the experiments with form, content and world-perspective propagated especially by André P. Brink. The women's contribution continued throughout the next decades. Themes in their work portray difficulties in adaptation to the African continent, problems of identity, especially of a sexual nature, and the awareness of competing with African women (Joubert), the affirmation of the power of the husband as the head of the family (Anna M. Louw) and the discomfort with family life because of imbalances of duties performed (Grové) (Willemse & Stander 1992:13). These writings remind one of the Parisian analyst Joyce McDougall's remark on pioneer woman, i.e. that the new countries depended on

the narcissistic investment in the daughters as the guardians of the future generations and their importance for survival of these new countries (Baruch 1988:70)

Like the Boervrou of the earlier years these women indirectly secured the political and economic unity of the nation. Whilst Afrikaner women of the women's movement in the forties received no material reward but rather cultural and indirect political support for their attempts at upliftment (Butler 1989:75), the Afrikaner women writers of the decades since the fifties and sixties enjoyed reasonable material benefits. They formed part of an elite who had cultural influence. However, they became politically inactive in party politics and were women who enriched the culture which in turn protected their identity. The apartheid Afrikaner government never really accepted their *avante garde* writers—especially the male contingent—for their 'immoral' anti-racist and sexual-erotic expressiveness. As Afrikaner 'volkskapitalisme' (capitalism of the people) gradually gave way to capitalism by a white elite in the second half of our century the use-value of Afrikaner culture and literature became less important as a party political tool.

In the eighties, women writers—Wilma Stockenström, Lettie Viljoen, Jeanne Goosen, Antjie Krog, Reza de Wet, Joan Hambidge etc.—took cognisance either of racial, gender or class conflict but their representations thereof are highly personalised. Since the late seventies male writers and

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<sup>2</sup> Anthologies of short stories by women like *Kwartet* in 1957 and *Die Dammetjie e.a. Sketse en Essays* in 1960 confirms women's capabilities and talent

some female authors had used documented realism in relaying the social upheaval and war mentality that swept the country. Women writers in the eighties showed an awareness of patriarchal oppression, but their female characters remained caught up in negative self-reflection and guilt. The struggle for individual survival was immensely traumatised and this narcissistic trend is indicative of a sex marginalised.

In the work of women authors of the nineties—Welma Odendaal, Riana Scheepers, Rachelle Greeff, Emma Huisman, M. van der Vyfer etc.—the African and specifically South African space is traversed. Physical and structural conflict finds its way into hetero- and homosexual relationships; opposition to patriarchal oppression is aired; an awareness of the female body is superimposed on the lived experience and lastly dissatisfaction with the prescriptiveness of the male canon is openly voiced. Postmodernist tendencies are rife and break down barriers created by patriarchal sexual/textual division. Underlying the playfulness and schizophrenic behaviour of postmodernist texts however is selfassertion (Waugh 1989:79-80).

The publication of an anthology of erotic short stories *Lyfspel bodyplay* in 1994 accounts for the increasing awareness of the politicisation of the body in the writings of Afrikaner women. In the foreword to the anthology the compiler refers to the need for women to express themselves on sexual matters, especially those coming from a Calvinistic background. A commitment to redress the image of women as sexual objects as portrayed by men is undertaken. In summarising the erotic the editor indirectly emphasises the need for transcending the body through bodily experiences. The contributions of the individual authors range from melancholic reminiscences, the discovery of sensuality, the intellectual manipulation of texts (metatexts), an assortment of sexual preferences and mostly a romanticised vision of bodily transcendence.

The number of texts dealing with Christian metaphors and images or themes analogous to the religious is remarkable. The exultation of the erotic experience is interspersed with guilt or revelations of the dichotomy of mind and body. The re-emergence of the erotic and the religious reverberates with the debate around censorship that characterised Afrikaans literature since the sixties and seventies. Back then the State claimed the moral high-ground and attempted to silence especially male authors. Once again in the nineties literature has become a space for confession and turmoil as bodies strive to redefine themselves. This contribution by women writers can be regarded as a reaction to the disproportionate sexualisation of society. The forthrightness of expression regarding sexual matters has led to the ingenious marketing of women's literature. The end result is somewhat disturbing as sexual identity becomes a handy label in the commodification of the body.

