Mothering and Othering: Reading *Fiela's Child* as an Adoption Narrative

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Abstract

Dalene Matthee's novel *Fiela's Child* (Matthee 1992) is one not traditionally considered an adoption narrative. However, through a discussion of Fiela's mothering of her 'adopted' son, seen in the larger context of the theory of mothering, as well as a salient investigation into Fiela's racial othering, it becomes clear that *Fiela's Child* may indeed be placed in the emerging oeuvre of South African adoption narratives. Placing both mothering and othering within the larger, overarching context of feminism, and especially African feminism, opens new lines of enquiry regarding not only Fiela, but South African women as a whole, and adoptive mothers specifically. Since the situation of mothering in the African context is largely undiscovered territory (Wilson 2013), this paper aims to fill this gap in part by investigating female queering of normative spaces in this country. With the focus on interracial adoption and its effect on adoptive mothers, another largely unexplored field, this paper concludes that Fiela's mothering and othering create a feminist point of view on adoption as well as the gender and racial issues accompanying it.

Keywords: Adoption narrative, mothering, identity, *Fiela's Child*, Dalene Matthee

Dalene Matthee's 1992 novel *Fiela's Child*, is one not traditionally considered an adoption narrative. No legal adoption takes place, there is no mention of adoption or the adoption process, the protagonist, Benjamin, is never called an adopted child, nor are Fiela and her husband called adoptive parents. However,

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Oh (2015:2–3) defines adoption as 'severing the relationship between a child and his or her parents', as well as 'transferring the custody to another parent or set of parents', and 'the adoption of an unrelated person'; as such, the events in *Fiela's Child* can be classified as adoption, and the novel as an adoption narrative.

Mothering is defined as the psychological transformation in women, moving from childlessness to bringing up a child for at least twelve years (Cairns & Barlow 1997). Studies on African views of mothering are quite recent (Asforth 2000; Holland 2001; Minde, Minde & Vogel 2006; Tomlinson & Swartz 2003), but few studies exist that place the theory of mothering in an African or South African context. This paper focuses on Fiela's mothering, not only as a mother herself, but also in terms of how the South African adoptive mother is represented in the text as a whole.

In *Fiela's Child,* the normative interracial, adoptive modus (white parents adopting black/mixed race child/ren) is inverted, while a further level of political and racial inequality is added to the discourse. Set in South Africa during the time of British colonisation, it is not only the dominant white/marginalised black discourse that is foregrounded, but also the pressures and limitations on all South Africans under British rule, changing the white-black hierarchy to privileged, normative English on the forefront, followed by Dutch/Afrikaans white, and finally, black/coloured peoples. Not only does Fiela need to contend with her 'crime' of raising a white child; she is also faced with a Dutch/ Afrikaans white legal system desperately trying to both cling to its roots, but also urgently trying to comply with British Imperial expectations, systems and norms. Thus, Fiela is othered not only in terms of race, but also in terms of what mothering is seen to be.

Nakano-Glenn (2016) posits that, currently, and for many centuries before, women's position in society has been largely defined by female biological imperatives. She further posits that the following questions are foregrounded in the current field of mothering, womanhood, and what that implies:

> Is mothering women's primary and sole mission and chief source of satisfaction, or one of many roles and sources of satisfaction? Is women's fate tied to their biological role in reproduction, or is biology only a minor factor? How much significance should we place on pregnancy and childbirth as putting women in a unique position that

> justifies special treatment? (Nakano-Glenn 2016:1).

These questions form part of a larger debate regarding 'good' mothering, what Elliott, Powell and Bronton (2013:352) equate with 'invest(ing) vast amounts of time, money, energy, and emotional labor in mothering', which is mainly seen as the purview of affluent, white mothers. Elliot *et al.*'s study shows that the dominant view of 'good' mothering, or 'intensive mothering ideology', reflects 'the importance of sacrifice, self-reliance, and protection'. Mothers themselves mention that self-sacrifice, being independent and teaching this independence to their children, and the protection of their children, form the identity of the mother. Baxter *et al.* (2015) posit that, after the birth of a child, mothering is seen as the main prerogative of the woman.

