

The Revisionary Struggle: A Feminist Perspective on the Canon of Afrikaans Poetry

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Is the unproductiveness of woman in the field of the arts to blame on an inherent characteristic of her nature, or is it one of the results of the historical evolution of our patriarchal society? (Eybers 1936)

1 Introduction

For oppressed or marginalised communities, the essence of the canonical problem is that it is only the experiences and aesthetic expression of white middle and/or upper class males which are canonised, anthologised, prescribed and in effect used as normative touchstone for the continuation and/or development of tradition. The result is that any literature originating in contexts other than those of the canonised literature are viewed as deviating from the norm and are judged as non-literary or inferior. In effect, such an attitude signifies a judgement that female, ethnic or working-class literature (see Moi 1985:78) is not only inferior when compared to 'great literature' but it also regards the experiences from which such literature emanates as being of secondary importance and not worthy of aesthetic expression.

The demand for a thorough-going revision of the canonisation is slowly gaining momentum¹.

¹ In literature, a canon refers to works which are judged as being of lasting value on the basis of cumulative agreement of authoritative critics and researchers, including the influence they exercise on later authors. Such works are often and in detail reviewed by literary critics and historians and are included in anthologies

Because men continue to hold sway in publishing houses, the academic sphere and the world of literary criticism, only texts which comply with their norms become part of the canon (Sherry 1988:28). Texts by female authors which do indeed find their way into the canon generally conform (Ruthven 1984:11). Thus few texts written by women take their rightful place in the authoritative records of 'great' works.

The statement above made by Eybers in 1936 gives rise to the question of where the female predecessors in Afrikaans poetry are. Where are the female names which should be recorded alongside those of men such as Totius, Marais, Leipoldt, Langenhoven, Van Wyk Louw and Opperman who enjoy a strong position in the canon?

According to Sherry (1988:27), it is common practice for groups who are attempting to obtain greater political power to revise earlier cultural products and achievements.

According to Michie (1989:16), this implies that feminist revision of the canon would involve a search for predecessors that have been forgotten, because ignored or forgotten female texts deserve revision just as much as those by men which are regarded as the 'standard'.

What are the reasons for this state of affairs? How can one set about revising the Afrikaans canon?

To determine the ranking of authors in the canon, quantitative and qualitative measures can be used. Literary histories and anthologies are the appropriate means of determining the status of authors within the canon. This can be determined statistically. Judgements, such as those made in literary histories, reviews etc. provide qualitative assessment of status. This sort of evaluation would include awards.

Redetermining the status of authors, demands tracking down authors that may have been forgotten or lost. Apart from literary histories, older editions of magazines and journals are used to determine the literary productivity of women in earlier times.

For the purposes of this article, the area has been limited to the field of Afrikaans poetry: a number of female poets were selected to determine their canonical status. One of the determinants for selection was the extent to which their texts exemplified female texts (in terms of criteria suggested by female theoreticians).

This selection was done in order to review the spectrum of female poetry between the thirties and nineties. The following women authors were selected: Elisabeth Eybers, Olga Kirsch, Ina Rousseau, Antjie Krog, Rosa Keet, Rika Celliers, Lina Spies, Joan Hambidge, Beverley Jansen, Valda Jansen and Jennifer Joseph. The last three mentioned made their debut in journals during the eighties.

2 Quantitative Analysis

The data for this analysis were drawn from literary histories and anthologies. Different editions were also compared with each other in order to explore the changes or otherwise with regard to the canonising of female authors.

The following literary histories were selected: *Digters van Dertig* (DJ Opperman 1962), *Afrikaanse Literatuurgeskiedenis* (G. Dekker 1941; 1947; 1960; 1966); *Die Afrikaanse Letterkunde van Aanvang tot Hede* (R. Antonissen 1955; 1960); *Perspektief en Profiel* (P.J. Nienaber ed. 1951; 1974; 1982); *Geskiedenis van die Afrikaanse Literatuur I and II* (J.C. Kannemeyer 1978; 1984); *Die Afrikaanse Literatuur 1652-1987* (J.C. Kannemeyer 1988); *Die Afrikaanse Literatuur Sedert Sestig* (T.T. Cloete ed. 1980); *Inleiding tot die Afrikaanse Letterkunde* (E. Lindenberg ed. 1987).

A count was made of the number of pages which were devoted to each of the selected female poets in these literary histories and this total was then expressed as the percentage of the total number of pages in the particular source².

The following anthologies were researched: *Groot Verseboek* (D.J. Opperman ed. 1973; 1974; 1978; 1980; 1983); *Digters en Digkuns* (P.J. Nienaber ed. 1962; 1981; 1987). In each of the respective sources, the number of poems by each of the selected female poets was determined as well as the number of pages which were apportioned to each of these poets as a percentage of the total number of pages in the anthology. The number of pages in subsequent editions could vary because of the page format/typesetting and could confuse the picture. Merely determining the number of pages could still be misleading because quite a number of short texts were printed on some pages—what was actually an indication of a high level of canonisation—could appear to be a low level, and vice versa. Thus, the number of texts appeared to be the most reliable measure, but the number of pages was used as a checking mechanism and also provided a means of making comparisons.