## **Conclusion: Cultural Ethics and the Aesthetic**

The participation of women in Afrikaans culture as caretakers, pioneering agents, writers or cultural vindicators is not to be underestimated. Evaluating women's contribution requires consideration of the struggle for national independence, the disparity in class-education and the material progress brought about by capitalism. The Boervrou symbolises the founding of the nation and becomes the yardstick for future performance. As material conditions improved women's participation in literature increased. While explicit images of motherhood and birth prevail, the struggle for personal identity—i.e. in a private or public sphere—abounds in literary themes regardless of space and time. Increasingly textual techniques and the act of writing as bodily experience erase the boundaries between the aesthetic-cultural or moral-political.

The tendency to categorise women's writing as of a narcissistic or semiotic nature, i.e. presenting a primordial energy akin to the life-giving forces presiding in the female body, may prove liberating. This type of essentialism is to be found in the works of Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva although their later works have proposed the opening up of gender categories. In terms of Afrikaans women writers one detects a gradual resistance to prescriptive gender-roles as realised within patriarchal structures. The image of the self which has been culturally constructed, i.e. of motherhood, remains restrictive. Afrikaans women have through their writing been relatively successful in criticising the deliberate separation of the private and public spheres. The occupation of writer has led to an aesthetisation and integration of the private and social, and promises deliverance from discriminatory features inherent to gender-roles.

The ambiguity displayed in several texts by Afrikaans women nevertheless registers an identity crisis. The feelings of guilt, of insufficiency and narcissism portrayed are indicative of intrapsychic turmoil. The emphasis on the body and the realisation of the self in private or social spheres, has the maternal body as its subconscious metaphor. The anatomy of being somehow seems to strike a discord. Although the maternal bond aligns women with a specific female experience, the very notion of sexual difference appears decisive. The images of breasts and vagina which aspire to liberation and identity are the images that affirm sexual difference. Irigaray regarded this kind of female narcissism as an interconnection between the sexes, not as a contesting singularity as proposed in her earlier work (Connor 1992:178). Connor (1992:182) however questions this erotic opening up of the gendering of society in a manner that still forecloses the collective other as it prioritises the private space of love. In a Kristevan sense primary narcissism involves the abject, i.e. the mother's body—that which lies at the border of the body and which defines the body—that which

is loved and dreaded at the same time (Kristeva 1982). In order to break away from the suffocating imprint of this borderlessness women must escape and create an own identity. Judith Butler (1993:316-318) counters the heterosexual discourse of psychoanalytic identification by proposing the 'permanent incapacity of that "self" to achieve self-identity' due to the desire for that which is not itself. In doing so she views gender as a continuous playing out of psychic representation within the signifying process in which the body is implicated. Elizabeth Grosz (1994:208) recently propagated the opening up of bodies which although culturally identified promise liberation exactly because of sexual difference which itself is a volatile construct. Since alterity is the basis for embodiment the construction of sexual difference as a process allows for countless forms of sexual identities.

Afrikaans women writers subconsciously acknowledge the Boervrou as their precursor on a psychosexual plane. From a Foucauldian point of view the body became sexualised within the Christian-nationalistic discourse. Lauding the specific female properties of women's writing may paradoxically incarnate the discourse which prolongs gender discrimination. At the same time the notion of cultural servitude elicits aggression. The symptoms of guilt, loss and reparation are a re-enactment of the self as process, as flow and a continuous struggle to redefine an identity. The literature of these Afrikaner women contain the fingerprints of a cultural residue which are the result of the interaction of bodies on an imaginary and symbolic level. The peculiar intrapsychical struggle for identity is the experience of the malleability of the imaginary and the body, and lays the foundation for re-presentation.

Department of Afrikaans  
University of Western Cape

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