The concept of mothering is further complicated in the case of adoption. The act of adoption essentially queers the concept of motherhood, as the biological role of reproduction is removed from the parenting equation. Fisher (2003:352) states that adoption is persistently perceived as 'not quite as good as having your own'. His study shows that adoption literature (both fiction and non-fiction) consistently provides '[W]orst case scenarios […] as typical of adoption, and […] negative generalizations about adoption', even though these scenarios are not supported by empirical evidence. Adoptive mothering is seen as 'second best' and 'not real'. In a sense, adoptive mothering queers the concept of traditional mothering, thus othering the biological mother. This issue is, for me, saliently encompassed in the following observation:

> Adoption is most commonly viewed through the lens of loss – the child's loss of her first set of parents and biological heritage, the birth mother's loss of the child for whom she continues to grieve, and the adoptive parents' loss of their wanted biological offspring (Leon 2002:652).

When one views mothering in this light, it becomes apparent that there is little, if no, difference between biological and adoptive mothering. However, it remains true that adoption queers and,

> troubles the boundaries of reproduction, reveal cultural anxieties surrounding the idea of maternal desire, and, thereby, invite transgressions of the definitions and boundaries of motherhood (Greenway 2016:147).

For this very reason, posit Cuthbert, Murphy and Quartly (2009), the analysis and study of the representation of adoptive mothering in adoption narratives are so important. It provides one, they state, with an essential and necessary critical space for regarding not only the family, but also mothering, in 'non-essentialist ways which challenge the dominant script of family and motherhood' (Cuthbert *et al.* 2009:412). Greenway (2016: 47) further states that studying adoption narratives allows one to investigate '[H]ow […] women's (in)ability to reproduce, (un)desire to mother, or essentialist understandings of birth mothering, biomothering, or adoptive mothering' are represented in literature.

A final aspect of mothering which starkly comes into play in any kind of adoption is research is that of nature vs. nurture. Horn (2017:n.p.) summarises the complex interplay of these two concepts as follows:

> Birth parents provide their adopted-away child with a genetic endowment, but do not participate in shaping the child's environment. Adoptive parents do not contribute genetically, but are otherwise in charge of directing the child's development. If adopted children grow up to resemble birth parents they have never seen, the clear inference is that hereditary factors have had an influence. Environmental factors are implicated whenever children resemble their adoptive parents, but not the birth parents.

The link between nature vs. nurture and mothering is one prevalent in adoption, mainly as traditional views of mothering implies that pregnancy fosters an innate mothering instinct, which adoptive parents are theorised not to possess (Coll, Bearer & Lerner 2014). If adoptive parents contribute no 'nature' in terms of genetic material, but only nurture the adoptive child, how legitimate is the label of parents then? And what impact does this have on one's identity as a mother? Leon (2002:654) posits that adoptive mothering is not seen as 'real', because of the pervasive idea that reproduction is linked to what he calls 'the myth of maternal instinct'. The theory of adoptive mothers not possessing said instinct greatly queers adoptive mothers in terms of mothering. Maternal instinct, says Leon (2002:4), is a 'cultural belief' posited on the conviction that the conception of a child endows the woman with a sense of maternal love that only pregnancy can ensure. Hrdy (2015:ii) also suggests that this 'all-consuming, utterly selfless love' which *is* mothering instinct is seen as

a defining characteristic of female identity but that, in fact, this is not true. In short, states Nakano-Glenn (2015), any study of mothering needs to contend with pervasive ideologies which have shaped society's view of motherhood, including the identity of mothers.

In Matthee's *Fiela's Child* one sees characters grappling largely with a search for identity – according to Wilson (2013:17):

> At the core of this novel is the question of what creates the identity, is it who one is born as, or who they become through circumstances.

As much as this is true in terms of Benjamin, the Caucasian child taken in by Fiela and her family, it is just as true for Fiela herself. Fiela is already a mother to her own biological children at the time Benjamin is left on their doorstep, but adopting Benjamin as her own adds another layer of complexity to her role as mother. In their rural, isolated existence, raising him as she raises her own children is uncomplicated and natural. It is only when census workers arrive on their farm that Fiela is faced with losing her child and comes face to face with the racial inequalities prevalent in South Africa at the time. Fiela's role as specifically Benjamin's mother is questioned by government officials, who tell her, 'You have a white child on your land and in your house among your own children and you know as well as I do that that is not right' (Matthee 1992:22). Not only is Fiela's mothering questioned as the child is so obviously not her own, but it is questioned as, from a racial point of view, she is not legally allowed to parent him as her own child. This calls into question not only Fiela's identity, but also the role of her mothering in Benjamin's upbringing.