2.1 According to the statistics, Elisabeth Eybers appeared to be the most canonised Afrikaans female poet, representing a total of 17,7% of the selected literary histories. Lina Spies was second (3,4%), third, Ina Rousseau (2,59%), fourth, Antjie Krog (2,4%), followed by Joan Hambidge (0,6%),

² N.P. van Wyk Louw, as apparently the most canonised Afrikaans poet, was used as a male control. If there had been space, a male contemporary could have been placed alongside each of the female poets. In order to calculate a percentage, the two parts of Kannemeyer's history of Afrikaans literature were seen as one unit. In the case of *Perspektief en Profiel* only the 'profiel' (profile) part of the text was used for the purposes of calculation.

Olga Kirsh (0,54%), Rosa Keet (0,3%) and Rika Celliers (0,28%). Krog's relatively low status is explained by the fact that *Lady Anne* which largely established her reputation, was published later than most of the literary histories and anthologies. By the same token, only Kannemeyer (1988) has taken note of Hambidge's young oeuvre. Eybers's long career gives her an advantage, but set against Louw's 39,1% it would seem that Afrikaans's most eminent female poet has enjoyed very limited acknowledgement. It is significant that there are no profiles of prominent female poets like Rousseau, Krog and Spies in *Perspektief en Profiel*.

2.2 It appears from this that the percentage of pages devoted to women poets in subsequent issues has decreased rather than increased.

2.3 The black female poets V. Jansen, B. Jansen and Joseph were completely ignored by these sources.

2.4 The hierarchical ordering of the percentage of pages in the *latest editions* is as follows: Eybers (7,6%), Spies (5,3%), Krog (5,3%), Rousseau (2,5%), Kirsch (1,8%), Cilliers (0,8%). The percentage for Van Wyk Louw is 9,9%.

2.5 There is a correlation between canonisation in the literary histories and the anthologies in the comparison of these results.

3 Qualitative Evaluation

Opperman (1962:351) makes the well-intentioned, but contentious remark that Elisabeth Eybers is the 'feminine complement in our literature' (my italics). This comment set the trend in literary histories and anthologies: there are more references to Eybers as a *poetess* than as a *poet*. The issue is: does this typology represent the beginning of a female canon or tradition or does it arise purely from literary sexism?

There has gradually been a measure of greater acknowledgement as can be seen from the honour that has been accorded Eybers to date. And since Eybers pioneered the way for women in Afrikaans poetic tradition, female poets who were white have gained prominence—since Kirsch and Rousseau, across the decades: Krog, Spies, Cussons, Stockenström—to Hambidge and others. But this still represents a white tradition.

4. Female Poetry in Magazines

The revision of literary canonisation offers an important, largely unexplored field of research: that of 'absent' female poets in Afrikaans. Women have

well and truly become part of the literary scene (for reasons which could cast light on social patterns). Louw (1939:45) puts it thus: 'Up till recently there has been a large gap in our poetry: women have not made their voices heard'. To test this statement, issues of *Die Huisgenoot* (1930-37), *Die Brandwag* (1937-40), *Die Nuwe Brandwag* (1929-33), *Die Moderne Vrou* (1936-37) and *Klerewerker* (1929-45) were researched.

4.1 There was a tally of nineteen female poets in *Die Huisgenoot*, who were not referred to in literary histories and the majority have therefore been forgotten.

4.2 Since only 3 poems appeared in *Die Nuwe Brandwag*, it seems that women did not choose to publish in this magazine at that time (see Lourens 1992:246f). But how does this square with the large number published in *Die Huisgenoot*? Did women not submit their poetry to *Die Nuwe Brandwag* or were their texts not accepted for publication? Is there anyone who remembers what really happened?

4.3 The poems published in *Klerewerker* are good examples of 'lost' female Afrikaans texts. Lourens (1992:248f) refers to the work of six women poets who do not appear in literary histories. The question is whether the ideological orientation of this paper played a role in their omission (particularly at a time of Afrikaner nationalism). It is also possible that these poets seemed insignificant when compared to the illustrious *Dertigers*. Their direct reflection of the experiences of poverty and oppression of the Afrikaner as minority group makes these texts particularly significant. In this sense, the poems have a value within the Afrikaans, but more particularly the female tradition. As Krog (1989) points out, these women portray the reality of a battle for survival, while Eybers, for instance, is engrossed in personal experiences.

4.4 In 1992, when this research was finished, there was as yet little evidence of Afrikaans poetry among black³ female authors. The collection *Aankoms uit die skemer* (1988) includes only one woman poet (M.C. Maclier) as opposed to six male poets. *IQabane Labantu* (1989) includes poems in Afrikaans and English by 37 black poets, only 8 of whom are women.

Jansen (1985:79-80) highlights the barriers which a strong patriarchal tradition presents for women (see also Krog 1989:4). For all that, like the clothing workers' poetry, this poetry addresses social issues. Since these are

³ 'Black' is used to denote the political and not the literal meaning of the word

the first voices of black women poets in Afrikaans, this poetry should merit a mention in a new canon. If literary standards are the only deciding factor, then the earlier *Klerewerker* poems would not be viewed as part of the Afrikaans tradition. The criteria should be expanded to include social meaning and the attempt at political realisation in individual experience (the personal which is politically embedded).

5. Conclusion

Quantitative and qualitative evaluation reveal that certain Afrikaans female poets enjoy high status within the canon. However, there are obvious gaps in the canonisation of women in minority groupings, especially poetry by the clothing workers from the past and the poetry of black female poets. There could have been racial or class prejudice, along with prejudice against women in general. Intensive research into literary historiography is essential in order to establish a theoretical basis for the revision of the canon of Afrikaans literature.

In order to rectify the imbalances in the canonisation of female poets, the prevalence of similar trends in the canonisation of poetry in other southern African languages will have to be researched.

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