

# Shattering the Chains of Apartheid Patriarchy: Ingrid Jonker's Suicide

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## Abstract

Ingrid Jonker was a pioneer in terms of her contribution to women's writing in South Africa. Her words left a powerful, but small mark – a mark that this article argues could have been larger if it were not for the patriarchal influences in her life which may have driven her to her death. She led a tragic life, largely as a result of patriarchy, both personally and politically, and this is portrayed in her writing. Her relationships with men were fraught with heartbreak and abandonment from a young age and politically, she opposed the Apartheid government – a patriarchal system made worse by the fact that her father was at its forefront. The impact this had on her writing and on her life should be taken into consideration. Thus, this study seeks to explore the patriarchal factors which led to Ingrid Jonker's suicide, by analysing her life and writing.

**Keywords:** Ingrid Jonker, Suicide, Patriarchy, Feminist, Apartheid

## Introduction

They published the children's verses, of the innocent Ingrid. Never the work that the crazed mother wrote, never the work that the political Ingrid wrote. They only accepted the daughter, the girl, the mistress (Krog 2001).

Antjie Krog's<sup>1</sup> view of Ingrid Jonker's work, as seen above, speaks volumes as to how it must have been as an Afrikaans woman attempting to have a voice through her writing during the highly patriarchal system of Apartheid. The truth is that Ingrid Jonker's voice, which went against Afrikaner ideals at the time, ultimately became her sacrifice and led to her death. In a patriarchal world, she had no place and she took her own life as a result. She spent her existence often in a state of abandonment by the male figures in her life. One of these men was her own father – a key role player in the regime she bravely stood against in her writing. Therefore, the main purpose of this feminist study is to acknowledge the effect of patriarchy on Ingrid Jonker's psyche and its role in her untimely and tragic death. Evidence exists in her poetry and prose which displays these effects to a great degree as well as their effect on her deteriorating mental state.

Patriarchy, in this article, will be discussed by an analysis of her life and selected works from both personal and political perspectives. These two aspects tie in with each other, especially since Ingrid Jonker can be seen as doubly affected by Apartheid's patriarchal ideals. This is because her father was a politician and therefore, stood for the values of Afrikaans nationalism which she rejected. Consequently, this placed her in a vulnerable position, especially as a writer, a woman and an activist. Her unique voice as a female writer sharing specifically female experiences is also significant in this discussion. Of further importance in this study is her apparent mental illness, fixation with death and suicide, as well as the extent to which this was caused by patriarchal factors. Analysing Jonker's work will provide clues, specifically those of a patriarchal nature, as to the reasons for her eventual suicide. The argument here is that although Jonker suffered from a depressive state of mind, patriarchal factors were fundamentally responsible for this, and they ultimately led to the suicide of a talented writer.

## 1. Abandoned by Father, 'Volk'<sup>2</sup> and Lovers

On a personal level, Ingrid Jonker's relationships with men were destructive

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<sup>1</sup> In Saskia van Schaik's documentary film *Korreltjie Niks is my Dood* (2001).

<sup>2</sup> The Afrikaans word 'volk' is used here and throughout the article to convey the effect of detachment from her culture, people and family. It is a word meaning 'people' or 'nation' which shows how steadfast white Afrikaners who provided leadership in apartheid times, believed themselves to be a chosen people.

and this factor alone would have been enough cause for suicide. The way she experienced this pain as well as uniquely feminine experiences – often those in which men had a part to play – is important in analysing her work and determining reasons for her eventual suicide. This is particularly significant as an investigation into trauma caused by the men closest to her, namely her father and her lovers. In its most extreme, this aspect is crucial in determining the extent to which the men in her life were responsible for her death.

### ***1.1 The First Rejection: The Father(land)***

Male abandonment is a prominent theme in Jonker's work because she experienced the pain of male rejection from an early age. When her mother was pregnant with her, her father Abraham Jonker abandoned her in a drunken, violent rage, accusing her of 'carrying another man's child (possibly to shield his own marital infidelities)' (Brink 2007: 10; Viljoen 2012: 16). Ingrid Jonker was never able to get over this initial rejection and it plagued her for the rest of her life. Indeed, her mother never recovered either and it was the start of a downward spiral into mental illness, something Ingrid was to witness until her mother's death in 1944.

Throughout her life, Jonker sought to gain her father's acceptance but her attempts were futile and would lead her to seek out father figures in her relationships with men (Piet Venter and Jack Cope specifically; André Brink was of a similar age). This interest in older men and her need to feel accepted by the male writers she respected (they were all literary men or had literary ambitions), only pushed her further into the cycle of male abandonment (Viljoen 2012: 46). They would all ultimately reject her, thus driving her to the brink of insanity and eventually suicide.

