

**STRANGER IN YOUR MIDST**  
**A Study of South African Women's Poetry in English**

by

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I was a stranger in your midst, hardly, even though I tried,  
understanding your tongue.

Not of your tribe assuredly, Oh not of your kind indeed!

Mary Morison Webster.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis represents the first extended study of South African poetry in English from a gender perspective. It is conceived in two parts: firstly, a deconstructive analysis of the dominant tradition of South African English poetry in order to reveal its masculine or androcentric base; and secondly, the reconstruction of an alternative gynocentric tradition that gives primacy to women and the feminine in poetry.

The first section consists of an examination of the ways in which the feminine has been excluded from the poetic tradition in historical terms by means of social and economic constraints on women. The study begins with a brief reference to the beginnings of cultural gender discrimination in British poetry, from which South African English poetry derives, and then moves to a more extended consideration of the ways in which this discrimination has manifested itself in the South African context in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is followed by an analysis of the "poetics of exclusion", the ways in which the tradition genders itself as masculine by defining its central speaking position or subjectivity as male and masculine, and so excludes women and the feminine.

The second section commences with the reconstruction or recovery of a gynocentric tradition of women's poetry in English in South Africa by means of a gynocritical "map" or survey, followed by a discussion of the nature of the feminine discourse or "poetics" required to provide the critical context for this poetry. The preliminary "map" is given greater detail by in-depth discussion of the women poets considered to be major contributors to the gynocentric tradition: Mary Morison Webster, Elisabeth Eybers, Tania van Zyl, Adèle Naudé, Ruth Miller, Ingrid Jonker and Eva Bezwoda. The study ends with an examination of the work of contemporary women poets in South Africa, especially the black women poets of the 1970s and '80s, and the poets – both black women and white women – who wrote from exile in the 1980s.

## **DECLARATION**

This study represents original work by the author and has not been submitted in any form to another university. Where use was made of the work of others it has been duly acknowledged in the text.

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C. J. Lockett

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **WOMEN'S POETRY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

In the field of South African writing in English, poetry has become a site of struggle in recent years. In the late 1980s and early 1990s much intellectual energy has been expended by academics and poets in defining and defending aesthetic and cultural values.<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps surprising that such a seemingly marginal activity in the larger world – that of poetry writing and reading – should produce so much heated emotion. But it is because of poetry's centrality to the embattled concept of "Great Literature" that poets and critics in South Africa who cherish traditional standards of literary value have felt the need to defend their activity so strongly against those with different agendas. Poetry has been, until very recently, the preserve of white middle-class men who have determined its form and set its standards in their own image. Challenges have been posed by poets of colour, mostly male, who have appropriated the cultural mode of poetry for their own purposes, often political and communal rather than aesthetic. This co-option has been perceived as a threat by traditionalists, who have seen values of "complexity" and "difficulty" being swept aside by writers with more pressing and immediate concerns, and indeed, with very different political agendas.

It may be argued that the Feminist criticism of recent years also poses a challenge to traditional ways of thinking about poetry. In this study the very nature of what is meant by "poetry" will be problematised; I will argue that what is accepted in South Africa as "poetry" or "good poetry" has been defined within a tradition created for and by men. The focus of this study will be on the nature of the challenge offered by Feminist scholarship to this historically male-dominated field. The study itself is based on two conceptual premises: Firstly, that there are two predominant sets of norms and values to be found in writing and culture which may be termed "masculine" and "feminine". The "masculine" is associated with the dominant values of western patriarchal society and particularly with patriarchal definitions of women's roles in society. The "feminine" describes values that are marginal and often oppositional to these dominant values and which seek to redefine the roles of women in our society. In this study the terms "masculine" and "feminine" will be used in this way, and will refer to social gender identity, while the terms "male" and "female" will be used to indicate biological identity. I also distinguish between patriarchal definitions of the feminine in poetry which locate this voice within narrow and essentialist parameters of the "emotional" and the "sensitive", and the oppositional feminine which focuses on resistance, anger, defiance and subversion.

The second premise of this work is drawn from historical materialism and foregrounds the concern of this study with cultural politics. It will be argued that texts

(and poems) are cultural artefacts produced and consumed within a cultural economy. As such they are also the bearers of a particular ideology that will either legitimate or undermine the status quo. The poems that are taken up by the dominant groups, the makers of literary traditions in this country, are those which are acceptable to them in terms of their own particular hegemonic discourses about the nature of poetry. Those that are refused, suppressed and silenced, are those which undermine and challenge this hegemony. It will be argued in the first part of this study that the very concept of "poetry" is highly politicised in South Africa, and that categories of definition and evaluation are equally politicised. In other words, poetry, its production and reception, is part of a larger process of cultural politics, and is subject to social and economic forces. "Aesthetics" is not a neutral concept, but is part of a politicised discourse – political in terms of race and gender. It will further be argued in this study that South African women's poetry has been marginalised and suppressed within this cultural economy, and that alternative discourse to the formal one of "aesthetics" needs to be formulated in order to recuperate women's poetry within the South African literary context.

The theoretical approach adopted in this thesis may be termed Feminist in its broadest sense. I have chosen to work with several different kinds of Feminist discourse. For example, I use the poststructuralist concepts of "self" and "other" to demonstrate how the master discourse of poetry in South Africa constitutes itself as masculine and renders the feminine as other. This activity of centring and marginalisation takes place within the larger historical context of literary exchanges and literary hegemony, a concept that derives from historical materialist criticism. I have also found it useful to employ some of the paradigms set up in the "gynocritical" writing of Feminists such as Elaine Showalter in order to categorise and define the poetry of South African women. In formulating a theoretical approach to the study of the body of South African women's poetry I have used Showalter's work as well as that of Ellen Messer-Davidow. In the studies of individual women poets I have used a variety of approaches, ranging from formalist analysis to psychoanalytical gender analysis. This eclectic method has enabled me to employ several perspectives in deconstructing the dominant masculine tradition and reconstructing an alternative feminine tradition in South African English poetry.

In South Africa the masculine nature of the tradition of English poetry has permeated the way in which critics and readers think of poetry. In 1959 Guy Butler – poet, critic and professor of English literature – claimed that South African English



poetry was "an educated man's affair", quite clearly implying the gender and class specificity of poetry considered worthy of anthologising.<sup>2</sup> Even in the 1980s in South Africa the term "woman poet" was considered a term of dismissal. In a review of the collection *Familiar Ground* by Ingrid de Kok, Robert Berold (himself a poet), stated that "it would be a mistake and a subtle put-down to reduce De Kok to a woman poet, or even 'our finest woman poet'".<sup>3</sup> While Berold is attempting to praise De Kok for her formal excellence, his words inadvertently reveal the persistent bias against women as poets. Alicia Ostriker, academic, critic and poet, has noted this prejudice against women in poetry: "To say 'poetess' is and always has been a gentle insult. A poetess is a poet who is sensitive and knows how to feel, perhaps very intensely, but does not know how to think or judge. She has no authority to change our minds. She asks us to bring her flowers and perfume and to console her for her powerlessness and disguise it from her, lest she become sullen; we pretend to respect her."<sup>4</sup> Douglas Livingstone's contemporary South African poem "(on the Unbuttoned Muse)", written tongue-in-cheek, perpetuates nevertheless masculine cultural attitudes towards the woman poet or "poetess":

The Resident Poetess admires the Visitor's Hair.  
 The Resident Poetess tells a Joke about an Aunt.  
 The Visiting Poetess intimates She jet-sets  
     & is paid through a Cultural Grant.  
 The Visiting Poetess has half a Mind to switch  
     To a more comfortable Chair.  
 The Resident Poetess has an uncouth Spouse who sleeps.  
 The Visiting poetess has married the Nadir  
     Of a long Line of Drunken Creeps.  
 The Visiting Poetess is Sick of Vodka  
     & has a Mind to try the Wine.  
 The Resident Poetess is Uncollected & Sad.  
 The Visiting Poetess has four Collections out  
     All of Them, She feels, Not Half Bad.  
 The Resident Poetess thinks the Dry Red should be Fine.  
 The Resident Poetess owns to Deep Desires to sing.  
 The Resident Poetess knows a Gay Poet named Ben.  
 The Visiting Poetess has not heard of him but  
     Wonders What has happened to Men.  
 The Visiting Poetess recalls a Publisher  
     With whom she had a Zipless Thing.  
 The Resident Poetess maintains, even so, he's Fun.  
 The Visiting Poetess is Screwed if She'll sleep with  
     Just any old Son of a Gun.

The Visiting Poetess now announces She  
 Is tired, & wishes She were Dead.  
 The Resident Poetess blots a Tissue to one Eye.  
 The Visiting Poetess lapses into Silence  
 With a long intemperate Sigh.  
 The Resident Poetess coughs & invites her to Bed.

Livingstone's contemporary vision of the woman poet shows her as part of academia, either the "Resident Poetess" or the "Visiting Poetess". But the style of the poem, with its plethora of capital letters, intimates Livingstone's opinion of the technical abilities of women poets. The torrid nature of the content of the poem suggests that women poets are still perceived to be bound to the domain of excessive emotion. Livingstone's poem may be contemporary satire, but it trades on age old stereotypes that trivialise women's efforts at the expense of the serious woman poet.

In order to understand the gender bias in South African English poetry, it is necessary to place such poetry within the larger tradition of English, and specifically British, poetry from which it derives. The attitudes and ideas concerning women and poetry that affect the work of South African women poets were brought to this country by the English colonists in the nineteenth century, and can be traced to their sources in the gendered British cultural and poetic traditions. The cultural politics of gender in British poetry are the foundations of any discussion of the cultural politics of gender in South African English poetry. Revisionist and Feminist scholars and researchers have shown conclusively that the British tradition has been persistently androcentric in nature and has functioned to exclude the feminine voice. I am especially indebted in this study to Joanna Russ whose work *How to Suppress Women's Writing* first suggested to me that the absence of a strong feminine voice in South African poetry might be the result of suppression, and to Elaine Showalter whose *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* first suggested to me the possibility of a "poetry of their own" for women in South Africa. The work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, especially *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* and *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets* enabled me to see the possibilities of developing an extended study of the work of South African women poets. Then I was inspired by the anthologies of women's poetry that have begun to appear, especially Louise Bernikow's *The World Split Open*, Germaine Greer's *Kissing the Rod: An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century British Women's Verse*, Roger Lonsdale's *Eighteenth Century Women Poets*, and Fleur Adcock's *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Women's Poetry*; these were also

instrumental in inspiring me to compile, as part of the research for this study, my own anthology *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women's Poetry*.

### Notes

1. In the mid 1989s public battles on the value of poetry were conducted in the pages of *The Weekly Mail* between Lionel Abrahams and Jeremy Cronin, and between Andries Oliphant and Stephen Watson. In *The Southern African Review of Books* 3(6), (1990, pp.20-21) under the heading "The Politics of Anthologies" Stephen Gray describes the power struggles that went on around the compilation of his *Penguin Book of Southern African Verse*.
2. Guy Butler, *A Book of South African Verse*. London: Oxford University Press, 1959, p.xix.
3. *Upstream*, Spring 1988, p.57.
4. Alicia Ostriker, *Writing Like a Woman*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1986, p.146.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **RE-READING SOUTH AFRICAN POETRY:**

#### **A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

(i) **Women and Poetry in South Africa: A Socio-Political Feminist Reading**

The establishment of a tradition of English "literature" or writing in South Africa was largely a result of the influx of British settlers in the nineteenth century, from 1820 onwards. The Cape Colony had been effectively in the hands of the British since 1795. (The British ruled the Cape from 1795-1803, the Batavian republic administered the Colony until 1806, when it was again taken over by the British and became a British Crown Colony.) The British government encouraged large-scale immigration to the Cape in an attempt to solve its own problems with the black peoples on the eastern frontier. Large numbers of English-speaking settlers arrived in 1820 and thereafter to settle in the eastern Cape in the area around Grahamstown, bringing with them their culture and their literature. The British also annexed Natal in 1844 as a district of the Cape Colony and set up a form of government there with Martin West as the first lieutenant-governor. In the late 1840s Joseph Byrne, an Irish speculator, launched a scheme which brought 2500 British immigrants to Natal, establishing the basis for an English-oriented Natal, founded like the eastern Cape on the principles of British culture and tradition.<sup>1</sup> If Thomas Pringle, one of the 1820 settlers, is recognised as the "father" of South African poetry, the first writer, as such, must certainly be Lady Anne Barnard. Lady Anne, a colourful and energetic woman, was married to Andrew Barnard, secretary to the Governor of the Cape in 1797, Lord Macartney. As Lord Macartney's wife did not accompany him to the Cape, Lady Anne became the "first lady" at the Cape. The letters Lady Anne wrote to Henry Dundas, Secretary for War and the Colonies, and then to Lord Macartney after he left the Cape in November 1798, became famous for their shrewd insight into affairs and played a part in ensuring the recall of the new Governor, Sir George Young, in 1801, for his extravagances and administrative malpractices.<sup>2</sup>

But even in her letters and journals – both of which she knew would be read by many friends and acquaintances – Lady Anne is careful to assume the approved posture of a woman writing in a man's world. Her protestations of female incompetence are fairly frequent, and are at odds with her keen eye and sharp intelligence.<sup>3</sup> Such self-effacing declarations as the following illustrate the constraints on a woman writer, even one as privileged and articulate as Anne Barnard:

I often wish when I hear anything new, curious, or useful, that I could divest myself of that portion of false shame which prevents me from taking out a memorandum book and marking it down while I remember the particulars

which afterwards escape my memory and the thing sinks into oblivion – but for a woman, being ill informed on most subjects, I might have said *All* subjects, to give herself the *air* of wisdom, while she knows how superficial she is, by marking down anything that passes in company, I cannot endure it! it is wilfully drawing on a pair of blew stockings she has no right to wear.<sup>4</sup>

Despite such limiting social constraints on her writing, the quality of her letters and journals would have allowed Lady Anne Barnard a claim to founding status in South African English writing, had not our patriarchal tradition elevated "literary" genres – the poem, novel and play – above other forms of writing such as the letter and the journal, both of which were considered to be literary forms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Possibly part of the reason for their exclusion from the status of serious work by twentieth-century critics is that they are forms particularly identified with women; certainly there are many journals and letters written by South African women in the nineteenth century in libraries and museums, awaiting critics and historians to reveal their rich narratives of women's lives and thoughts. Once critics have enlarged their area of study to include such forms, Lady Anne Barnard will be recognised as the founding "mother" that she is. Lady Anne also wrote poetry, and she is remembered in Britain for her ballad "Auld Robin Gray", a poem about a Scots-woman who is forced to marry an older man although she is in love with another.