The issue of nature vs. nurture in Fiela's parenting most prominently comes to the fore once Benjamin is taken away from Fiela. On his way to the courthouse with the census officials, he stays over at a white woman's house, and she tells the census worker, 'He called me missus, Ebenezer, it's too terrible. Like a Coloured' (Matthee 1992:76). Once he is sent to live with his so-called biological, white family, his mannerisms, speech patterns and diction, the result of being raised amongst coloured people, set him apart from his racial peers. Through nature he may be white, but he was nurtured to 'act' coloured. The white community, and to a large extent the white 'biological' parents, attempt to change Benjamin's identity to a more fitting one, one that is socially and normatively more acceptable. According to Wilson (2013: 18),

> There is an expectation that even though Benjamin is only twelve, and has only known his black family, he should inherently be able to behave like a white person who was raised by white people. This is almost an argument for nature versus nurture, because he is white he should know that he is 'better' than the black family he was raised by. His use of titles when speaking to white people quickly bothers them, and the magistrate who places Benjamin with the Van Rooyens tells him: 'I never want to hear you use the word master again! You're a white child and you will learn to speak like a white child'.

Elias van Rooyen, Benjamin's so-called biological, white father says, 'The little brat would realize that it would not pay him to play tricks, that he would be made white again and learn to be obedient. He was no longer in Long Kloof' (Matthee 1992:155). Fiela, on the other hand, does not attempt to hide Benjamin's true cultural and racial identity, nor does she actively try to change it (though, it can be argued, she inevitably does so through the nurturing aspect of her mothering). As such, Benjamin realises that he is different from his family (and he sees Fiela's family as his own, 'Please, your worshipful lord, I'm Fiela Komoetie's child and Selling Komoetie is my father') Matthee explains it in the following manner, 'He knew he was white and his mother and father and Dawid and Tollie and Kittie and Emma, brown. He was white because he was the hand-child' (Matthee 1992:102).

Instead of denying him his race and identity, Fiela allows him to see and experience how he and her family are racially different, but at the same time, similar: they are human beings seeking an existence and happiness in a colonised country with much uncertainty. Benjamin knows who he is until he is exposed to the world outside of Fiela's farm when his identity is questioned and changed by white society. Fiela is confident in her identity as a mother, even after Benjamin is taken away from her – it is the dominant political ideology and those who enforce it that question her motherhood. The racial inequality and prejudice in South Africa play a large part in questioning whether she really ever was a mother to Benjamin. Fiela tries her best to appeal the court's decision, using educated and logical arguments. Yet she is told, 'The mother of the child immediately identified him amongst four others!' His temper was roused, 'The fact that the child had been in your home for nine years, unlawfully, is a serious offence; we shall have to consider bringing a case against you' (Matthee 1992:170).

Not only is Fiela's role as mother questioned based on her race and inferior 'black' arguments, but her years of nurture, sacrifice and love are negated, as she cannot possibly be a fitting mother to a white child. However, Fiela is clearly aware that the critique of her mothering is based on racial inequality, 'Say what you mean – say, because Benjamin is a white foundling. If he had been like us, no one would have said a word about it!' (Matthee 1992:174). Ironically, the parenting of the white family who supposedly lost their son (a case of negligence), never made an attempt to look for him, and claiming him back is never questioned – they have the correct skin colour, and therefore they cannot be in the wrong. Yet Fiela, who has mothered Benjamin for years, has her mothering questioned based solely on her race.

These aspects of Fiela's mothering journey are prominent points for adoptive parents to connect to. Raising a child of a different race is problematic and, though Fiela's tale inverts the dominant white parent/black or coloured adoptee situation, the fears of losing a child based on racial difference is one all parents who adopt interracially are confronted with. Further, Fiela's fierce love and protection of Benjamin speaks to what adoptive parents certainly yearn to be represented as: 'real' parents who will do whatever it takes to protect their adopted children.

The issue of race in interracial adoption is primarily foregrounded in Matthee's novel. As previously mentioned, the normative interracial adoptive modus (white parents adopting black/mixed race child/ren) is inverted, but a further level of political and racial inequality is added to the discourse. Set in South Africa during the time of British colonisation, it is not only the dominant white/marginalised black discourse that is foregrounded, but also the pressures and limitations on all South Africans under British rule. Fiela's racial othering is saliently foregrounded in this text.