It is possible that paternal rejection is witnessed in Jonker's poem, 'Escape'<sup>3</sup> (Jonker 2007: 39). Here, she imagines the life of her childhood with reference to 'Gordon's Bay' and wishes to return to it. Even though they were poor, with no financial support from her father, it is the happy, carefree life she lived with her mother, sister and grandparents. After losing her mother, grandfather and grandmother to death, she and her sister went to live with her father in what she sees as 'this Valkenburg'. The reference to the mental institution, where her mother died and to which she too would one day be

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<sup>3</sup> All poems are taken from Brink and Krog's (2007) translation of Jonker's poems in the anthology *Black Butterflies*, except when stated otherwise.

admitted, says much about how she viewed her father and how he made her feel. In the third stanza, the speaker states, 'I am the dog that slinks from beach to beach / barks dumb-alone against the evening breeze'. These lines refer to an intense sense of loneliness and isolation. She is a dog, 'dumb-alone', barking against the evening breeze, which already alludes to her own sense of difference and a sense that she is going against the norm, even perhaps against her father. The fifth stanza speaks of 'fulfilment of my pain in you'; a 'you' which could easily stand for the pain her father has caused her in his lack of acceptance of her. But of course this 'you' could also be seen as a lover. This 'pain', isolation and loneliness ends in her death. There is a despair so great in this poem that she only sees the places where 'we once did pass' in conjunction with her own end. That this end, captured with 'eerie precision', is prophetic of her death and that she sees this death in relation to the 'you' in the poem is telling (Viljoen 2012: 38). In a way, the grounds for her unhappiness and eventually, her suicide are listed in the poem.

'I Drift in the Wind', is similar, this time evoking her anguish as the exiled daughter of an Apartheid politician in a conflicted nation, and is one the last poems she wrote (Jonker 2007: 126). In it, she 'called her country to follow a course not of a divided house, but with its rifts healed like hands united in prayer; the alternative was too dark to contemplate' (Cope 1982: 90). Her desperate plea to her country, her people, her father, to be united rather than seek what she views as a loss of the sun, in an apocalyptic image – 'the sun in our eyes forever covered / with black crows'<sup>4</sup> – reveals her desolation. She equates this lack of unity with death. The poem stands for the poet's simultaneous impression that she has been deserted by firstly, her father who 'clenches his hand that jerks loosely in the air' and secondly, because of the ideals he stands for as an Apartheid politician, by her own people who 'have rotted off me'. The whole poem points to her death, almost alluding to a freedom she may just find in death. It asks 'what will become of me' as if she realises there is nothing left for her, now that she has lost everything. She has lost all hope as De Saxe (2014: 51) suggests:

Her detachment and disillusionment drift in the wind; there is no solace, no hope and no joy and in the end only a bitter and tragic exit from her unhappy world as Jonker could not out write death.

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<sup>4</sup> In Brink and Krog's translation, 'black butterflies' is used; however, Cope's translation used 'crows' which is symbolic of death.

Evidently, Jonker's double rejection from both father and fatherland or 'volk'<sup>5</sup> caused her to feel a sense of estrangement and she lost all connection to life in her state of 'banishment' (De Saxe 2010: 29). Her father never reciprocated her love and this was exacerbated by his political status, a fact which left deep wounds. Furthermore, his rejection would cause her to follow a pathway of tragedy in her relationships with men.

## ***1.2. Adultery, Abortion and the Love Triangle of Doom***

Much of Jonker's poetry consists of love-poems which, more often than not, speak of the relationship between man and woman sarcastically or mockingly. Though her poetry does address love in its purest, most tender form, often, especially in her later works, love is a burden, surrounded by darkness, pain, rejection and death. That love is often seen to equal death is revealing, because that is how love ended her life. Added to this is a feeling of sheer despair at failed relationships. In truth, her cynical tone in these poems could easily point to her attempts to mask her sorrow at the hands of men. This sorrow is described in more detail below.

Louise Viljoen (2012: 47) reveals that in Jonker's marriage to Piet Venter, it 'would prove difficult for her to reconcile her roles as poet, wife and mother'. Her ideas about life were in great contrast to what was expected of Afrikaans women of the time and Jonker was to pay dearly for her denial of this expectation. Jonker's (2007: 42) poem, 'Song of a Rag Doll' portrays her real feelings about Afrikaner femininity and the roles her culture prescribed. The speaker identifies herself: 'I am the rag doll that does not speak', which strongly verifies the views of her culture, that women should not voice themselves, that they should be seen and not heard. The poem's tone is sinister, with the doll portrayed as 'numb', 'dumb and dead', unable to 'raise' her 'bran-stuffed head' or move her 'limbs'. The doll is unable to walk without a man's 'help' and he is portrayed in ownership of the doll: 'you simply bought me like a dog'. He has the power to burn her 'one Guy Fawkes night' when he no longer wants her. Male power and its abuse of women is regarded as 'the binge of your kind'. The view displayed in 'Song of a Rag Doll' is important because

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<sup>5</sup> Brink and Krog's (2007) translation uses 'volk', while Cope and Plomer's (1968) translation in *Selected Poems, Ingrid Jonker* is 'people'.