Lady Anne Barnard was an exceptional and gifted woman. Born into the privileged aristocracy, she grasped every opportunity that was made available to her to exercise her talents and gifts. For the more ordinary middle and working-class women that came to, or were born in South Africa in the nineteenth century, there were not as many opportunities either to gain an adequate education or, if educated, to express their views or to write poetry. The historical experience of being a pioneer or frontierswoman conditioned the nature of many immigrant women's lives: such women had to be strong and competent enough to survive the hardships of frontier life, yet they were also expected to maintain their "womanly" or "feminine" qualities, as Dorothy Driver notes:

...however much the polar opposites of masculinity and femininity appear to break down under the concept of frontierswoman, which is so obviously a site of contradiction ... the patriarchal balance rights itself again in terms of these carefully constructed opposites ... however much colonial women might have appeared to male observers to be the "models" of emancipation, they continued to act as the repositories of values shed by the male colonist as he played out his duty as frontiersman, aggressive, strong, confident and



commanding. If the myth regarding white men is that they penetrated and tamed the "dark continent", the myth regarding white women is that they made the continent "liveable". On the obvious level, this term refers to their ability to "soften the edges" of colonial rule. According to the culture/nature dichotomy that has been perpetuated in Western rationalist discourse and that associates women with nature, women offer men recovery of their "essential" humanity, the "natural" attribute that has been repressed by the requirements of civilization. In the South African colonial situation, where the Law of the Father has taken hold with particular force and the ideals of masculinity and femininity have been particularly polarized, the humanizing function of women has had a vigorous life in the world of ideas.<sup>5</sup>

This particular ideology is given expression in the following lines from a poem that appeared in *The Cape of Good Hope Literary Gazette* in 1831; the poem is called "On a Lady teaching a Female African Slave", and it draws on the stereotypes of nineteenth-century womanhood:

For here are earth's extremest ends combined,  
 And sweet it is to note how peaceful grows  
 The straggling desert flower, beside the rose –  
 The rose of *England*; and to find  
 The sculptur'd lip of massy bronze, so close  
 To one, (by the deep contrast more refin'd,)  
 The breathing image of a spotless mind.

And sweet to mark with what a docile gaze, –  
 With what a soul-subdu'd and soften'd look  
 Her lustrous eye gleams o'er the Sacred Book!  
 Whose mighty pow'r omnipotent, allays  
 The struggling passions that have fiercely shook  
 The bosoms of her race in other days,  
 And turns the war-song to a song of praise.<sup>6</sup>

Yet it was not ideology alone that confined colonial women to their "feminine" roles; the education they were offered did little to equip them as potential poets and writers. In the rural areas educational opportunities were limited, with children often being taught their "letters" by barely literate parents. A wealthy farmer might employ a governess or an itinerant schoolmaster to educate his children. Equally, a small farm school might offer basic education to the children of poorer farmers and their workers. In all cases the standard of education was not liable to be very high. Olive Schreiner parodies such education in the "school" established by Bonaparte Blenkins in *The Story*

of *an African Farm*. While Lyndall is a fictional character, her tragic life reflects many of the author's feminist concerns. Lyndall's education, both on the farm and later at a girls' boarding school in the city, must have been based on the kind of education that many young colonial girls, such as Schreiner herself, would have experienced. Of her time at boarding school and of her aspirations to literary activity, Lyndall says:

... I have discovered that of all cursed places under the sun, where the hungriest soul can hardly pick up a few grains of knowledge, a girl's boarding school is the worst. They are called finishing schools, and the name tells accurately what they are. They finish everything but imbecility and weakness, and that they cultivate. They are nicely adapted machines for experimenting on the question, "Into how little space a human soul can be crushed?" I have seen some souls so compressed that they would have fitted into a small thimble, and found room to move there – wide room. A woman who has been for many years at one of those places carries the mark of the beast on her till she dies, although she may expand a little afterwards, when she breathes in the free world ... Can you form an idea ... of what it must be to be shut up with cackling old women, who are without knowledge of life, without love of the beautiful, without strength, to have your soul captured by them? It is suffocation only to breathe the air they breathe; but I made them give me a room. I told them I should leave, and they knew I came there on my own account; so they gave me a bedroom without the companionship of one of those things that were having their brains slowly diluted and squeezed out of them. I did not learn music, because I had no talent; and when the drove made cushions, and hideous flowers that a machine would have made better in five minutes, I went to my room. With the money saved from such work I bought books and newspapers, and at night I sat up. I read, and epitomized what I read; and I found time to write some plays, and find out how hard it is to make your thoughts look anything but imbecile fools when you paint them with ink on paper.<sup>7</sup>

Lyndall discovers what Olive Schreiner knew – that a girl or woman who desired an adequate education in the nineteenth century must largely be her own teacher since society made little provision for women with intellectual and literary ambitions. While their brothers in the middle class continued to be educated for the church or the professions, colonial women were educated for their "feminine" roles as wives and mothers and to be the bearers of the "feminine" values of passivity and dependence.

That the education of girls in British Colonial South Africa was indeed as poor as Schreiner suggests is borne out by Sylvia Vietzen in her study of education for girls in



Natal. As Vietzen notes, the practices in Natal can probably be viewed as common in areas under British rule:

The study of girls' education in Natal during the period 1837 to 1902 must be seen in several ways ... in a yet wider perspective, it is a study in the structure and functioning of the society of Victorian Britain. There was an "English-speaking culture", a "common civilization" which spread through many parts of the world in the nineteenth century ... girls' education reflected and perpetuated the woman's position and role in society.<sup>8</sup>

The education offered to English-speaking girls in South Africa was aimed at inculcating Victorian ideals of femininity, and preparing girls for their destined roles as wives and mothers. Vietzen observes that "...the frequency, content and tone of the advertisements [for girls' schools] in contemporary newspapers suggest a remarkable similarity between the ideas and attitudes surrounding girls' education in Natal and those typical of the corresponding period in England".<sup>9</sup> The education offered at these schools was aimed solely at producing "accomplished" young ladies for the marriage market, rather than literary or intellectual prodigies, as Vietzen notes...

Such girls' schools as existed were usually farcical. They aimed at turning out accomplished rather than educated women, for any seriousness of intent or instruction was regarded as highly unbecoming and dangerous. A "blue stocking" or "strong-minded" woman was a subject of intense horror, ridicule and reproach ... a typical curriculum at a "ladies" school (for middle class or privileged girls) included several of English, Arithmetic, Drawing, Painting, Pianoforte, Dancing, French, Italian, Singing, Needlework.<sup>10</sup>

Such courses were available to young ladies at the major centres of Durban and Pietermaritzburg, and it is reasonable to suppose that much the same kind of curriculum was offered at other centres such as Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Grahamstown. Indeed, Cowper Rose, in his book *Four Years in Southern Africa* published in 1829, mentions "a seminary for young ladies" as among the features of life in Grahamstown as early as the 1820s.<sup>11</sup>

Towards the end of the nineteenth century there was increased pressure for "higher education" for girls in South Africa, probably as a result of the establishment of colleges for women in England and America. The opening of secondary schools in England – as opposed to ladies' finishing schools – and colleges for women in America was the result of growing Feminist insistence that girls and women should be given access to formal education. In the later decades of the century, intelligent and capable

young women were even allowed to attend courses at universities and to take degrees. However, women who managed to attain intellectual parity with men were often regarded as dangerous oddities. Elizabeth Longford recounts that Annie Besant was refused permission to continue her botany studies in the Royal Botanical Gardens in Regents Park for fear that she might corrupt the Curator's daughters who worked there.<sup>12</sup> Yet the secondary schools, such as the Cheltenham Ladies College, and the colleges such as Girton and Newnham in England and Mount Holyoke in America, gained in popularity because their aim, in general, was not academic excellence but rather the education of girls for their domestic roles, to produce informed and competent wives and mothers (or to produce teachers who would be competent enough to instill these values in their pupils). In South Africa, the opening of the Huguenot Seminary in Wellington in 1874 (with a later branch at Greytown in Natal), met the need for higher education for girls. The seminary was recognised as a college in terms of the Higher Education Act in 1898.<sup>13</sup> Yet despite its status as a "college", the education provided was essentially only at a secondary school level. The college was strictly a Christian establishment open to upper- and middle-class girls, and in line with its Christian character it emphasised the domestic role of women. Run under the auspices of the Dutch Reformed Church, the college's system of education was based on that of Mount Holyoke in America, as the Reverent Andrew Murray acknowledged in his opening speech:

I have often been asked how it is that I, with my own close connection with Scotland, was led to go, not there, but to America for teachers. I gladly answer the question for the opportunity it gives of explaining what really is the Mount Holyoke system developed by Mary Lyon.

The first thing that struck me was the wonderful way in which she gave the head and heart and hand an equal place in her training. *She believed that women should receive the best intellectual training possible to enable them to fill their place aright.* With this she believed in *the cultivation of a truly moral and religious character* to be of supreme importance. While she aimed at the highest mental culture, she was never content until her pupils had learnt to seek first the kingdom of God. She laboured as definitely for this as for the literary success of her institution. With these high aims in head and heart, she combined most remarkably the culture of the hand. *She honoured domestic work*, not only as a duty to be willingly accepted when it was a necessity, but as a means of developing one's whole nature, as a healthful recreation from mental fatigue, and as fitting for true independence, and power to rule or help others.<sup>14</sup> (My italics.)

If a young woman was fortunate enough to survive her narrow formal education and was able to educate herself to a level of literary capability, there was still

overwhelming social pressure for her to abandon her intellectual aspirations and to marry and raise a family. The following extract on "Good Wives and Good Husbands", taken from the *Cape of Good Hope Literary Gazette* of 1833, reflects the nineteenth century veneration for the nuclear family, with its fixed gender roles, as the foundation of society:

Good wives and good husbands are essential to social happiness and public morals. From them infancy derives its first impressions, youth its morals, and society the character of its members. On them rest in a very high degree the pillars of human happiness. Moral or social delinquencies in them invariably exert, to a greater or less extent, a pernicious influence upon others, and not infrequently give their hue of impiety to the moral complexion of succeeding generations. But if our views are bounded by present considerations alone, as there is no relation so intimate as that of husband and wife, so there is none on which the best interests of mankind are so much depending.<sup>15</sup>

The same journal offered a stern warning to women who might resist marriage; not only were they shirking their responsibilities to the community, but they were also placing themselves in considerable personal and moral danger:

... How helpless is a solitary female! how many real dangers surround her; and how are these perils multiplied by solitariness! A single man has a thousand engagements abroad: a woman, if single, has little diversion from thought, and broods over real and imaginary evils. And inferior is she reckoned to the female who sustains the character of a wife and a parent, and is performing her duty to the world, and is the source of usefulness to the community.<sup>16</sup>

The writer cannot conceive of a woman using her solitude for intellectual activity as a man might, but sees her rather "brooding" over "evils". The *Gazette* also offered guidelines for the roles of husband and wife. These are informative to the contemporary reader because *both* focus on the conduct of the woman: the wife must conduct herself in the approved submissive and dependent manner, while the husband's role seems to be to ensure that she does just that. The excessive length of the section on wives demonstrates the way in which nineteenth-century women were entrapped in rules and codes of behaviour that did not apply to men:

A Good Wife. — The good wife is one who, ever mindful of the solemn contract she has entered into, is strictly and conscientiously virtuous, constant, and faithful to her husband; chaste, pure, and unblemished in every thought, word, or deed: *she is humble and modest from reason and*

*from conviction, submissive from choice, and obedient from inclination; what she acquires by love and tenderness, she preserves by prudence and discretion: she makes it her business to serve and her pleasure to oblige her husband, as conscious that everything which promotes his happiness must in the end contribute to her own: her tenderness relieves his cares; her affection softens his distress; her good humour and complacency lessens and subdues his afflictions; "She openeth her mouth," as Solomon says, "with wisdom, and her tongue is the law of kindness: she looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness: her children rise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her." Lastly, as a good pious Christian, she looks up with an eye of gratitude to the great Dispenser and Disposer of all things, to the Husband of the widow, and Father of the fatherless, entreating his divine favour and assistance in this and every other moral and religious duty. (My italics.)*

A Good Husband. – The good husband is one who, wedded not by interest but by choice, is constant as well from inclination as from principle: he treats his wife with delicacy as a woman, with tenderness as a friend: he attributes her folly to her weakness, her imprudence to her inadvertency; he passes them over therefore with good nature, and pardons them with indulgence: all his care and industry are employed for her welfare; all his strength and power are exerted for her support and protection; he is more anxious to preserve his own character and reputation, because hers is blended with it; lastly, the good husband is pious and religious, that he may animate her faith by practice, and enforce the precepts of Christianity by his own example.<sup>17</sup>