Fiela does not, however, for a moment doubt her abilities or rights as a mother, an interesting concept for a coloured woman; Adhikari (2005:xi) states that the coloured identity was 'framed within a hegemonic racist ideology'. This is explained as follows,

> Coloured identity (was) set by an authoritarian, white ruling establishment in control of an increasingly prescriptive state […] this study is emphatic about Coloured identity being primarily and in the first place a product of its bearers […] processed of Coloured self-definition were influenced by the marginality of the Coloured people,

> their intermediate status in the South African racial hierarchy, class differences, ideological and political conflict, cultural affinities, and popular stereotyping. It is argued that their marginality was central to the relative stability of Coloured identity because of limitations it placed on the possibilities for independent action (Adhikari 2005:xiii).

As a result, posits Adhikari, Coloured identity has retained a sense of equilibrium over the centuries (2015:xiv). Fiela does not feel that she needs to be 'whiter' in order the raise Benjamin; she believes that, through the act of having taken him in and having nurtured him, she is his mother, and that she will remain his mother independent of race. Du Plooy (2014) states that Fiela's narrative can therefore be seen as a resistance narrative in the Foucauldian sense of the word; the story of a 'docile body' and her resistance to power rather than dissecting the 'grand narrative of history' (Du Plooy 2014).

However, race remains an issue for many other characters in the book. The census takers, the government officials, the white community Benjamin is moved to, all object most strenuously to him having been raised by a coloured family and acting 'Coloured', othering Fiela both racially and in terms of mothering. Singley (2011) suggests two major narrative and ideological strands regarding adoptees in adoption narratives, especially where said adoptees are part of disrupted or reformed families. In the first strand, the adopted child is 'saved' from desperate circumstances, which allow the child to participate in national narratives addressing new beginnings (Singley 2011). In the second strand, the child remains dependent based on gender, race, class, or is shown as being 'unworthy of adoption' (Singley 2011). In Benjamin Komoetie we find an interesting combination between these two strands. Fiela first saves the child from certain death, stranded and alone in the arid Karoo. Benjamin is then again 'saved' by the census takers – 'saved' from growing up further in an 'unsuitable' household. Finally, after enduring years of abuse and torment at the hands of the Van Rooyen family, Benjamin saves himself by finding out the truth – that no-one knows who his biological parents are, that he was placed with the Van Rooyens merely to take him away from a coloured household – and returns to whom he considers his true family, the Komoeties, and his real mother, Fiela.

Thus Benjamin is firstly part of a new beginning in an interracial family narrative in a time when those narratives were scarce and regarded as criminal; secondly, as a newcomer to an already established, poor white family

who needs to accommodate the 'ruralised' and 'coloured' child they were told to take in; and finally in what is truly his new beginning, as part of the Komoetie family, having made peace with what has happened in the past. In fact, Benjamin is the sole character who can and does negate Fiela's othering. However, Benjamin is also characteristic of the second strand. Although Fiela takes him in and cares for him, as a coloured woman she cannot adopt a white child, and he is therefore unadoptable based on race. Though the Van Rooyens take him in, he is not adopted by them, as he is presumed to be part of their family and was therefore merely returned to his birth family; yet he is seen as unadoptable because he acts too 'coloured' to be accepted by this community. Benjamin himself is othered, and this othering allows him to return to Fiela and negate her racial and mothering othering.

> *Fiela's Child* forms an integral part of the Afrikaans canon of literature (Gardner 1991), and has become part of the English canon of South African literature. Reframing it as an adoption narrative implies that it can also become part of an adoption canon slowly being built in the country, along with books like *Umbilicus* by Paula Gruben (2016) and *Killing Caroline* by Sarah Jayne King (2017). The interracial adoption community in South Africa is not widely known and exists mainly in online spaces. What makes *Fiela's Child* so integral to this canon is both Fiela's mothering and othering. Though this novel focuses mainly on the tortuous journey of Benjamin adjusting to life with his (presumed and falsely suggested) 'biological' family, Fiela's journey as adoptive parent is saliently foregrounded. As a marginalised, coloured woman during a time of racial inequality in the late 19th century, her trauma and struggle, though in some ways different from current adoptive parents, provide tangible focal points for adoptive parents in the way she is represented.

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