In this context, it is useful to use both in an explanation of Jonker's sense of abandonment.

it provides clues as to how Jonker must have perceived herself and the roles she was expected to play. It suggests that she found traditional views of femininity stifling and mindless and male power over women as dangerous. The poem reinforces the idea that if a woman is like a rag doll, then she has no power over her own destiny; she simply lives on the whims of her male counterparts, which could lead to her demise. Hence, Jonker can be seen to have had a disregard for the traditional roles of an Afrikaans woman.

In her story, 'The Goat', a young, pregnant woman, Susan, is portrayed in an unhappy marriage to her older husband, Hein. She is isolated and has had to move away from the world she has always known to her husband's goat farm. He is not there for her, mainly because he cannot understand her. In her anger at her life being wasted, she strikes out at a goat, which has the cheek to come into her garden. She also takes out her anger on others around her: her servant, Lena and another worker on the farm, Jager who are in love. She is cynical, seeing their love as useless when her husband smiles at it: '... it won't be long before that slut's up in the guts and looking like me, swelling out for a man's pleasure, and then where's the sweet lovely stuff? No, then there's nothing ...' (Jonker 1991: 256). In her unhappiness she cannot bear to see other people happy and she is jealous (Viljoen 2012: 69). Furthermore, she does not actually want to have her baby because it is not really a symbol of love and it will only make her stoop more in her unhappiness with her husband.

With this, Jonker provides a different perspective about women; she rebels against gender norms and analyses the thoughts of an unhappy woman. In Apartheid times, it was unthinkable that women might be unhappy in the position men had created for them, specifically that of a domestic environment. Jonker, in this story, therefore rebels against the roles of wife and mother. Jan Rabie (2006: 100) explains Jonker's motives:

'The Goat' was written about Piet Venter .... 'The Goat' is a satire about a man – and Piet Venter looked a lot like a goat. I would say that it was aimed at him. It was written out of her anger<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, Susan's anger is relevant to Jonker's own anger at the failure of her marriage. It also explores the feelings Jonker felt during her own pregnancy in

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<sup>6</sup> This is my own translation. The original is: "“Die Bok” is geskryf teen Piet Venter .... “Die Bok” is ’n satire van ’n man – en Piet Venter het baie gelyk na ’n bok. Ek sou sê dis gemik teen hom. Dis in haar woede geskryf”.

which she often felt 'anxious' and 'trapped' (Nogueira 2007)<sup>7</sup>. In this regard, Ingrid Jonker may be seen as unable to fully accept the gender roles of her culture and it caused unhappiness in her life. It is a theme in her work as is evident in portrayals of characters such as Susan in 'The Goat' and in much of her poetry.

In addition to her inability to conform to gender expectations, it would appear that Venter was unfaithful (Brink 2007: 14). Soon after this discovery, the couple moved to Johannesburg, far away from her Bohemian friends in Cape Town. She is said to have attempted suicide at this time and soon afterwards, in 1960, after three years of marriage, she fled back to Cape Town, taking their daughter, Simone with her (Brink 2007: 14).

Her marriage ended in divorce, with Jonker constantly feeling Venter's ability to 'terrorise' her when it came to custody of Simone, as Jonker relates to Brink in their love letters (Galloway 2015: 146). He threatened to take Simone away from her on more than one occasion (Viljoen 2012: 70). Adding to her burden, Jonker from this time on would have to manage as a single, working mother. The stress of this, as well as the constant fear of losing her daughter would have been another factor which would have been cause for her deteriorating state of mind.

At this stage, her relationship with the writer Jack Cope became more serious. Unfortunately though, the open-ended nature of her relationship with Jack Cope and his lack of commitment soon began to frustrate her (Brink 2007: 15). To make matters worse, in the winter of 1961, Jonker discovered that she was pregnant, but Cope did not react well. She had an abortion, at that stage, an illegal act in South Africa. Brink (2007: 16) confirms, '[i]t was a back street affair, performed by an old 'coloured' woman armed with a knitting needle ... it was one of the most traumatic moments of her life'. Cope was in London at the time and she was utterly alone. A 'bad infection developed and Ingrid was terribly ill' (Nogueira 2007). The relationship between Cope and Jonker could never be the same again. She mourned the baby she lost until her death in 1965 and it was a major cause for her despair. She attempted suicide and was hospitalised and treated for her resulting depression at Gardens Nursing Home and Valkenburg (between the years 1961-1965); her fixation with suicide, would become worse (Brink 2007; Viljoen 2012).

The trauma inspired the very sad poem, 'Little Grain of Sand' (Jonker

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<sup>7</sup> This is from Helena Nogueira's documentary film *Ingrid Jonker: Her Lives and Time* (2007).

2007: 79). Written during Jonker's stay in hospital (Metelkamp 2003: 115), the poem alludes to a 'baby that screams from the womb' becoming 'silence in dead-end street' and being begged by its mother to 'laugh now and speak'. It is no wonder then that the poem ends in sorrow, with the mother voicing her final pain and her own death: 'Small grain of sand is my word, my breath / small grain of nought is my death'. But from the speaker's perspective, her death and her words mean nothing to anyone. In this way, Jonker shows the tragedy of abortion and the shame and torture a woman must go through after such an event. There is a sense of anger towards the father of the child: 'Small arrow feathered into space / love fades away from its place'. Where once there was love between man and woman, this love which conceived a child, has disappeared (Viljoen 2011: 74). While the arrow can be regarded as phallic and the 'love' as a love between man and woman, the image may be suggestive of the implements used during an abortion and the 'love' as the child which is taken away from her. Nevertheless, the mother's pain, throughout the poem is unbearable, she feels as if she has lost everything.