These guidelines reflect quite clearly that in the mid-nineteenth century the belief that women must be controlled by, and submissive to their husbands, was still a vital part of the dominant ideology. This traditional attitude towards women, dating back to the Renaissance and through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, existed in uneasy tension with the developing feminist movement of the latter part of the nineteenth century which produced, in England and America, the "new woman" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The late nineteenth-century woman in South Africa was caught between "duty" and family, her "natural" role, and the possibilities of achievement so tantalisingly glimpsed in the careers of exceptional women such as Josephine Butler, Annie Besant and Mary Kingsley, and in the literary field, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Harriet Beecher Stowe, George Eliot and Christina Rossetti.<sup>18</sup> Yet for the average middle- or working-class woman in South Africa, her education alone would hardly have qualified her for poethood, and it is no surprise that the first women



to publish collections in this country in the decade of the 1880s were generally upper-class and aristocratic women, educated in their countries of origin and sometimes only on extended visits to South Africa. Before 1880 there was not a great deal of poetic activity by writers of either sex, as Miller and Sergeant observe: "Early South African verse is far too much the work of old and middle-aged men. An unusually large proportion of it was written by devout clergymen and their friends..."<sup>19</sup> However, Michael Chapman has shown that apart from Thomas Pringle and the "devout clergyman" school – who had the education and the opportunity to write – there was also a vigorous sub-culture of settler poetry:

In particular, [Andrew Geddes] Bain and his contemporary, Frederic Brooks, had exploited the rhythms of popular song in order to offer trenchant comment – from the vantage point of the "uneducated" settler – on conditions and British Colonial policies at the Cape... But perhaps understandably, a small, insecure English-speaking intelligentsia, excluded by circumstance from the literary centre of the English world and subscribing as they did to British-humanist values, could see in the personae of Bain and Brooks only an anti-liberal sentiment rather than an ironical check on the humanitarian zeal of the missionary. Instead of welcoming an element of wicked irreverence, they looked for a publicly responsible poetry, the language and tones of which derived from British High Culture.<sup>20</sup>

Later in the century, the opening of the diamond diggings at Kimberley and the goldfields of the Transvaal also gave rise to a subculture of digger verse and ballads. However, in serious circles, it was the poetry of "British High Culture" that prevailed.

The opportunities for publication of one's poetry in South Africa in the early and mid nineteenth century were, in any event, largely limited to the various literary and general journals that came and went with varying degrees of success, such as, for example, A.A. Jardine's *Cape of Good Hope Literary Gazette* (1830-1835), James Fitzpatrick's *The Cape of Good Hope Literary Magazine* (1847-1848), William Brittain's *The Cape Monthly Magazine* (1857-?), or to one of the many newspapers, the most interesting being *Sam Sly's African Journal* (1843-1851). In reviewing such publications for examples of poetry by South African women, the researcher is confronted with a number of problems. Some editors, such as Jardine, often reprinted items from overseas publications without acknowledging their sources.<sup>21</sup> Also, because of the social pressures already discussed, very few women poets published under their own names, preferring either to remain anonymous or to use the designation "a lady", in which case verification of authorship is almost impossible. Most of the poems accepted

for publication from such women were of the traditional type of "female" poetry popularised by British women poets Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon, and dealt with "approved" women's topics that reflected the women's position within the patriarchal family unit, such as "My Mother's Sentiments" which appeared under the byline "anonymous" in the *S.A. Advocate and Cape Town Spectator* of 2 January 1843:

A little stream that's never dry  
 When summer suns are glowing;  
 That, when the wintry storm sweeps by,  
 Is never overflowing;  
 Such is the wealth that I implore,  
 And God has given me such, and more.

Daughters more excellent than fair:  
 A son not great but good;  
 Servants with whom I've learned to bear,  
 Whatever be their mood;  
 In peace with these, in love with those,  
 I calmly live, and have no foes.

A house for comfort, not too small,  
 Not large enough for pride;  
 A garden, and a garden wall,  
 A little lake beside;  
 In these I find so sweet a home,  
 That not a wish have I to roam.

A little land to graze my cow,  
 Whose milk supplies my table;  
 A warm sty for my good old sow;  
 And for my nags a stable:  
 All have their space for food and play,  
 And all are glad – both I, and they.

I feed the poor man in his cot,  
 The beggar at my gate;  
 And, thankful for my quiet lot,  
 I envy not the great:  
 But rather praise my God on high  
 Happy to live, prepared to die.<sup>22</sup>

Another problem that the researcher confronts is that men often appropriated a female persona, for a variety of reasons. In "The Souchong Table, or Says she, and says I; Extract of a Letter from Miss Cherubina Snowdrop, of Bouquet-street, Cape Town,

to Miss Patty Cowslip, of Tranquil Dale, Albany", published in *The Cape of Good Hope Literary Gazette*, the poet adopts the persona of a young woman in order to derive humour from ridicule of the supposedly superficial level of women's activities and conversation:

Last Monday week, we went to tea  
 (Mama and I) with Mrs G.  
 Fanny was there, and Miss Ann Brown  
 The greatest flirts in all the town.  
 At first we all were somewhat shy;  
 Mama felt cold and so did I: –  
 Indeed that room, sit where you will  
 Has draught enough to turn a mill.  
 ...  
 Says G. "There's dreadful doings still  
 In that affair about the will;  
 For now the folks in George's street  
 Dont speak to Higgs, when they meet!"  
 "Pray, ma'am" says I, "has poor Miss A  
 Been left as handsome as they say?"  
 "My dear," says she, "tis no such thing;  
 She'd nothing but a mourning ring,  
 I'm positive," says Mrs G ...  
 So then we laughed, and drank our tea.<sup>23</sup>

Possibly the poem is a satire of some particular event in Cape Town involving an inheritance.

The masculine tradition of attaching women's names to salacious verses, originating in seventeenth-century Britain, appeared to be alive in South Africa, and some poems bearing women's names are probably of this genre. For example, *Sam Sly's African Journal* of 12 October, 1843 published a poem entitled "A Heart to Be Let" in which an available bachelor advertised for a lady companion. One of the replies, published on the 19th October, was from one "Dolly Dubbs", reputed to be aboard a steamer docked in Cape Town, en route to India! "Miss Dubbs" has obviously seen life, and her reply is suggestive and suggesting:

My charming Captain, whom no hearts have sighed on  
 (I'm quite enraptured with your manly speeches,  
 For so I guess, by finding that you're nigh done,  
 And feel disposed this hour to "wear the breeches"  
 So that on such a man I could be tied on,

Until I'd worn them out, or cracked the stitches,  
 Be pleased to drop a line, if you're no dreamer  
 To Dolly Dubbs on board the *Bentinck* Steamer.

I am, myself, a lass of *high* descent,  
 My pedigree are traced *above* the "Flood",  
 My father is on chimney-sweeping bent;  
 My grandpa was a *Tar* of noble blood;  
 (With such professions and such bold intent,  
 Men most "aspiring" must be understood;)  
 Besides all this, my native charms you'll spy,  
 Are such as fail not to attract the eye.

Since you're not nice, you'll surely overlook,  
 Nor mind a slight protuberance on the back;  
 Or eyes—I warrant you none ever took  
 For green, or blue, but of decided *black*;  
 Altho *I've* tried to wash them – and the cook—  
 From the foul dyeings of the sooty sack,  
 But I've got that which changes all its wrapp'd in,  
 I've got the "*Dibbs*"—the "*Dibbs*"—my worthy Captain.<sup>24</sup>

It seems obvious that "Dolly Dubbs" was created as a reproof to the "gentleman" who was so vulgar as to advertise for a companion in a newspaper. His common actions must be seen to elicit a response from a common woman, – a disease-ridden dockyard prostitute of dubious origin – as "Dolly" notes: "With such professions and such bold intent/Men most 'aspiring' must be understood." It is equally apparent from the tongue-in-cheek tone of the poem that "Dolly Dubbs" is a pseudonym and is not the real name of the poet.

Bearing in mind these problems with the identification of poetry by women in early journals, it seems more productive to focus on collections of poetry published by women where authorship is not in doubt. The earliest collection appears to be Esther Falconer's *Poems* published in Grahamstown in 1884, followed by Mary Louisa Acutt's *Poems* of 1888 published in Durban. In 1889 Anna de Brémont published *Love Poems*, followed in 1892 by *Sonnets and Love Poems*; Kate Scanlen published *Lost in the Karroo and Other Poems* (1892), Harriet King *Pretoria* in 1896, Caroline Goodenough *Natal Lilies and Other Poems* (1897) and M.E. Barber *The Erythrina Tree* in 1898. In the early years of the new century collections were also published by Edith King, Alice Mackay, Lady Charlotte Moor, Carrie Thackwell and Alice Jane Briggs. Not a great deal is known about these women, the founding mothers of women's poetry in South



Africa, yet it seems that their common link was generally their status as upper and middle-class women with a degree of education and opportunity. Anna de Brémont was the wife of an itinerant French nobleman, Comte León de Brémont; Caroline Goodenough, on the evidence of her poetry, was raised and educated in America before settling in Natal; Edith King was educated to University level in England and then came back to South Africa as an art teacher; however M.E. Barber was raised and educated in South Africa, as was Charlotte Moor, the daughter of a Natal magistrate who married Sir Frederick Robert Moor, prime minister of Natal, in 1878. Both Anna de Brémont and Charlotte Moor were also novelists, while Edith King is better known in South Africa as a painter.

In keeping with their status as upper middle-class "ladies", several of these women conformed to the tradition, begun in the seventeenth century by Katherine Phillips, of having their work introduced by men, and of apologising for their temerity in publishing their work. In his introduction to M.E. Barber's collection, *The Erythrina Tree*, one R. Trimen praises the poet's intellectual ability, for it appears that she was also a naturalist of some renown:

Throughout her long life she has amply demonstrated her devotion to nature, her high powers of observation, and those rare faculties of conscientious accuracy and untiring patience which mark the true naturalist. Her love of plants rapidly grew into enthusiastic botanical work, and the annals of Kew and the volumes of the *Flora Capensis*, etc. will always testify to the scientific value of her herbaria observations. When she turned her attention more closely to the animal world, her specimens and notes were highly prized by zoologists, and her contributions to ornithology and entomology especially found full recognition in the works of those branches published in South Africa and in Europe. She maintained for a long series of years an extensive correspondence with men of science in England and elsewhere, as well as in South Africa; and the interest and value of her letters were greatly enhanced by her excellent figures of specimens – samples only of the noble series of coloured drawings to which she was constantly adding with unwearied industry and skill.<sup>25</sup>

Yet despite this praise of a woman who was obviously intelligent and talented, Trimen still feels it necessary to stress that Barber, a true "lady", wrote poetry only for the amusement of her friends and with no vulgar thought of publication:

The verses, grave and gay, which are here collected and printed for presentation to relatives and friends, will be welcomed and prized by all who have been so fortunate as to know their gifted authoress – Mrs F.W.

Barber, whose many-sided mental powers and loving true-heartedness they clearly reflect ... "Love, honour, troops of friends", she had deservedly won; and the simple verses here brought together – written as occasion prompted from time to time, for amusement and relaxation merely, and with no view to publication – will be cherished as an illustration of the versatile powers of one so widely and truly held dear.<sup>26</sup>

According to Trimen, Barber was an accomplished woman who retained the female virtues of "loving true-heartedness", whose literary activities were merely "for amusement and relaxation" and whose work was published for "relatives and friends". Both the quality of Barber's writing and the fact that her collection found its way into libraries contradicts Trimen's statements, and indicates too that the stereotype of the reticent "lady" poet, first noted in the writing of Lady Ann Barnard, was still current in Barber's time and was exerting its pressures on women writers.

In 1906 Alice Mackay wrote the introduction to her own volume of poems, *Song of the London Man; Song of South Africa and Other Poems*. Yet she too explains that her enterprise has been sanctioned and approved by respected males:

I ... feel it necessary to publicly express my warm gratitude to E. Laver-Aldham, Esq of Highams House, Essex, who, having read some of my verses printed in magazines, and liking them, said he could wish to see them collected in volume form. On the strength of having met my late husband abroad, and of knowing that he too had wished me to collect my poems, Mr Laver-Aldham generously came forward with truly disinterested kindness, and urged me to publish, and to permit him to bear all the expenses incidental to publication. This I at first hesitated to do, but ultimately accepted; and it is to him I am indebted for the publication of this volume ... Personally I have now but little ambition to collect my fugitive pieces into more permanent form; but it was my husband's frequently expressed wish, and moreover he reminded me several times that I had the sanction of a high authority for doing so; for when a few of my girlish efforts were submitted by a friend to the late Lord Tennyson, the poet perused them in MS and sent me a letter of kind advice and encouragement...<sup>27</sup>

She goes on to apologise for her supposed unworthiness to undertake the project of presenting her work to the public: "...I fear 'The Muses' are not too worthily represented. I am sadly conscious of the limitations of my own particular Muse."<sup>28</sup> Her preface also includes a lengthy explanation of her domestic circumstances – she nursed an invalid husband for nine years – to explain any shortcomings in her work: "...[the later poems] were nearly all composed under circumstances which either

involved the 'burning of the midnight oil' when the day's heavy duties were done, or the snatching of a few rare moments of leisure amid the performance of those duties."<sup>29</sup> (Mackay's words must also have rung true for many aspirant women writers who were constrained by domestic duties.) Despite her many disclaimers, the serious way in which Mackay regarded her poetry is suggested by her conclusion, where she quotes Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

In conclusion, I would fain quote the earnest words of one of the noblest and most lofty-souled of our English poetesses – Mrs Barrett Browning, where she says: – "If it must be said of me that I have contributed immemorable verses to the many rejected by the age, it cannot at least be said that I have done so in a light and irresponsible spirit. I have done my work, so far, as work – not as mere hand and head work, apart from the personal being – but as the completest expression of that being which I could attain, and as work I offer it to the public, feeling its shortcomings more deeply than any of my readers, because measured from the height of my aspiration."<sup>30</sup>

As if aware that she has covered an inordinate amount of paper attempting to explain herself, Mackay apologises for her apologies in a note added to the preface, stressing that it was not *her* desire to be prolix, but that as a lady she was bowing to the wishes of others:

I am conscious that my preface is rather lengthy, but may plead in extenuation that the preface I originally wrote, and even had set up by the printer, was a model of brevity, merely consisting of some necessary expression of thanks where thanks were due; but to please some kind-hearted and intimate literary friends, who begged me to write a longer preface stating at least a few of the many drawbacks I have encountered in my literary aspirations, I at last consented to substitute the above for the shorter one.<sup>31</sup>

In reading Mackay's introduction the contemporary reader must be struck by the contradictory and conflicting impulses that it betrays: Mackay is serious about her poetry, classifying it as "work", not just idle "accomplishment", and she quotes Tennysonian approval of her efforts, yet she also feels that she must denigrate herself and apologise for her presumption. These contradictions reveal, quite clearly, the predicament of the woman writing poetry at the turn of the century, a predicament involving a conflict between literary aspiration and social and sexual decorum.