A similar poem is 'Pregnant Woman' (Jonker 2007: 52-53) which was written in 1957, when Jonker was pregnant with her daughter, Simone (Viljoen 2012: 48). Rather than experiencing pleasure during her pregnancy, the speaker, experiences a mixture of emotions which show her doubt at the pending birth. She feels 'trepidation' and 'the reluctance of the mother or her ambiguity about becoming a mother and having a child' are unmistakable (Thomas 2014: 44). She seems to imagine losing the child either by miscarriage or abortion. Brink (2007: 13) referring to the poem and Jonker's pregnancy, states, 'an illogical fear of a miscarriage cast a pall over that eager expectation' of having a child. Nogueira (2007) on the other hand, states that during the time of her pregnancy she 'thought about suicide and then about abortion and then wrote about it in the poem, 'but she couldn't go through with it'. The theme of abortion or miscarriage is reiterated in the repeated lines, almost like a chorus: 'but sewer o sewer, / my offspring lies in the water'. Throughout the poem too, it is often difficult to determine whether the child or the mother is speaking which is a theme in the work of Jonker; she often thought of her mother's experiences and compared them to her own. In Jonker's eyes, her mother too, must have thought of aborting her, because she was unwanted and a cause for her own parents' separation. Mother and child are synonymous with her own experiences as a mother and daughter. For example, the poem opens, 'Under the crust of night I lie singing, / curled up in the sewer, singing, / and my offspring lies in the water'. Both mother and child seem to lie in the waters

of the sewer. Viljoen (2012: 52) echoes this point: '... both mother and child are the result of mis-births that have deposited them in the sewer rather than a happy productive life'. Mother and child both end up in a state of abandonment much like in 'Little Grain of Sand'. The result of this desertion is as De Saxe (2014: 7) emphasises: 'loss is coated in blood', where the 'predominant mood is distress'. That the speaker states, 'I play I'm happy' also reveals Jonker's disquiet at having to pretend female fulfilment in traditional gender roles.

The conjuring of female moments, such as motherhood, childbirth and pregnancy, is a remarkable element in Jonker's writing. In writing these moments, she reflects on a world exclusive to women and one which draws away from masculine subjects. Therefore, female experience is realised as being as relevant as male experience. Furthermore, Jonker takes a stance on feminine experiences which did not fit in with traditional Afrikaner values of motherhood, one which is in a way more truthful. Even though she embraced motherhood (Brink 2007: 17; Viljoen 2012: 52), Jonker's work affirms that it is natural for a woman to experience doubts, misgivings and fears during moments of female life which can be traumatic, such as childbirth or miscarriage. With this, Jonker's work can be considered as incorporating feminist themes at a time in South Africa when it certainly would have been frowned upon, and thus, she is a precursor in terms of women's writing in the country (Viljoen 2012: 148).

In April 1963, Ingrid Jonker met André Brink, a fellow writer and Afrikaans Professor at Rhodes University, at a meeting in the house of Marjorie Wallace and Jan Rabie. It was a meeting to 'plan a concerted protest against the new censorship bill which was taking shape in Parliament ... sponsored by Abraham Jonker ... the Chief Censor' and Ingrid's father (Brink 2007: 9). They began an affair despite the fact the Brink was married. The moment this happened, Cope became interested in Jonker again and, so began a destructive love triangle between Cope, Jonker and Brink (2007: 18-19), as he describes below:

... soon a fatal pattern was established: I would rush down to Cape Town in a frenzy of longing and desire, only to find, that in my absence she had been with Jack again – sometimes because he would not leave her in peace, just as often because *she* could not bear to be alone. This would inhibit my urge for commitment (what Ingrid wanted above all, was to get married), and I would become serious about returning to Grahamstown and my marriage. And of course this decision would then persuade Ingrid to turn to Jack again – by which

time, back at the ranch, I would decide that my marriage had failed after all, and I would rush back, head over heels, to Cape Town, only to find that in my absence ... et cetera.

It became a vicious cycle, never seeming to end and she was ‘shattered, she seemed able to inspire wild passions but unable to attract love’ (Nogueira 2007). It was around this time, in February 1964, that Jonker won the Afrikaanse Pers-Boekhandel (APB) prize for *Rook en Oker* (1963). This was an exceptional accomplishment; she decided she would achieve her dream and travel around Europe with the prize money (Viljoen 2012: 96). But alas, the trip was a disaster and signalled the end of her relationships with Cope and Brink.