In the twentieth century there have been many apparent changes in attitudes towards women and their literary activities. In South Africa, as in Britain, women have a greater variety of opportunities: white women were given the vote in South Africa in 1930, and as the century unfolded white middle-class women were given access to university education and to the professional and commercial worlds. On a superficial level it appears as if the problems faced by white women poets, at least, up to the end of the nineteenth century had been removed: white women, if they so desired, had access to education equal to that of men (at least at university level), and there were no barriers preventing them from publishing their work on an equal footing with men. However, as I shall show, their access to recognition in the world of letters was still largely barred by prejudice, whether blatant or covert.

After the hostilities of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1904), South Africa became a Union. The unification of the four provinces produced, for the first time, a sense of a national South African identity. Poets and writers, from Francis Carey Slater onward, began to attempt to create an indigenous body of poetry specific to the South African context. Indeed, recent criticism of South African poetry in English, such as that produced by Guy Butler and Michael Chapman, has tended to emphasise the specificity of our poetry as distinct from its British counterpart.<sup>32</sup> While this has been a healthy response to an academy that tended to be overly colonial in outlook, it has obscured the close relationship between our own academic and literary traditions and those of Britain from which they derive. The common link between South Africa and Britain in the twentieth century in this regard is the institutionalisation of English as a discipline, and the appropriation of literary authority by university-educated literary critics. The universities now function as the custodians of the literary heritage in both countries, and while they have become embattled in recent years, for most of the century the concepts of British High Culture – Arnoldian "touchstones" and the Leavisian "great tradition" – have been the cornerstones of the academic study of English.

In his essay "The Rise of English" Terry Eagleton points out that in England the institutionalisation of English was closely linked with the perceived failure of religion in the late nineteenth century:

This was particularly worrying for the Victorian ruling class, because religion is for all kinds of reasons an extremely effective form of ideological control ... It provides an excellent social "cement" encompassing pious peasant, enlightened middle-class liberal and theological intellectual in a

single organisation ... Finally religion, at least in its Victorian forms, is a pacifying influence, fostering meekness, self-sacrifice and the contemplative inner life.<sup>33</sup>

Eagleton points to Matthew Arnold as the key figure in the attempt to substitute the discourse of English literature for that of religion as a "social cement" or "pacifier". The middle class was to be given access to a form of education similar to that of the aristocracy, who were ceasing to be the dominant class in England. They, in turn, would pass what they had learnt on to those beneath them – the working class – and, as Eagleton suggests, "since literature, as we know, deals in universal human values rather than in such historical trivia as civil wars, the oppression of women or the dispossession of the English peasantry, it could serve to place in cosmic perspective the petty demands of working people for decent living conditions or greater control over their own lives".<sup>34</sup> However, of greater importance to my discussion, is the connection that Eagleton makes between women and the institutionalisation of English studies:

The working class was not the only oppressed layer of Victorian society at whom "English" was specifically beamed. English literature, reflected a Royal Commission witness in 1877, might be considered a suitable subject for "women ... and the second – and third – rate men who ... became schoolmasters". The "softening" and "humanising" effects of English, terms recurrently used by its early proponents, are within the existing stereotypes of gender clearly feminine. The rise of English in England ran parallel to the gradual, grudging admission of women to the institutions of higher education; and since English was an untaxing sort of affair, concerned with the finer feelings rather than with the more virile topics of *bona fide* academic "disciplines", it seemed a convenient sort of non-subject to palm off on the ladies, who were in any case excluded from science and the professions. Sir Arthur Quiller Couch, first Professor of English at Cambridge University, would open with the word "Gentlemen" lectures addressed to a hall filled largely with women.<sup>35</sup>

Eagleton goes on to note that "modern male lecturers may have changed their manners [but] the ideological conditions which make English a popular University subject for women to read have not".<sup>36</sup> Eagleton's analysis also applies to the conditions of tertiary level English studies in South Africa, where the subject has been, and continues to be, a subject taught largely by men to a student body composed largely of women. It continues to be perceived as a "feminine", second-rate subject, not on a par with the "masculine" scientific and technological disciplines. In reaction to the feminisation of their roles, the males who control English studies have attempted to masculinise their subject. Again this has historical precedent in England:

If English had its feminine aspect, however, it also acquired a masculine one as the century drew on. The era of the academic establishment of English is also the era of high imperialism in England. As British capitalism became threatened and progressively outstripped by its younger German and American rivals, the squalid, undignified scramble of too much capital chasing too few overseas territories, which was to culminate in 1914 in the first imperialist world war, created the urgent need for a sense of national mission and identity. What was at stake was less English *literature* than *English* literature: our great "national poets" Shakespeare and Milton, the sense of an "organic" national tradition and identity to which new recruits could be admitted by the study of humane letters.<sup>37</sup>

This masculinisation of literary studies had its counterpart in South Africa, where South African academics suffering from colonial "inferiority complexes" were fiercely protective of the "great tradition" of English literature that they had inherited. They resisted the concept of an indigenous body of writing worthy of transmission to students, and saw their mission to be to teach the "great" works of their English heritage. English was seen to be the masculine and strong subject, while South African literature in English was seen to be feminine and weak. This can be substantiated by the fact that although South African writing in English had a history of more than a century, the beginnings of the "rise" of South African literature in our universities can be roughly charted to the late 1950s and early 1960s, the period when South Africa became a Republic and cut its ties with Britain by leaving the commonwealth.

The importation of academic English studies as a literary discipline meant that the critical methods in use at English universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, were also adopted here without question. A young woman studying literature, or more specifically poetry, with the idea of becoming a poet herself, would have been taught about the "greats" of English literature. From F.R. Leavis she would have discovered that there was a "great tradition" of English texts, and that these works embodied the very highest literary and moral standards and were valuable in shaping the moral and intellectual fibre of those who were fortunate enough to study English. She would have been taught that these middle-class values were "universal" and were held dear by all intelligent and educated persons (regardless of race or gender). From Matthew Arnold she would have learnt that in the tradition of great poetry there were some poets whose work was "classic", as Arnold termed it, and that these classics could be used as "touchstones" to evaluate one's own poetry:

Indeed there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. Of course we are not to require this other poetry to resemble them; it may be very dissimilar. But if we have any tact we shall find them, when we have lodged them well in our minds, an infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry which we may place beside them.<sup>38</sup>

At this stage, the aspirant woman poet might have noticed that Arnold refers to "great masters", and that all the poets he rates as worthy to be "classics" or to provide "touchstones" are men. From T.S. Eliot she would have learnt much the same thing, for in his influential essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Eliot proposes that:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead ... the existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them.<sup>39</sup>

Eliot, like Arnold, refers to existing "monuments", the edifices in question being the work of male poets. Indeed, if women had been admitted to the universities as students of poetry, until very recently they had not been allowed a critical voice. Critics and academics continued to ignore their present or past efforts in poetry; the social and educational disadvantages suffered by women poets prior to the twentieth century ensured that they had not been able to produce poetry worthy of "monumentalisation". Any critic who pointed to the disadvantages suffered by women poets and who might suggest that value could be found in the simple expression of women's difficulties and problems would again come up against Eliot's erudite presence in criticism, for Eliot had decreed that "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from personality ... The emotion of art is impersonal".<sup>40</sup> Not only was the personal banished from poetry, but the only type of poetry considered worthy of note by Eliot was the complex and difficult poetry produced by educated men, hence his warm praise of seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry and his proposal for the present:

Our civilisation comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more



comprehensive, more allusive, *more indirect*, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.<sup>41</sup> (My italics.)

The aspirant woman poet, after her education at a South African university, would have learnt that all the "great" poets of the English language were men and that poetry was not personal and emotional – not an expression of one's problems – but rather impersonal and indirect. It would have seemed to such a woman that the precondition for a poetic career was the ability to assimilate the masculine tradition and enter into a textual dialogue with this tradition. There were no acknowledged "foremothers" or "grandmothers" worthy of monumentalisation, to whom the woman poet could refer; poetic acceptance was predicated on her ability to alienate herself from her own experience as a woman, in the historical as well as the personal sense, and to think and write like a man. If the aspirant woman poet were called Adèle Naudé, she would have reacted with a measure of ironic despair: her poem "Lament" articulates the predicament of the woman poet writing within the masculine tradition. However, since she is unable to analyse her situation in gender terms, Naudé ascribes her difficulties to her own failure of the imagination:

How easy it was once to be  
A poet when the pool was new.  
I dive for pearls of imagery  
But oft lift a half-soled shoe.

My pile of footwear grows with time  
Far greater than a rummage dump.  
Its hard to press through eye sublime  
When as a poet I've got the hump.

As Naudé goes on to describe her problems it becomes clear that her "hump" or block is a result of her inability to provide work that, as Eliot prescribed, must seem "new" in relation to previous male poetry:

Only a genius or an ass  
Would write to-day of daffodils –  
"Keep off the green Wordsworthian grass"  
Is rainbowed over all the hills.

And even when I plumb the sewer  
Of the modern dam of slimes,  
Its hard to fish a word that's newer  
For coupling up my frequent rhymes.

...



Since Campbell's cantered down the gamut  
 Of the dictionary's course,  
 I must needs trot when I would gallop  
 Even when I've found a horse.

...

Now Butler's curtaining is shaken  
 By the coming of a dawn,  
 That image too its call has taken  
 And all my draperies are drawn.

So if, like Uys, I stand accused  
 Of theft from *heinde en van verre*  
 I would not be at all amused  
 For if I've done it, it's in error.

And if my spring dries on the shelf,  
 Choked with the dust of uneasiness,  
 It is because I find myself  
 A dumb, wordsworthless poetess.<sup>42</sup>

A woman poet, such as Naudé, must inevitably find herself "dumb" and searching for words when attempting to enter into a dialogue with men in a male poetic language which articulates men's history and experience.

Despite such obstacles it is to women's credit that they continued to write poetry and publish their work. In fact, it is possible to suggest that as poets in South Africa, women have contributed equal amounts of creative energy as their male counterparts, producing more than a hundred individual collections in this century. Yet most of this work has been lost and forgotten, not only because it failed to measure up to the "touchstones" of the past, but also because it has often failed to qualify for selection into the anthologies that have shaped our conception of the South African poetic tradition in English. The ubiquitous anthology has become a feature of poetic life in the twentieth century, and its appearance in the late nineteenth century is certainly linked to the institutionalisation of English studies: the anthology has become the means whereby the "best" poetry can be selected and reproduced for the consumption of the reader or student. In South Africa the first anthology appeared in 1887 and was compiled by Alexander Wilmot. Notable landmark anthologies have been those produced by John Purves (1915), Francis Carey Slater (1920 and 1945), Roy MacNab and Charles Gulston (1948), Roy MacNab (1958), Guy Butler (1959 and 1979), Jack

Cope and Uys Krige (1968), Michael Chapman (1981), Stephen Gray (1976 and 1984), Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (1982) and Michael Chapman and Achmat Dangor (1982). The common factor among all these works is that the editors are all men. While women poets have been represented in these anthologies it is with varying fortunes, and always as a minority: in Slater's anthology of 1945 there are 54 male poets and 16 female, in MacNab and Gulston's 1948 work there are 61 men and 43 women, in Roy MacNab's 1958 work 26 men and 5 women, while in Michael Chapman's 1981 anthology there are 127 men and 10 women. The academic critical tradition taught in universities has largely been established by means of critical introductions to the above-mentioned anthologies, particularly those by Slater, Butler and Chapman, and by critical studies such as Miller and Sergeant's *A Critical Survey of South African Poetry in English* (1957), Peter Wilhelm and James Polley's *Poetry South Africa* (1976) and, more recently, Michael Chapman's award-winning study, *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective* (1984). It is to be expected that the critical discourse of South African poetry, created and applied by men, will be one that favours men and male experience at the expense of women and their experience.

The way in which women poets have "vanished" from our poetic history can be observed by a closer examination of the works produced in any decade of this century. Consider, for example, the history of the Veldsinger's Club, probably the most important and energetic group of poets in South Africa in the period 1908-1915. The club consisted of a core membership of practising poets, but the monthly meetings were also attended by interested persons. The membership included both men and women: Francis Ernley Walrond, George Murray Johnstone, Denys Lefebvre, Robert A. Nelson, William Blane, Alice Mabel Alder, Mary Byron, Beatrice Allhusen, and Theodore Hermann van Beek. The club produced a volume of poetry in 1910, *Veldsinger's Verse*, and many members had individual collections published, including Beatrice Allhusen and Mary Byron who each published two collections.<sup>43</sup> Yet it is the male poets – Francis Ernley Walrond, Denys Lefebvre, William Blane and George Murray Johnstone – who have survived in anthology after anthology, while Mary Byron and Beatrice Allhusen have not. While their contemporaries were prepared to accept them as equal partners, subsequent critics and anthologists have quietly excised them from our poetic history.

A similar pattern of critical blindness to women's work can be observed in a consideration of the 1920s: Francis Carey Slater produced *The Karroo and Other Poems* (1924) and the better known *Drought* (1929), Roy Campbell established his reputation

with *The Flaming Terrapin* (1924) and later *The Wayzgoose* (1928), while William Plomer published his first collection *Notes for Poems* in 1927. All three men have found a place in our academic tradition, yet in the same period at least twelve South African women also published collections, including Mary Byron, Ethel Campbell – the sister of Roy Campbell – and a promising new young poet, Mary Morison Webster, whose first collection *Tomorrow* (1922) appeared under the auspices of Harold Monro and the Poetry Bookshop. Monro was also nurturing the talent of the young William Plomer at this time, yet while Plomer, Campbell and Slater endure as major figures, their female contemporaries do not. This process is repeated in the 1930s: Campbell published *Adamastor* (1930) and Slater *Dark Folk* (1935), both seminal collections, yet of the approximately fourteen collections produced by women poets, not one has assumed any critical importance. The 1920s and 1930s were particularly fertile periods for South African English poetry, as was the decade of the 1970s. During this more recent surge of poetic energy new names such as those of Douglas Livingstone, Patrick Cullinan, Wopko Jensma, Arthur Nortje, Mongane Serote and Mbuyiseni Mtshali became part of our tradition and our anthologies, but of the seventeen or so women poets who were also active in the same period, two – Jennifer Davids and Sheila Roberts – have received marginal recognition.

The single woman poet to have gained a measure of critical recognition in South Africa is Ruth Miller, thanks to articles by Charles Eglinton, Lionel Abrahams and Michael Chapman.<sup>44</sup> Miller, who wrote in the 1950s and '60s, published two collections, *Floating Island* (1965) and *Selected Poems* (1968). Her work has been well received in certain circles largely because her tough existentialist vision and her modernist style are easily assimilated into mainstream masculine criticism that favours modernism as a technique. Michael Chapman devoted an entire chapter to her work in his book *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*, yet even he notes the "critical neglect" Miller's work has suffered.<sup>45</sup> Chapman's analysis of Miller's poetry is often perceptive and insightful in its willingness to incorporate the personal into the poetic: "Within her range of personal experience Ruth Miller achieves poetry which is a distinctive blend of the unusual and the commonplace. Traditional symbols are revitalised and made pertinent to an exploring sensibility, and the craftsmanship of the modernist serves situations deeply human in their implications."<sup>46</sup> Yet his final accolade, a quotation from Lionel Abrahams, shows that masculine criticism of women's work is still governed by the concept of the "female" poet whose work must be evaluated primarily in emotional terms since this is the patriarchal realm assigned to women: "There are no doubt South African poets, Campbell and Livingstone among

them, who have greater flair and wider interests; yet, as Lionel Abrahams has said, 'Ruth Miller is the one who *moves* us most.'<sup>47</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

Women, as poets, have suffered social disadvantages that have excluded them from poetic success. In the late nineteenth century middle-class women, the "educated class", were confined by sexual decorum and the dictates of the social stereotype of the "lady". The essential conflict between the term "woman" – one who is passive, modest, dependent and confined to the private or domestic sphere – and the term "poet" – one who is assertive, creative, and operates in the public sphere – manifested itself as a restraining feature in the lives and work of women poets of the past. In this century, when women have been given access to education, are able to publish work without social stigma, and can enter the public world of letters, their access to poetic recognition has been blocked by an academic tradition that is androcentric and functions in terms of masculine achievement. But it is not external social pressures alone that have prevented women from making their mark in poetry – there are also exclusionary devices working from within the poetry of the accepted tradition that function to marginalise women. In the next section of this chapter I shall show how the central "self" or "voice" of South African poetry in English has been gendered as masculine and objectifies the feminine as "other" or object.

ii) The Gender Politics of Identity in South African English Poetry

My muse is all of moonlight still and cold,  
 No Shakespeare glints of song make music bursts,  
 The heart, and nature, dancing to their tune,  
 In winter calling back a touch of June.  
 Songs have I learned by score, both new and old,  
 Yet for the gift my own dry spirit thirsts!

When at the Lyric spring my wild heart sips,  
 I think, Cannot I join them in their song?  
 No bright invisible bird sits on my lips,  
 No words that sing, high gift! to me belong

...

(Isabel Fannin Barker)

Isabel Barker's lines record a woman's failure, in her own eyes, to measure up to the standards of competence and skill set by great male poets such as Shakespeare. Barker articulates her distress in terms that suggest a particularly Romantic conception of the role of the poet – she characterises poetic facility as a "high gift". Prior to the nineteenth century, poetry was regarded as a craft to be acquired by labour, and the poet merely a craftsman. The Romantic poets redefined poetry and the nature of the poet in terms that are still current today; they posited the poet as an exceptional or gifted individual and poetry itself as a superior imaginative discourse that gave the reader access to the transcendent realm of "truth". William Wordsworth defined the poet as:

... a *man* speaking to *men*: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind... [my italics]<sup>48</sup>

Wordsworth also valorised the imagination as the highest creative faculty, while Coleridge added the concept of the poetic "genius". The Romantic emphasis on the creative subjectivity of the individual male poet and on the operations of the creative imagination posed a problem for women poets that was entirely unrelated to the social disapproval of literary women which was a feature of nineteenth-century society. In her study *Women Writers and Poetic Identity*, Margaret Homans explains the problem in Structuralist terms, for if the poetic "self" is male – "a man speaking to men" – then women are cast in the role of other or object:

In Romantic poetry the self and the imagination are primary. During and after the Romantic period it was difficult for women who aspired to become poets to share in this tradition, not for constitutional reasons but for reasons that women readers found within the literature itself. Where the masculine self dominates and internalises, that other is frequently identified as feminine, whether she is nature, the representation of a human woman, or some phantom of desire. Although this tradition culminates in Romantic poetry, it originates in the Bible, which directly and through Milton's transmission reinforces the Romantic reading of gender. To be for so long the other and the object made it difficult for nineteenth-century women to have their own subjectivity. To become a poet, given these conditions, required nothing less than battling a valued and loved literary tradition to forge a self out of the materials of otherness. It is not surprising that so few women succeeded at this effort; very few even conceived of the possibility of trying.<sup>49</sup>

The identification of women with nature in poetry derives primarily from the figurative relationship set up between the poet and nature in the nineteenth century, in which the male poet interacted with a feminised nature. The relationship could be characterised as a filial bond to "Mother Nature", but more often it was erotic: nature is objectified as a sexual partner and coitus is a frequent trope for the unification of the poetic self with its object. While Margaret Homans focuses her study on an analysis of this phenomenon in the context of English Romanticism, her points are equally valid in the South African context. The discourse of Romanticism, with its emphasis on the natural world as a pathway to the sublime, was used by poets after Thomas Pringle in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As J.M Coetzee points out: "The language of the sublime is easily enough transposed to the mountains of South Africa ... Numerous ... celebrations of the sublime limitlessness of the veld are to be found in such collections as E.H. Crouch's *Treasury of South African Poetry and Verse* (1909) and Francis Carey Slater's *Centenary Book of South African Verse* (1925)."<sup>50</sup> Romanticism, as a mode of poetic discourse, had a relatively long life in South Africa. In the early years of the century the more *avant garde* styles of modernism were rejected in favour of the conservatism of Romanticism. In the introduction to his 1925 anthology, Francis Carey Slater stated:

The new form – or formlessness – of much modern poetry is scarcely a sign of healthy development and strength. It betokens, rather, a weakness and a lack of true originality. It is as though a man, in order to appear peculiar, walked upon his hands instead of his feet. This eccentric mode of progression might possibly enable him to make a minute study of the pavements and pillarboxes, but it eliminates the mountains and the stars.<sup>51</sup>

Slater revised his anthology in 1945, yet the introduction to the influential *New Centenary Book of South African Verse* shows that his position had not changed in the intervening years. He reiterates his commitment to the ideals of Romanticism:

But the best poetry must be something more than merely local or "fast rooted in the soil", it should have universal significance as well. Like Wordsworth's skylark, it should be "true to the kindred points of Heaven and Home". For, as Shelley says, "a poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not ... Poetry is indeed something divine..."<sup>52</sup>

The first poet to attempt the transposition of the Romantic ethos to the South African context was Thomas Pringle. His seminal poem "Afar in the Desert" follows the formulations of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey", with the poet escaping from "oppression, corruption and strife —" into the freedom of the desert. Pringle's attempts to marry the diction of English Romanticism with descriptions of the South African landscape are slightly jarring, with "glens" and "fens" becoming home to African quaggas and gazelles. But perhaps more important, in terms of this discussion, is the speaking voice or subject position of the poem. It is still male, but not purely meditative and philosophical. The poet has now assumed the African persona of the explorer/hunter who traverses the African veld:

Afar in the Desert I love to ride,  
With the silent Bush-boy alone by my side:  
...  
There is rapture to vault on the champing steed,  
And to bound away with the eagle's speed,  
With the death-fraught firelock in my hand —  
The only law of the Desert Land!

The subject position of the virile male hunter/explorer became a popular one in South African poetry. It is self-evident that such a speaking position precludes women whose gendered social roles are domestic and reproductive rather than active and exploratory. This implicit exclusion of the female as subject is made explicit by Kingsley Fairbridge in his poem "The Painting of a Picture".<sup>53</sup> Although the poem is ostensibly about painting, it can as easily be applied to the creative activity of poetry writing. Fairbridge assumes the position of the explorer/hunter who criticises a woman for the deficiencies in her work:



Lady, from lips of little worth, from a tongue of  
 small renown  
 Would you learn the life of the things that lie  
 lair'd in the lisping brown –  
 Lair'd in the grass by the granite peaks where the  
 blue-hid mountains melt –  
 Would you learn the chant of the Utter Wild and  
 the song of the Open Veld?

Would you steal the soul from the solid stone  
 where the secret gold-hoards sleep  
 Waiting the while till the White Men come to  
 work in the inner deep;  
 Would you draw the diamond of deathless worth  
 with its glint of glittering blue  
 From the sand of the Kalahari or the dust of  
 the dry Karroo,

Merely by piecing the shattr'd shards of an  
 ill-told tale aright?

Fairbridge considers that the "text" of nature must be read directly, rather than second-hand:

Nay! you must go to the Open Veld, and study  
 by day and night,  
 Hide on the neck of the timber'd hill where the  
 herds of horn'd game pass,  
 Till you read the tale of a broken twig, and the  
 rune of a bended grass.

You must commune with the vastness, you must  
 partake of the wild,  
 On guard like the closely hunted, in faith  
 like a little child  
 Hunted full oft you will know that you are, you  
 will draw that hard-drawn breath,  
 For you will not come on the Truth of the Wild,  
 till you glimpse the gates of death.

At this point the encounter takes on erotic undertones, with death as a metaphor for orgasm, and nature offering sexual release:



And you will not find the face of the Veld, till  
     you feel the weight of her hand,  
 Till you sink in the blinding darkness to grope in  
     the sheathing sand;  
 And you will not find the heart of the Veld till  
     you pay the price in pain,  
 But when you have found the form of the Veld,  
     you will not forget again!

But when you have shiver'd beside the blaze that  
     blinks in the highveld blast  
 Which whirls the white ash out on the wind like  
     the shades of the shadow'd past;  
 While the cowering Kaffirs watch and wait,  
     whispering tales of fear  
 Of the ghosts of the dead and their father's forms  
     that flit in the fleeting air;

But when you have heard, in the hush of the heat  
     that holds the air blood-warm,  
 The crash of the rolling thunder and the rush of  
     the coming storm;  
 And when you have sicken'd at hunger's gnaw,  
     and sobb'd in choking thirst,  
 And struggled blind for the water-hole 'fore  
     Death should find you first.

It is only once the hunter/explorer has experienced this erotic encounter with nature  
 that he can correctly read or know the text of nature:

Yea, when you know these things, and  
     a thousand things beside –  
 The trail of the snake, the lion's spoor, and the  
     path of the hippo wide,  
 The tragic fleck of hair and blood where the  
     hunted sable died...

Why then if your eyes have seen aright, and the  
     Veld has sung to you,  
 You may draw and paint your picture, and know  
     that it is True!

Obviously, such "truth" is denied to the woman artist or poet who is restrained by  
 gender to domestic roles and consequently unable to "read" the "text" of nature at first

hand. The patronising tone of Fairbridge's poem is indicative of the difficult position of the woman artist or poet who aspired to create yet who was limited or even excluded by gender. She could not assume the persona of the virile hunter/explorer, nor could she enter into erotic intercourse with a feminised nature in the same way as the male poet whose phallic penetration seemed to be a prerequisite for the authentic experience of "truth".