It is in this miserable state, that she wrote the poem, ‘Waiting in Amsterdam’, which is dedicated to both Cope and Brink (Jonker 2007: 117). The poem – an epitome of her torment at being in the centre of a love triangle in which there could be no resolution – begins, ‘I can only say that I waited for you’ which is essentially what she was doing: waiting in the hope for one of her lovers, either Cope or Brink to reciprocate her love. The emphasis on ‘waiting’ suggests her desperation as well as her humiliation at both her lovers’ rejection. The first verse of the poem creates the awareness that she is terribly alone, isolated and unhappy. Nonetheless, the tone changes in the second verse; finally the man, the ‘you’ in the poem arrives, after coming ‘through the forlorn cities of Europe’. As if in a dream, the speaker of the poem ‘recognises’ him, graciously preparing ‘the table with wine with bread with grace’, almost as a repetition of the Last Supper and as if this meal may be the last she spends with her lover. That she must ‘recognise’ him is troubling; conceivably, he is different from the man she knows and loves or he has changed. Then very controversially, Jonker writes:

But unperturbed you turned your back  
You took off your cock  
Laid it on the table  
And without a word  
With your own smile  
Forsook the world

The woman sets a meal for the man and all he can do is ‘turn his back’, take off his ‘cock’ and ‘forsook the world’. These final lines have sexual connota-

tions, but they also signify Jonker's feeling that Cope/Brink had betrayed her. The word, 'voël' (translated in English to 'cock') in Afrikaans is slang for male sex organs, a pun, intentionally played with by Jonker. It is for this play on words that Brink and Krog translated the word, 'voël' as 'cock', its translated use adding further connotations of betrayal to the poem. In a similar vein, the Last Supper was symbolic of Jesus's sacrifice for humanity. Her re-enactment of the Last Supper could perhaps symbolise her own sacrifice, her love for the man and her offering to him of something – herself – she considered precious and holy. Yet, he turns his back, perhaps unaware of what she is doing, forsaking the world (their private world, her world, her sacrifice) and betraying her. That he lays his 'cock' on the table is also a sign of rejection and disrespect for her offering. Ultimately, the man in the poem shows disregard in his actions and is uncaring of the efforts of his partner. Underlying all these connotations is the final sacrifice Christ did make, his death and Jonker's own death, not for humanity like Christ, but perhaps as a result of the betrayal she felt her whole life, at the hands of men.

It is in Europe that Brink and Jonker agreed to part ways, but Jonker returned to Paris, only to plummet into despair. Her relationships with both men, Cope and Brink, were at an end and she felt hopeless. In Paris, Jonker was admitted into the mental institution St. Anne's. She was devastated at the way things had turned out in what she, according to her sister, Anna Jonker (2003: 151), aptly called 'the bloodbath of Barcelona'. Jonker was desperately disappointed, she had 'thought the hotels in Europe would be lover's nests, but instead they became lovers tombs' (Nogueira 2007).

Though her relationships with Brink and Cope were supposedly over, contact with both men continued into 1965. On the weekend of her suicide, Jonker had to deal with further betrayal, whether they meant this or not, by Cope and Brink. The first was that Brink married another woman. It did not help either that he had recently published *Orgie* (1965), a novel describing their relationship in great detail. The second was Cope's visit which ended up in a terrible argument – this was only a few hours before her death. These events were the final straw and she committed suicide before the weekend was over.

Investigating Jonker's life reveals that even before her birth, she was rejected and mistreated by men and this cycle continued right till the hour before she drowned herself in July's freezing cold waters at Three Anchor Bay. She suffered emotionally and spiritually from her father's neglect and this was repeated by the men she loved. She also had to endure traumatic events such as abortion, without support. Furthermore, her father played a crucial role in

the Apartheid government and in implementing the dreaded Censorship Act. As a writer, this meant professional exile from her 'volk' and country at the hands of her own father: the effect of which would have been treacherous betrayal and a definite link to her suicide.

## 2. The 'Political Ingrid': Activism Against Apartheid

In much of her poetry, Ingrid Jonker addresses the issue of racism on which the Apartheid government was built. As an Afrikaans woman, speaking out against Apartheid she was placing herself in a difficult position; she was in fact turning away from her culture and its ideals about womanhood and about race.

As a woman, she was rejecting traditional Afrikaans gender roles. According to Elsie Cloete (1992: 45), 'the Afrikaner ... expected Afrikaner women to sublimate themselves to and collaborate in the establishment of Afrikaner nationalism'. Women were the conveyors of culture and this was the role to which they were confined. It was a task most Afrikaner women accepted without question. Furthermore, Afrikaans women can be said to have suffered more than their English contemporaries. They were more isolated within their culture because they succumbed to patriarchal power more easily, mainly because they had been socialised to accept the strictures of their culture and church without question. Although white women obtained the vote in 1930, this only occurred, as Vincent (1999: 10) relates, because of Afrikaner suffragists' campaign of the *volksmoeder* ideology which declared Afrikaner women 'as mothers, not only in the private sphere of the home and family but as mothers of the Afrikaner nation'. The *volksmoeder* then would nurture and raise the children of their *volk* to believe in the views of the National Party. However, as soon as white women had gained enfranchisement, thus strengthening Nationalist power in South Africa, women's parties were dissolved and they found themselves back in the home fulfilling their biological roles. Vincent (1999: 15) confirms that 'Far from challenging fundamental social inequalities, a campaign based on the *volksmoeder* discourse reinforced notions that women possessed certain natural predispositions which could legitimately be said to define and circumscribe their social capacity in various ways'. Afrikaans women therefore, until the 1970s remained mostly distanced from politics and firmly in the traditional sphere of womanhood. It is then possible to see just how much Jonker was sacrificing in order to stand up for her beliefs; by voicing herself, she was defying her people and placing herself in a position of isolation and exile.