The subject position of the explorer/hunter was taken up, in different ways, by South Africa's most prominent twentieth-century poets – Roy Campbell and Douglas Livingstone. Campbell fervently embraced this tough masculine stance, as Guy Butler notes:

It took a century before the rapture of the hunter, hinted at in Pringle, found its poetic apotheosis in Roy Campbell, so much of whose imagery and ethics derive from that archaic life, with its individualism, self-reliance, stress on courage, physical skill, and endurance of hardship, its acceptance of the cannibal nature of existence, an intimate knowledge of wild beasts, a love of horses and lethal weapons.<sup>54</sup>

Campbell's first major work *The Flaming Terrapin* (1924) is based on the Romantic conception of nature, and opens with an invocation to "maternal earth":

Maternal earth stirs redly from beneath  
Her blue sea-blanket and her quilt of sky,  
A giant Anadyomene from the sheath  
And chrysalis of darkness; ...

In contrast to passive and feminine nature is the Terrapin who is "the symbol for masculine energy".<sup>55</sup>

This sudden strength that catches up men's souls  
And rears them up like giants in the sky,  
Giving them fins where the dark ocean rolls,  
And wings of eagles when the whirlwinds fly,  
Stands visible to me in its true self  
(No spiritual essence or wing'd elf  
Like Ariel on the empty winds to spin.)  
I see him as a mighty Terrapin...

Campbell's decision to utilise a Romantic framework for his Modernist poem about the regeneration of western man after World War I was consciously taken in an effort

to affirm his links with the "great tradition" of western poetry. The classical perspectives and allusions in the poem have a masculine basis that is posited in the binary opposition active:passive in relation to male:female. As Simone de Beauvoir has noted:

Aeschylus, Aristotle, Hippocrates proclaimed that on earth as on Olympus it is the male principle that is truly creative: from it came form, number, movement; grain grows and multiplies through Demeter's care, but the origin of the grain and its fecundity is regarded as only a passive quality. She is the earth, and man the seed; she is Water and he is Fire. Creation has often been imagined as the marriage of fire and water, it is warmth and moisture that give rise to living things; the Sun is the husband of the sea; the Sun, fire, are male divinities; and the Sea is one of the most nearly universal of maternal symbols. Passively the waters accept the fertilising action of the flaming radiations.<sup>56</sup>

In Campbell's poem it is a feminine earth that joins with the masculine sun to perpetuate new life:

Now the Earth meets the Sun: through nerve and limb  
Trembling she feels his fiery manhood swim:  
Huge spasms rend her, as in red desire  
He leaps and fills her gushing womb with fire...

Campbell's poem concludes with a focus on Noah, symbol of western man who has weathered the storms of history and now stands at the centre of the world:

...Zone on sweeping zone,  
Huge circles outward swirled without a bound,  
The world's immense horizons ringed him around,  
Receding, merging on until the whole  
Creation on the pivot of his soul  
Seemed to be wheeling...

This solitary male figure is also a metaphor for the masculine and creative hunter figure, and the poem concludes with a reaffirmation of his essence:

Though times shall change and stormy ages roll,  
I am that ancient hunter of the plains  
That raked the shaggy flitches of the Bison:  
Pass world: I am the dreamer than remains,  
The Man, clear-cut against the last horizon.

Many years later, in his book *Portugal*, Campbell reiterated his belief in the connection between the virile male pursuits and cultural activity, a conjunction that excludes women:

Hunting and herdsmanhip are schools of courage and cunning; they teach self-reliance, individualism, independence ... The herdsmen had leisure to dream, and to them civilisation owes its poetry, philosophy, astronomy, music and mathematics.<sup>57</sup>

This particularly masculine view of culture and creativity is ironically deconstructed by Douglas Livingstone in several poems in his collection *Sjambok and Other Poems from Africa* (1964). In these poems the virile hunter/explorer becomes what Michael Chapman terms "Adam ... after the Fall".<sup>58</sup> According to Chapman, whereas Campbell's figures glorified in "Edenic Possibilities", Livingstone's reveal the "clichés of colonial masculinity inherent in the 'white hunter' persona".<sup>59</sup> In "Sjambok (A colonial essay)" the virile African hunter has been transformed into the jaded and vulgar tourist guide who adopts the sjambok as a symbol of Africa:

The sjambok was a subcontinent's tool  
and like the freemason's trowel  
has been promoted or relegated,  
depending on which side of all the elevated  
wrists your granddaddy stood, to a symbol.

Livingstone clearly suggests the violence and coarsened sensibility at the heart of the African hunter persona – armed with "the death fraught firelock" and the "sjambok" – and in so doing debunks the myth of creativity and culture propounded by Campbell and African Romantic poets since Pringle. Yet whether the figure is mythic and generative, as in Campbell's poetry, or ironic and deconstructive, as in Livingstone's, it remains masculine – a male subject position that needs to interact with a feminised nature. In "She-Jackal" Livingstone takes his debased "hunter" into the African veld:

As the sun fell west he composed himself  
against a pinetree bole, happily smooth  
a yard above the soft sprung-needle ground  
and punched open one of his two beercans.

Here Livingstone has his male persona encounter feminised "Africa":

...

he saw a shamelessly feminine curved  
Africa – usually so male and wrinkled –  
blatant under the first opened stars.

Evilly panting and smiling, a jackal  
stood near: razor ribs, warty shrivelled dugs,  
hourglass loins and lean wire legs quivering.

The jackal is described as the "other" in familiar sexual terms, but in this scenario the result is not a figurative union, but rather a decided rejection, ending on a violent note:

They looked at each other, obviously  
disliking what they saw, both warily  
tensed, although she retained her polished smile;  
he, measuring jumps from her and his stick.

So, you mangy chewer of carrion  
he thought it directly and impolitely,  
camp follower of filthy offal-thieves,  
what the hell are you drooling over, bitch?  
this meat is alive with a nearly full  
tin of chemical malt in its right hand.

She made no reply so he flung it hard  
and inaccurately and she was gone  
apparently without moving; ...

Livingstone's Modernist anti-hero reacts against a century-long tradition by refusing erotic union in favour of violent rejection – but a violence, Livingstone suggests, that was always latent. In "The Killers" this violence is distilled into an encounter between the male poet/persona and a feminised cobra:

I chose my time and jumped past the fanned hood.  
I got the shotgun and blew her head clean.  
I watched her lively dead knottings. High birds  
began to sing. I had to shoot; I mean  
that now her limp grey life lies understood.

The death of the cobra is a fitting trope for the violent death of the female poetic voice at the hands of the white hunter/explorer. In fact, the encounter between the masculine speaker and the feminine snake, read in psychoanalytical terms, contains traces of the primal encounter between Adam and Satan, where the cobra

amalgamates Eve and Satan as the "other" or enemy that must be vanquished. The encounter also carries undertones of sexual threat as the snake/woman is motivated, according to the male speaker, by "lust":

...Her short-sighted eyes suddenly know.  
 Know me...  
 ...Skidding with lust,  
 her track spreads. Her taut length is not so thin.  
 She slices air quicker than a spring bough.

Rage whips the lash so tightly close until  
 it lands good yards away. A black snake boils  
 around me, hunting me, raising the dust.  
 And the sweat popping and ballooning soils  
 me where I sit, hating, so still.

This emphasis on the poetic self as definitively masculine – whether in the poetry of Pringle, Campbell, or Livingstone – has functioned to exclude women and an intruding feminine subjectivity in South African English poetry. Like the cobra in Livingstone's poem, the woman poet has been figuratively "killed" and her dangerous "knowledge" neutralised into silence. She lies "understood" by the male poets who have suppressed her poetic identity and created her as nature – the object of *their* knowledge.

\* \* \* \* \*

While the hunter/explorer was the dominant persona or subject position in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – at least until the time of Campbell in the 1920s and '30s – in the mid twentieth century a new subject position was developed. Still masculine, this poet is the more educated and "civilised" relation of the hunter/explorer, the colonist who anguishes over the violence of his predecessor, the hunter/explorer. Termed the "Enlightened Settler" by Michael Chapman,<sup>60</sup> the poets who adopted this position include Guy Butler, R.N. Currey, Charles Eglington, David Wright, Anthony Delius, N.H. Brettell and Alan Paton, all of whom were represented in Guy Butler's important anthology *A Book of South African Verse* (1959). Chapman describes their work as "a poetry which, in keeping with those conciliatory ideals associated with English intellectual life, characterises a humane and reasonable voice that predominates over image-making".<sup>61</sup> Chapman goes on to link this group of poets with the missionaries, the more restrained fellows of the hunter/explorers:

Accordingly, the English speaking poet and intellectual (in liberal-humanist aesthetics the two are very much synonymous) pictures himself as a purveyor of Western European "light". Taking cognisance of his alien position, both linguistically and culturally, in a landscape delineated by the harsh rule of division, he tends in a manner reminiscent of his Christian-missionary forbears to look to the example of a restraining moral wisdom.<sup>62</sup>

For this group of poets, their central dilemma was to reconcile their humane European values and heritage with the violence of their African homeland, as Guy Butler noted in the introduction to his anthology:

A South African aware of his European origins, and impatient with much that seems anachronistic in his environment, may disavow the country of his birth and return to the country of his traditions. Once there, however, he may find himself to be an anachronism, and that the England he has sought exists only, say, in Hardy's novels. This may force him to a second disavowal. He ends up outside the consolation of any tradition with an increased self-knowledge, but stultified by doubts.<sup>63</sup>

This uneasiness at being caught "between two worlds" is expressed by many of the poets, notably by Guy Butler in "Myths", "Stranger to Europe", and "Livingstone crosses Africa"; Eglington in "Lourenço Marques"; McNab in "Rhodes"; Brettell in "African Student" and Delius in "The Last Division".<sup>64</sup> Their commitment to liberal humanism in the South African context with its social and political inhumanities led many of the poets to an anguished self-examination, as Butler reveals:

Social pressures in South Africa are such that we are forced to examine big words like Liberty, Love, Justice, Truth and Civilization (particularly when coupled with the epithet White). What was a platitude a generation ago, and may still be in England, suddenly becomes startlingly immediate here, where it can no longer be taken for granted.<sup>65</sup>

Such troubled musings led many of the poets of this era to choose the difficult life of exile rather than to stay in South Africa; Wright, McNab and Delius chose to live in Britain rather than in South Africa.

For the poet, this sense of alienation from his homeland created a difficult working relationship with his subject. The tension is expressed by Guy Butler in the familiar terminology of African Romanticism: Africa is feminised and the poet's attempts to "know" her are described in terms of a relationship:



Most of our poets have tried to belong to Africa, and, finding her savage, shallow and unco-operative, have been forced to give their allegiance, not to any other country, but to certain basic conceptions. In their searchings and journeys they have naturally enough "driven back on predetermined courses" to their European origins. What rest or stability they find is not in any particular place but on principles: the integrity of the individual; the duty to seek the truth and proclaim it; the command to love thy neighbour. All these concepts are alien to Africa.<sup>66</sup>

In this manifestation the African muse proves difficult and unco-operative, driving her would-be suitors back to their European origins. The metaphor of Africa as a woman to be challenged, explored, loved, but never wholly possessed, lies at the heart of much poetry written in this period. Here, for example, are the closing lines of David Wright's "A Voyage to Africa", which appeared in Butler's anthology:

About to fly of a midnight to England  
I half turn, affected as a lover, while  
Exiled I quit what seems a native ground,  
Engage, already exiled, on an exile  
With a half mad Europe to my northern hand;

Which to inherit, flying far and over  
Johannesburg – above whose black defiles  
The street lamps burn as I again remember  
(O delectable in dark, luminous under hills)  
That every farewell is in fact for ever –

A leaning plane's wing lifts me swiftly further.  
In her long gown of evening she drags away,  
And far lights flutter to a broad tiara.  
Obscure, below, prodigious and gothic lie  
The expanses galloping to a grand Sahara.

Earlier in the poem, Wright defines the feminised African landscape as a mirror that reflects the masculine "self":

A mirror more perfect than any of glass  
She is: when looked in, the looker sees a shape  
Of his emotion, and of what really was.  
There, looking in; of an angel or an ape.  
If her mountains lean towards beguiling us –

In whom, once, we saw a visage of our fright,  
 Though long ago, and in another country,  
 Whereas today they flatter us with their height –  
 O nature, mirror or mishandled pantry,  
 O medicine, goddess, enemy, what you like –

I love you, and knowing whom I really love  
 I find it difficult not to love you more;

...

It is largely the erotic tension that gives Wright's poem its *frisson*. The woman poet who wished to write in this period was disadvantaged since, as before, she could not enter into the same distinctly sexual relationship with the African landscape. In Butler's anthology there is also a poem by a woman poet, Margaret Allonby, called "Reflection" in which the poet attempts to use the erotic language of her male counterparts. The poem lacks impact because the tension of the heterosexual encounter is missing – its landscape is merely descriptive:

Beneath the brown, lustrous haze,  
 A lit tulle stretched across the brackish spruit,  
 The tree contorts and, innocent,  
 More antique than Eve's considering  
 Moves Babylonian arms.

The brown look glazes the intricate design.  
 The deep roots stir, the sun is hypnotized  
 And the wind drops; the long hair stirs  
 In the brown summer, felicity evolves  
 A nautch of rippled limbs.

Allonby's poem lacks the impact of Wright's because the imagery of the African encounter is gender-specific, and its libidinal impact only available, at this stage, to the male poet.

As the above discussion has shown, both the persona of the "hunter/explorer" and the "enlightened settler" derive from the ethos of Romanticism where the poetic "self" is male and the "other" is woman/nature. The erotic and dominant relationship of male poet to female object and the suppression of a feminine subjectivity has dictated the shape of the tradition of South African poetry as it is found in anthologies such as those of Slater, Butler, and Chapman. Yet because this masculine dominance has always been perceived as "natural" – not at all "sinister" as Lionel Abrahams has

claimed<sup>67</sup> – few women poets have understood the mechanisms of their exclusion from the "brotherhood" of poets. It is the insight produced by recent Feminist Poststructuralist analysis, with its emphasis on the construction of gender in western society which has shown women that it is not only social prejudice that prevents their poetic achievement; it is also the gendered discourse of the poetry created by men as a vehicle for their own libidinal expression that shuts them out. It was not until the late 1980s that a young South African woman poet would challenge the masculine possession of the African encounter. In her poem "Sun, Aloe, Rain", Ingrid de Kok inverts the accepted paradigm and creates the speaking voice as feminine – a young girl child – and the landscape as masculine:

In the veld were thorn trees in patches  
like the dregs of other, imaginary gardens,  
except in spring, when sticky with yellow life  
they had another name, mimosa.

And in the gardens there were always aloes, sharp as blood,  
and leathery cannas, all male flowers.  
No one has yet put aloes and cannas  
into a sweet-smelling basket or pitcher of water.

The female persona rebels against the oppression of the masculine landscape:

I sat, more sullen than shy, licking my ice-cream carefully,  
hating the aloes and cannas in their tended rows.

...

Then the Storm broke, an exploding rock,  
a detonating jewel, its pieces of hot hail  
knocking the cannas flat into the earth, puncturing aloes,  
and the rain leapt over and over us.

When it was time to go, I ran  
across the muddy grass, my back to an imagined breeze,  
the yellow ribbons in my hair, loose and lovely,  
breaking like waves against my long, thin neck.

De Kok's poem may be read as a metaphor for her own liberation from the constraints of masculine diction and imagery. She has broken free and defined herself unequivocally as libidinal female within a masculine landscape, engaging in the same erotic love/hate relationship. In "On Her Way Home" she allows her female persona an erotic encounter with masculinised Africa:

This is her favourite view on her way home:  
 when the road leans suddenly  
 towards a grey outcrop of rock and shadow,  
 A hill pockmarked by aloes,  
 when the sky is dead clear, and the sun dead centre.

...

Heat bearing down  
 On her neck, behind her knees  
 In her head sun stroking her,  
 clay beads of sweat in her head,  
 in her pupils blacker and blacker.

The skull of a sheep made her think  
 of erecting gazebos in the place  
 and she laughed out loud  
 so far from the river  
 remembering the futile shade of willows.

De Kok's challenge to the dominant discourse is a tentative beginning for women poets – an oppositional gesture in the direction of an autonomous subject position for women in South African English poetry.

\* \* \* \* \*

While the above discussion has, so far, centred on white poets in South Africa and a predominantly western poetic tradition transposed to this country, consideration must also be given to the Black poetry phenomenon that dominated the literary scene in South Africa in the 1970s and '80s. For political reasons, the poets who formed this poetic "renaissance" rejected western literary traditions and aesthetics and embraced the African rhetorical techniques of oral poetry. This not only enabled them to reaffirm cultural links with their past traditions, but also facilitated the processes of conscientising, protest and resistance that were the aim of their work. Yet despite their rejection of western aesthetic modes, their poetry is as gender discriminatory as that of white South African men. In social terms black women have been in an even less enviable position than their white counterparts: until very recently black women were legally perpetual minors. In their own communities they were viewed only in the light of their domestic functions as wives and mothers and were, in general, not educated to any significant extent. As a result the first significant black poets to begin publishing in the 1970s were men – Mbuyiseni Mtshali, Mongane Serote, Sipho Sepamla and Mafika Gwala.

Since black poetry has also been dominated by men the "self" or subject position of this poetry is also masculine and women are the "other". In the early phase of this poetry, known as the protest phase, male poets used the image of the black mother as a metaphor for Africa. In the writing produced by the ideology of Black Consciousness – both pre and post 1976 – "Mother Africa" is a constant motif. This maternal figure is a variation, or complex, of the erotic/maternal Romantic "woman as nature" concept of western poetry, where "Mother Africa" is created from a comparison between the land, Africa itself, and the gender-specific characteristics of the black woman. Underlying this image is the concept of property – the woman, like the land, traditionally belongs to the black man. However, the black poets who used this metaphor saw in it an analogy of the suffering land that must be liberated by her (male) children. The black woman images the resistance and anguish of the black people. Molahelu wa Mmutle's "Our Immortal Mother" shows her suffering transcending her life as she is mythologised by her children:

My mother died a servant  
 She was buried a meid  
 A housemaid she was  
 Like a dienskneg she lived  
 With all humanity removed  
 ...  
 They killed her  
 She died in solitude  
 Broken – broken to the bone  
 Without raising an eye to heaven  
 For the foreign God betrayed her.  
 She lives on in her shrine  
 Her soul they could not destroy  
 She went to rest, a goddess  
 Worshipped by those she loved  
 Immortalized by her children.

Similarly, in his poem "Somewhere", Es'kia Mphahlele elevates the creative power of motherhood and its supposed connection with political struggle:

Somewhere a mother waits  
 her man, her son  
 in chains of an oppressor  
 or waits for those who never come  
 and still endures we know not how  
 ...

Somewhere a woman gives the world an artist  
 a child who sings and dances,  
 dreams and weaves a poem around the universe

...

To know our sorrow  
 is to know our joy –  
 somewhere a mother will rejoice.

Mothobi Mutloatse's short story, "Mama Ndiyalala", includes this poem of lamentation to "Mother Africa":

Mama, oh mama, ndiyalila  
 I am crying mother  
 Oh, Mother Africa  
 I am crying for your breast  
 Your breast of comfort  
 Amidst these worldly obstacles  
 Amidst these human snares  
 Oh, Mother Africa  
 We shall seek you  
 We shall love you  
 Your children are crying  
 For your breast of comfort.

While the "Mother Africa" figure generally offers a positive image of black women (and for this reason is often accepted by black women themselves), it is based on biological or sexual functions, and draws its strength from an ideology that views women as the property of men and glorifies motherhood as the only aspiration of all women. It seldom allows for any roles other than those of wife and mother for the black woman, who continues to be a prisoner of gender, defined only in terms of black men. Similarly, the emphasis on courage, determination and survival as positive qualities inherent in black women tends to glamorise their real suffering and oppression as, in many cases, sole breadwinner of single parent families. In such cases their status as victims, both of racist legislation and often of mistreatment and desertion at the hands of black men, has been minimised.

The more radical poetry that was written to commemorate the events of 1976 and subsequent political activism elevated the male warrior as the heroic symbol of resistance, as in Theminkosi Ndhlovu's "Elegy for the Dead of Soweto":

Rest in peace, warriors of Soweto.  
 I pity the souls of the departed,  
 I weep for the orphans left without care,  
 And I mourn for you, the women  
 Who gave these heroes birth

...

Young men may die, but their praise-poems remain.  
 Warriors, we will live remembering you,  
 Though in the end you did not change  
 This land of black heroism.  
 All of us say, Warriors, rest in peace,  
 This most beautiful country is dead.

The modern activist is equated with his heroic ancestor, the tribal warrior. Yet this particular metaphor suggests that all activists are male, a fact that is patently untrue, as John Kane-Berman notes:

Girls participated actively in the demonstrations. In August 1977, 110 youngsters between the ages of 12 and 25 were convicted of public violence at Hammanskraal (just north of Pretoria): 53 were male and 57 females. The previous month a press report had it that 280 schoolchildren went on the "rampage". Both the police and the chairman of the Cape Peninsula Bantu Affairs Administration Board claimed that violence in the Peninsula townships began when girls and young women attacked a men's hostel in Nyanga. A sixteen-year-old schoolgirl who was subsequently sent out of Soweto by her parents admitted to having committed arson...<sup>68</sup>

Yet despite their active involvement, women have become invisible as "warriors" in black poetry precisely because this poetry is written in terms of symbols that are traditional and male and that exclude women. Where women do appear, it is only in their gendered roles of wives and mothers, or as objects of sexual violation, as in Mbuyiseni Mtshali's "The Raging Generation". In this poem "menchildren" are imaged as virile and energetic, while the "little girls" are merely passive – the boys are "menchildren", conferring adult status, while girls are "little girls", emphasising their childishness:

Menchildren in the promised land of your forefathers,  
 returning swallows who presage the coming of our summers  
 the bane of the receding winters of our oppression  
 unbroken steeds, whose hooves raised dust  
 of Soweto streets,  
 where your maimed bodies were cut down by  
 doom primed fireshells,



from depraved barrels,  
 little girls budding flowers of our youth,  
 your tight inviolate virginal veil torn asunder  
 by the wanton penis of the monster.

\* \* \* \* \*

Clearly South African women have been "shut out" of what has come to be perceived as the dominant tradition of South African poetry in English. They have been denied access to the central speaking position of this tradition and so also denied access to the formal techniques – imagery and diction – of the tradition. Measured against the phallogocentric value system of the tradition, women's work inevitably fails. Yet, as contemporary poststructuralist theory has shown, value systems are not fixed but relative. The feminist critic who aims to find a place in South African literary studies for women's poetry must reject the centrality of the phallogocentric tradition and begin to explore the possibility of an alternative gynocentric tradition and a gynocentric poetics. This will be my aim in the following chapter.

### Notes

1. Historical details from C.J.F. Muller, *500 Years: A History of South Africa*, Cape Town: Academica, 1977.
2. See Adey et al (eds), *Companion to South African Literature*, Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1986, p.27.
3. Margaret Lenta, "Lady Anne Barnard's Letter to Henry Dundas: A Political Woman and her Limits", (Unpublished paper), p.2.
4. A.M. Lewin Robinson (ed). *The Letters of Lady Anne Barnard to Henry Dundas*, Cape Town: Balkema, 1973, p.88.
5. Dorothy Driver, "'Woman' as sign in the South African colonial enterprise", *Journal of Literary Studies*, pp.8 and 10.
6. *The Cape of Good Hope Literary Gazette*, No 8, January 5, 1831, p.98.

7. Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm*, Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1975, pp.173-174.
8. Sylvia Vietzen, *A History of Education for European Girls in Natal*, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1973, pp.xi-xii.
9. Ibid, p.8.
10. Ibid, p.131.
11. Cowper Rose, *Four Years in Southern Africa*, London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1829, p.5.
12. Elizabeth Longford, *Eminent Victorian Women*, London and New York, Knopf/Random House, 1981, p.141.
13. Sylvia Vietzen, *A History of Education for European Girls in Natal*, p.131.
14. Ibid.
15. *The Cape of Good Hope Literary Gazette*, June 1833.
16. *The Cape of Good Hope Literary Gazette*, January 1833.
17. *The Cape of Good Hope Literary Gazette*, June 1833.
18. Most of these women are discussed in Elizabeth Longford's *Eminent Victorian Women*.
19. Miller and Sergeant, *Survey of South African Poetry*, p.11.
20. Michael Chapman, *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*, Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1984, p.21.
21. See Adey et al (eds)., *Companion to South African Literature*, p.153.
22. Poem quoted in Carol Anne Hammond, *A Survey of South African English Verse Printed in Cape Periodicals and Newspapers from 1824-1851*, p.205.

23. Quoted in A.M. Lewin Robinson, *None Daring to Make Us Afraid*, Cape Town: Maskew Miller, 1962, pp.161-162.
24. Quoted in Carol Anne Hammond, *A Survey of South African English Verse*, pp.206-207.
25. Introduction to M.E. Barber, *The Erythrina Tree and other Verses*, London: Rawland Ward, 1898.
26. Ibid.
27. Introduction to Alice Mackay's *Song of the London Man, Song of South Africa and other poems*, Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable, 1906, pp.vii-viii and xiii.
28. Ibid, p.ix.
29. Ibid, p.xiii.
30. Ibid, p.xv-xvi.
31. Ibid, p.xvi.
32. See Guy Butler's introduction to *A Book of South African Verse* (1959) and Michael Chapman's *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective* (1984).
33. Terry Eagleton, "The Rise of English", in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, London: Blackwell, 1983, pp.22-23.
34. Ibid, p.25.
35. Ibid, p.28.
36. Ibid, p.28.
37. Ibid, p.28.

38. Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry" in Enright and de Chickera (eds) *English Critical Texts*, Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1979, p.267.
39. T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in Enright and de Chickera (eds) *English Critical Texts*, pp.294-295.
40. Ibid, pp.300-301.
41. T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets" in Enright and de Chickera (eds) *English Critical Texts*, p.309.
42. Poem taken from her collection *No Longer at Ease*, Cape Town: Balkema, 1956.
43. Mary Byron published *A Voice from the Veld* (1913) and *The Owls* (1916-18?) while Beatrice Allhusen published *April Moods* (1912) and *April Moods and Other Verses* (1917).
44. See Michael Chapman's chapter on Ruth Miller in *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*; Charles Eglington, "Ruth Miller - A South African Poet", in *Jewish Affairs* 15(11) (November 1960) and "Homage to Ruth Miller" in *Contrast* 22 (December 1969); Lionel Abrahams, "Terrible to the Cage", *Jewish Affairs* 24(5) (June 1969).
45. Michael Chapman, *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*, p.125.
46. Ibid, p.151.
47. Ibid, p.151.
48. William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads", quoted in Lilian R. Furst, *European Romanticism: Self Definition*, New York: Methuen, 1980, pp.73-74.
49. Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, p.12.
50. J.M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, New Haven and London: Radix and Natal University Press, 1988, p.53.