In March 1960, Ingrid Jonker (2007: 85), affected by the violence that broke out across the country after the Sharpeville Massacre, wrote her famous poem, 'The Child who was Shot Dead by Soldiers at Nyanga'. It was written after a child was shot dead in his mother's arms in Cape Town; she was outraged by the unnecessary violence she was witnessing and experienced 'terrible shock and dismay' (Jonker: 1975: 210). The poem was a massive criticism on Apartheid South Africa and the violence which ensued as a result. In this poem, the child who was shot dead, lives on and becomes 'a giant' who 'travels through the whole world'. He is a symbol of freedom and he 'travels ... without a pass'. Jonker, thus, speaks out against the pass law, which forced Black South Africans to carry a pass, a form of identification and permission to be in urban areas. Failure to produce a pass could result in being arrested and imprisoned. Jonker, therefore, stood against Apartheid and its often outrageous laws and against the absolute injustice that caused a child to be killed as a result. The poem is powerful because Jonker's own anguish at her own place in the world can be felt. She is the rejected daughter who rejects a government created by white males and one in which her father is a part. She is thus involved in her battle against Apartheid in a unique and personal way to the extent that she becomes 'a watchful child condemning the creation of unjust laws to which the poet's father was a party' (De Saxe 2014: 5).

Jonker (1975: 210) stated in an interview with *Drum* magazine in May 1963, 'I think it has been an advantage to my development as a writer and a human being that I have never been conscious of racial feelings. From childhood onwards, I have seen people simply as people'. This statement is in stark contrast to the beliefs of the Afrikaans culture. Yet, she went further than just 'seeing people as people', she actually identified with those who were not considered people by the Apartheid government as can be seen in her poem, 'The Child', but also in other poems such as 'Dog' and 'Walk'. The black men in the latter two poems, so tormented by the 'white baas'<sup>8</sup> can easily stand for the pain she often went through at the hands of white men (Jonker 2007: 107; 104). In all three poems, Jonker not only puts herself in the shoes of black people, she experiences their suffering as her own. She rejects Apartheid and the illusions of white patriarchy and superiority. Krog (2001) explains:

It was strange to read the work of a woman who opened her mouth about politics. Women didn't do that. And then she even wrote about

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<sup>8</sup> White Master.

being black and in the language of the coloured people .... Ingrid used it as though it was her language.

It was a brave move for a woman in South Africa to stand against her culture and to speak out politically in a time of 'political madness' (Clarke 2001). 'To resist Apartheid under Verwoed was high treason' (Nogueira 2007). Thus, standing against the government, even in the smallest way could mean getting into trouble with the law as Peter Clarke (2007) explains: '[i]t was a time when anything could have happened. Anyone could have been picked up. Anyone could have been arrested and ... people often disappeared.' It was not only dangerous to speak out in the way Jonker did, but it was disgraceful to her culture. In speaking out she was disowned by her family and culture. Nelson Mandela recognised this, when he recited her poem during his inauguration speech in 1994. Marian de Saxe (2014: 52) observes:

That the poet's tragic death has been mythologised in relation to the difficult passage and symbolic importance of this poem was not lost on Mandela. He selected the poem of a dead, white, Afrikaans woman as a gesture of defiance and resurrection which was part of a reconciliation discourse to verify deeply felt truths as written into Jonker's poetry (De Saxe 2014: 52).

The poem, 'The Child', was threatened with censorship, along with countless other works in South Africa at the time and Jonker was forced to stand at loggerheads with her father, who was the chairman of censorship. According to Nogueira (2007), in standing with her friends against, Apartheid and censorship she 'became the battleground on which these ideologies were fought, tearing her apart'. The Sestigers are described in Nogueira's (2007) film: they 'rejected Nationalism ... [and] ... ventured away from the inner circle [of Afrikaans Nationalism] opening new ways of thinking .... The Sestigers worried about the death of Afrikaans and its culture, but they rejected Apartheid in which the National Party legalised racism'. It was also the first time that Afrikaans writers mixed with English writers in their common rebellion against Apartheid. At this time, Jack Cope, Ingrid Jonker's lover, founded his magazine, *Contrast*, which served as a 'mouthpiece of the angry young writers' and broke down barriers of gender, race and language (Nogueira 2007).

Censorship laws targeted artists and intellectuals and their works. Anything the conservative government disapproved of could be banned. According

to Jack Cope (2007), it 'was the beginning of forty years of intellectual black-out'. In the end, over 16 000 books were banned (Nogueira 2007). Two hundred writers and artists, including Ingrid Jonker signed a petition against censorship, only to be dismissed as 'nobodies' by Abraham Jonker. Ingrid Jonker stood up to her father in the media and the 'controversy between father and daughter ... [became] ... front page news' (van Schaik 2001). Ingrid Jonker was publicly disowned by her father in her attempt to stand up for what she believed was right. She could not be the 'dutiful, respectful' and obedient daughter her culture prescribed (Jonker 2007). The effect of this must have been damaging. In a letter to the *Sunday Times* on 18 June 1965, a month before her death, Ingrid Jonker stated:

'Alarm and despondency amongst writers, has been aroused – and censorship has now become a fact .... A new enemy seems to have emerged against our writers .... We are and have been fighting for freedom of expression in our country and we, as writers, shall never come to terms with the enemy' (Metelerkamp 2003: 190).

Unfortunately, Jonker was placed in the firing line, because her father was the head of censorship; it was 'breaking point' in a relationship that had never been strong (Brink 2001). It did not help either that the media took things out of context, often sensationalising the conflict between father and daughter (Cope 1982: 88). As a consequence, Jonker was doubly affected by patriarchy, on both personal and political levels, because her father had a prominent place in the government which she stood against. At the same time, she questions the rationality of actions taken by a government that is all-male. This is an important aspect in Jonker's works, one that prevents her from being criticised as purely self-centred and concerned with women's issues. Thus, focusing on her work, especially from a political angle, provides confirmation that she was actually concerned about events surrounding her. This aspect in turn disproves stereotypical notions of her art, especially in view of her suicide, as neurotic, desperate and resulting in madness, which has always 'particularly been associated with women' (Goodman, Small & Jacobus 1996: 114).

### **3. The 'Crazed' Ingrid**

The focus until this point has been the patriarchal influences that affected Jonker's life and her writing. However, because she did commit suicide, it is

important to gain an understanding of her mental health, especially since it is a theme often addressed in her work. Of particular interest to this discussion are Kaufman and Baer's (2002: 273) findings, based on a study of 1,629 writers which 'showed that female poets were significantly more likely to suffer from mental illness than both other types of women writers (fiction writers, playwrights, and nonfiction writers) and male writers (fiction writers, poets, playwrights, and nonfiction writers)'. Dubbed the 'Sylvia Plath effect', this phenomenon explains the higher incidence of mental illness in female poets in that they are more vulnerable to 'extrinsic motivational constraints', such as 'interpersonal relationships' (Kaufman & Baer 2002: 278). Vulnerability in interpersonal relationships would then lead to a greater amount of stress in the lives of female poets who are required to be creative, particularly in the creation of poetry which is often an intrinsic process. This factor is witnessed in Jonker's life and her writing, especially with regards to her relationships with men. Another reason is that 'high levels of creativity require one to "defy the crowd"' which leads to 'a heightened level ... of psychological distress and results in a higher incidence of mental illness' (Kaufman & Baer 2002: 279). This too, can be witnessed in Jonker's life and in her work, especially in terms of the patriarchal influences and gender roles to which she was expected to conform.

Kaufman and Baer's findings are of especial importance because they further emphasize how rejection from father, '*volk*' and her male counterparts could have had a greater effect on her because of the nature of her profession. The degree of Jonker's mental illness must be measured according to external factors in her life such as her relationships with men and the gender roles she was expected to conform to within the patriarchal institution which was Apartheid. While Jonker may have been prone to depression or mental instability, this problem was enhanced by the amount of pain and stress she encountered in her life specifically as a result of patriarchy. With the findings of Kaufman and Baer, in mind, it is now possible to discuss Jonker's mental history, its prevalence in her work. To summarise, evidence shows that Jonker was prone to depression and that she had a preoccupation with death and suicide. She attempted to commit suicide on various occasions and was admitted into mental institutions from a relatively young age to be treated for her depression. Furthermore, Jonker explored her experiences of mental illness as a theme in her work.

According to Nogueira (2007), Jonker 'was still a minor when he [Abraham Jonker] had her committed to Valkenburg'. This must have been a traumatic experience for her, especially as it was the place where her mother

had died. Jonker was admitted into Valkenburg on several occasions because of nervous breakdowns and suicide attempts. Reasons for these episodes include the abortion<sup>9</sup> she suffered, and strife in her relationships with men (Viljoen 2012: 71). During these stays, she volunteered for Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT) and was on various forms of medication, both of which can have a detrimental effect if not administered correctly. Dr Francois Daubenton (2007) who was at the time of Nogueira's film, the head psychiatrist at Valkenburg gives an account of ECT during the sixties:

Patients used to have a fairly classic grand mal seizure, where their limbs would go into extension, both arms and legs, and the mouth .... muscles would tighten. You ran risks of patients breaking bones or certainly damaging areas of the mouth as a result of the clenching of the teeth through the process of the seizure. In those days it was quite a traumatic and unpleasant experience.

Dr Daubenton (2007) also provides a psychological profile of Ingrid Jonker, stating that she 'clearly had a depressive illness', most likely 'inherited from her mother'. Daubenton suggests that the 'absent father is very crucial in her whole life, in terms of Ingrid's feeling that in a way she was responsible for her mother's death'. Jonker's own psychiatrist (whom she consulted for four years) stated in an interview with L.M van der Merwe (2006: 196): 'The general impression was always that her problems were circumstantial: her unhappy childhood, her unfortunate marriage, sexual relationships, general frustration, and her work'<sup>10</sup>. It is therefore clear that extrinsic factors in Jonker's life had a huge impact on her state of mind. According to this psychiatrist, Jonker was often on antidepressants, but stopped coming to see him from January 1965. It is therefore unclear whether she was taking them when she committed suicide. If she was taking them incorrectly, of course, they could in fact have exacerbated her depressive state of mind (Jick, Kaye & Jick 2004).

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<sup>9</sup> It is possible that Jonker had more than one abortion, however, there is only definite evidence of this occurring once. More than one would also have added to her mental state, especially if these were a result of unstable relationships.

<sup>10</sup> This is the author's translation. The original is: 'Die geheelindruk was altyd dat dit omstandighede was wat haar gepla her: haar ongelukkige kinderdae, haar ongelukkige huweliksverhouding, seksuele verhoudings, algemene frustrasie, en haar werk'.

Jonker's friends remember her trying to commit suicide a number of times. Jan Rabie and Marjorie Wallace (2006: 7) refer to pills that a psychiatrist gave her, which she used for 'suicide attempts', as well as an attempt by Jonker to commit suicide by drowning, three days before her death, in which Rabie managed to save her. This was shortly after she found out that Brink was going to marry someone else. Another instance, is when Jonker and Brink separated in Europe; she returned to Paris and soon admitted herself into St Anne's, a mental institution, because, according to her sister, Anna Jonker, she was suffering from acute depression (Metelerkamp 2003: 151). Breyten Breytenbach (2001) provides an explanation of the situation:

Within a few days we had to have her admitted to an institution .... She was terribly unhappy .... She was very ill. She wanted to be admitted to St Anne's, the psychiatric institution in Paris. She talked about the exhausting tension between André and Jack. And she told us that she was deeply depressed. She was extremely distraught. She had a nervous breakdown in Paris.

Jonker's (2007: 123) poem, 'Mommy' ['Mamma'], written shortly after her return to South Africa, describes her depression. The poem is written from the perspective of a daughter, watching her mother suffer and describes the feelings Jonker imagined her daughter would have towards her as well as her experience with her own mother's mental illness. The poem begins, 'mommy is no longer a person / just an a', the lack of capital letters describing the mother's lack of importance and humanness. She is only 'an a' and she goes through the actions of normality and everyday life, but she barely exists. She acts 'just like an ordinary person' but she is barely living. She 'whispers words' that have 'no sound' and her presence is ghostlike. The poem ends, 'it would like to believe in people / never mind a god', which is an indicator of mommy's feeling of betrayal by others as well as her lack of belief in people. The ending also points to a feeling that there is no longer any reason to live, 'mommy' is close to giving up, is disillusioned by the world and can no longer take the hurt others have caused her.

It is clear to see that Jonker's state of mind was directly influenced by the pressures around her, her extreme disillusionment with disintegrating social values and the pain she was confronted with in her life often as a result of patriarchal factors. In 'My Doll Falls and Breaks', the theme of suicide is again present in the metaphor of a doll falling from a 'high balcony' and breaking

(Jonker 2007: 82). The doll almost seems like a sister piece to Jonker's (2007: 42) earlier poem, 'Song of a Rag Doll', except she now rebels: the doll, unlike its mute sister, can 'speak'. The poet also mysteriously asks, 'or was it the wind from the distance / or was it my very own hand'. If it was her 'very own hand', she could easily have thrown the doll down as a sign of anger and rebellion against the rag doll virtues she perceives women to play. At the same time, her 'own hand' can easily represent the part she will have to play in her own suicide. The poem therefore acts as a fantasy of suicide, especially since it ends with the speaker asking with fascination: 'if I should fall from a high balcony / if I should break/ would I look like this?'

Although Jonker had a history of depression, she may never have committed suicide, had she not been abandoned by the men in her life. Jonker was completely alone in the days leading up to her suicide. She had recently found out about Brink's marriage to another woman, there seemed to be no chance of reconciliation with Cope and her father had rejected her completely.

It is evident that extrinsic factors, in Jonker's life namely those that are patriarchal, had a huge impact on her state of mind. She experienced much pain in her life because of men who should have cherished and loved her rather than reject her. At her funeral, these men appeared devastated (Meterlekamp 2003: 207; 220), though during her lifetime, none of them acted as a stable or permanent place of refuge. Politically, she fought for her beliefs through her writing and should be thought of as an activist against Apartheid, who sacrificed herself for its cause. In doing so, she had to stand against her father and her people. In this light, Ingrid Jonker should be remembered for her bravery in her struggle for a freedom whose birth she never witnessed and a freedom, she herself as a young female writer never found in the constraints of the patriarchal system of Apartheid.

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