51. Francis Carey Slater, introduction to *Centenary Book of South African Verse* (1925) quoted in Michael Chapman *A Century of South African Poetry*, p.15.
52. Francis Carey Slater, introduction to *The New Centenary Book of South African Poetry*, London: Longmans, 1945, pp.x-xi.
53. Fairbridge, Kingsley. *Veld Verse*. London: Oxford University Press, 1909, p.38.
54. Guy Butler, *A Book of South African Verse*, p.xxvi.
55. Campbell's own description, given in a letter to his parents. See notes to *Campbell: Collected Works Vol I*, Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1985, p.633.
56. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975, p.176.
57. Roy Campbell, *Portugal*, p.21. (Quoted in Butler, *A Book of South African Verse*.)
58. Michael Chapman, *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*, p.87.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid, p.23.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid, p.24.
63. Guy Butler, *A Book of South African Verse*, p.xxxii.
64. See Michael Chapman, *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*, p.25.
65. Guy Butler, *A Book of South African Verse*, p.xxxii.
66. Ibid, p.xvi.
67. Lionel Abrahams, "Letter to the Editor", *Upstream*.
68. John Kane-Berman, *Soweto: Black Revolt: White Reaction*, Johannesburg: Ravan, 1978, p.8.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **BREAKING THE SILENCE:**

#### **(RE)COVERING WOMEN'S POETRY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

i) **Introduction: The Voices that were Lost**

The purpose of this section of the study is to propose an alternative gynocentric tradition of women's poetry in South Africa. As mentioned earlier, women poets were publishing their work in South Africa as early as the nineteenth century, yet a sense of feminine continuity or tradition is absent because the feminine voice in our poetry has been suppressed and lost. It has been my aim to recover that suppressed tradition and to allow the feminine voice in South African poetry to be heard.

The process of recovering this feminine voice necessitated the location of as many collections of poetry by South African women poets as possible. In research terms this involved the perusal of the bibliographies of anthologies of South African poetry and of the bibliographies of reference works such as the *Companion to South African Literature*.<sup>1</sup> The resulting list was supplemented by personal research in South African libraries: the Don Africana Library and the Killie Campbell Library in Durban, the Africana section of the Johannesburg Public Library and the South African Library in Cape Town. Additional collections were obtained from the Cory Library in Grahamstown and various other provincial and municipal libraries by means of the inter-library loan system. I was then able to compile a comprehensive bibliography of collections by South African women poets. I also read through all the available poetry journals and "little magazines" in order to locate work by women poets who might not have published collections but whose work has appeared in print.

The most immediate result of this research was the publication of my anthology *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women's Poetry*.<sup>2</sup> This was compiled from work extracted from the various collections and journals. The anthology features the work of 153 women poets: by no means *all* the poets I had discovered, but a representative selection. (The anthology may be read in conjunction with this chapter.)



My criteria for the inclusion of poems into the anthology were also my criteria for works that would qualify as part of a gynocentric tradition of women's poetry. The poems were politicised in their articulation of the feminine in relation to poetry - women's concern with their lives as women and their creative problems as women poets. My approach was initially motivated by the American critic Elaine Showalter, who proposed a form of criticism which she termed 'gynocriticism'. Showalter defines gynocriticism as a concern with, among other things, "... *woman as writer* - with woman as the producer of textual meaning... Its subjects include the psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and the problem of a female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career; literary history; and, of course, studies of particular writers and works..."<sup>3</sup>

My construction of a gynocentric tradition of women's poetry in South Africa, both in the anthology and in this study, follows the paradigm suggested by Elaine Showalter, adapted to meet the needs of a poetic tradition within the South African context.

## ii) The Gynocentric Tradition of South African Women's Poetry

In this section my aim will be to apply the principles of gynocriticism, as discussed above, to South African women's poetry. My focus will be on poetry published in the English language, and where Afrikaans women poets are mentioned I have used published translations of their work. My purpose here is to offer a preliminary survey rather than in-depth study (which will be the purpose of the next chapter). In so doing I hope to demonstrate the feasibility of the gynocritical concept of a women's tradition in South African poetry. In mapping out this tradition my aim is to establish the continuity of women's voices in our poetry, from decade to decade, from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. In examining the poetry produced over more than a century I have found it useful to divide the field into two periods - the Early Period and the Modern Period. In the Early Period some women wrote feminist poetry, but the majority were unaware of the specific reasons for their anger and the direction it should take. This period extends to the 1950s. The Modern Period commences in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and in this period (the era of contemporary feminism), women find a direction for their anger and develop a sense of their own value as writers.

### 1) **The Early Period**

Women who wished to become artists and writers in the nineteenth century in South Africa, at the commencement of the Early Period, were faced with powerful institutionalised discouragement. As discussed in the previous chapter, the only desirable path for middle and, often, working-class women, according to church and state, was considered to be marriage and motherhood. The "angel in the house", the self-sacrificing wife and mother, was the cultural stereotype to which women were urged to aspire. Although in England and America the "new woman" was emerging, allowing women in general greater opportunities, in the pioneering societies of the colonies the emphasis on gender roles was more pronounced since women were needed as wives and mothers to temper the ruggedly masculine milieu with their so-called "civilising" influences.<sup>4</sup> Any woman who chose a role outside of the nuclear family was labelled an oddity or stigmatised as an "old maid", while women who entered into sexual relationships before or outside of marriage were condemned as "fallen women". While these stereotypes were powerful, it is still possible to find voices raised in protest, as in "Thoughts by an Old Maid", an anonymous poem published in *The Cape of Good Hope Literary Gazette* of 1834:

So cease your jests, nor think that all  
 Old Maids must be the same,  
 For I'm not stiff and starched I'm sure,  
 And therefore 'tis a shame  
 To make one suffer for the faults  
 of two perhaps or three,  
 Though still we have the laugh at you,  
 For *we*, yes *we*, are FREE.<sup>5</sup>

The "fallen woman" - a common motif in nineteenth-century art and writing - was generally in an even less enviable position than her spinster sister, for society deemed her to be a social outcast. Esther Falconer articulates the values of her society in "The Lost One", where a "young and fair" woman, formerly innocent, has been marred by the "blighting touch of sin and shame". Writing in 1884, Falconer paints a word picture of the "loose woman", alienated from the 'joys' of house and home:

Her face is marr'd with care;  
 No joyous light is beaming from her eye;  
 Yet 'mid the scenes of godless revelry,  
 Her laugh seems loudest there.  
 But who would wish to have the smallest part  
 In the dark doom of that forsaken heart!<sup>6</sup>

The poem concludes with the sop of religion, for while society may cast her out it yet offers "hope", for "Jesus loves to save the lost". Falconer unquestioningly accepts the guilt of the woman, who although a "victim" is nonetheless lost to respectable Christian society. A similar point of view is elucidated by Anna de Brémont in "The Two Bands of Sisterhood" where the pure are contrasted with the fallen, and the fallen assured that despite their sins "God's love is here/To redeem thee, frail sisterhood". However, there is a feminist voice raised against such oppressive and discriminatory social practices. In "Outcast" Kate Scanlen criticises the "Christian people" who are responsible for the plight of the outcast, and focuses on the man who has caused her "fall" and who is excused by these same people:

I see my tempter passing gaily by,  
 He will no longer heed my anguished cry.  
 He is not shunned, though as great a sinner,  
 He is greeted by the passers-by,<sup>7</sup>

The poem concludes rather dramatically with the woman 'found dead in the street', and Scanlen suggests that the cruelty of society is responsible for her death since

society desires it as a self-vindicating punishment, a modern parallel of the Biblical execution by stoning for women found guilty of adultery.

The Boer War (1899-1902), and its effects on the lives of South African women, provided a different range of experience and therefore different topics for women poets at the turn of the century. The most distinct group of poets writing at this time were those who supported the Boer cause - Anna Purcell, Elizabeth Molteno and Alice Greene. All three published their poems in *New Age* and in the anthology *Songs of the Veld* (1902), thought to have been edited by Olive Schreiner, who was also part of this group of pro-Boer women writers. Schreiner's poem "The Cry of South Africa", although not published in the anthology, demonstrates her identification with those who "grew up" in South Africa rather than with the colonising power.<sup>8</sup> The poems in *Songs of the Veld* generally sing the praises of the Boers, their courage, and the heroic spirit of their women and children. "The Young Burgher's Mother", an anonymous poem, recounts the way in which a Boer mother sends her young son to fight for the Boer cause:

Better he lay out there, unknown, unnamed,  
Dead, dead, but free, beneath his own free sky,  
Than stand beside me, shamed.<sup>9</sup>

In "The Rebel", Anna Purcell writes of a youth who was executed for rebellion, and in Alice Greene's "The Boer Women Camp" a Boer wife sends her husband back to the field:

My husband, you ask: "Shall I go, Shall I stay?"  
And this my reply,  
- Although from my side it must force you away,-  
Go! Fight till you die!<sup>10</sup>

Elizabeth Molteno's poem "Miss Hobhouse" is written in praise of "our English woman", Emily Hobhouse, who played a key role in exposing the appalling conditions in which Boer women and children were living - and dying - in the British concentration camps. Hobhouse was deported from South Africa by the British authorities in the Cape when she attempted to return for a second tour of the camps, and her poem "Ode to Table Mountain" tells of these experiences. Hobhouse sees herself as an agent of British altruism confronting the misused might of British imperialism:

Mere channel I of England's love for those  
 Weak and defenceless whom She scorns to fight;  
 Usurping lawless force, they interpose  
 And, captive, thrust me forth by misused might.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most extended poems about the Boer War was Angela Buckton's *The Burden of Engela*, a book-length narrative about the war from the point of view of a Boer woman who loses her family and her home and is sent to the camps. Buckton was a young Englishwoman who never visited South Africa but wrote, nonetheless, a sympathetic account of the sufferings of Boer women in a war in which it was official policy to make these women witness their homes being burnt to the ground, their possessions stolen or vandalised, and their crops destroyed.<sup>12</sup> On being removed to the camps many had to watch their children die of disease and starvation. The Boer War poets, although often not writing from personal experience, recount what it was like to live through the war as a Boer woman.

After the war, in 1907, women poets were counted among the members of the "Veldsinger's" club, a group of poets that met in Johannesburg. They were motivated by their mutual love of poetry and the desire to discuss ideas and criticise each others work. In 1910 they published an anthology of their poems, *Veldsinger's Verse*, which included work by Alice Mabel Alder, Beatrice Allhusen and Mary Byron. The club was mostly concerned with the writing of what came to be called "veld and vlei" poetry - an adaptation of the mores of English romanticism to the South African landscape - although several members such as Francis Ernly Walrond, Denys Lefebvre and Alice Mabel Alder experimented with the new forms of Imagism and Symbolism. The women poets, for the most part influenced by their male colleagues, generally produced the same uninspired second-rate romanticism as the men. Yet Mary Byron and Beatrice Allhusen revealed their feminist inclinations in several of the poems that appeared in collections published separately under their own names. In "Love, the Creditor" and "It's Love that Pays", Beatrice Allhusen criticises the way in which romantic love is used to trap women into the unequal social contract of marriage.<sup>13</sup> For a woman, according to Allhusen, marriage means exchanging the "riches" of life for "the golden band" that protects her from "the world's shame and strife" but offers little else except rapid ageing and the loss of vitality. Mary Byron is even more forthright; in "Vita Nuova" she contradicts the Byronian dictum that love is a woman's whole existence by professing herself tired of the suffocating sensuality of love and longing for freedom. In "Forgiven" she challenges the stereotype of the 'fallen woman', for the persona of the poem sees her illegitimate child as a gift:

My shame? I laugh for very pride  
 Whom Love has crowned and deified  
 No more a thing defiled  
 For God has smiled  
 And with kind eyes, all undismayed,  
 Beneath my heart His hand has laid  
 A little child.<sup>14</sup>

In the 1920s and '30s women became more prolific as poets, publishing many individual collections. In this era in South Africa the general poetic climate was conservative, despite the impact of Roy Campbell, William Plomer and *Voorslag* in 1926. The poets most admired and set up as models were Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats and Tennyson, rather than the modernists W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot. Women poets, in general, most often wrote in imitation of the work of men, or produced versions of approved "women's poetry" - overly sentimental and cloying odes about religion, babies, and departed pets - that revealed the ways in which these poets had internalised society's assumptions about the "feminine sensibility" and its natural preserve within a patriarchal society.

Mary Morison Webster, who began to write in this period, internalises many of these assumptions, but her work is distinguished by its implicit criticism of the constraints attendant on them. Webster, who developed a precocious formal and technical competence, was recognised as a fine poet and several of her poems were included in anthologies. However, these were never the poems in which she explored, often indirectly, the social condition of women in her time. The major characteristic of Webster's work is her focus on suffering, sorrow, and despair - and yet she seemed unaware that her unhappiness and sense of alienation were a result of the structure of the society in which she lived. In her early poem "Caged", the plight of the caged bird, a "little, yearning yellow thing", evokes her sympathy for its inability to escape beyond the "heavy curtains" to freedom.<sup>15</sup> Webster's empathy with the bird indicates a subconscious knowledge of her own entrapment, although she lacks the awareness to make the connection in her poem.

Many of Mary Morison Webster's poems speak of betrayal and unrequited love, and while some seem to be poetic explorations of the psychology of betrayed women, they do suggest the poet's own difficulties in finding happiness in traditional heterosexual relationships. Webster never questions this failure, nor considers that socially determined gender relations might be the root cause of such unhappiness.

Instead she looks to herself and identifies her condition with that of women through the ages:

Yet is this love of noble lineage;  
 Not single in this stricken hour I stand,  
 Yea, clasp I at this moment by the hand  
 Proud queens that smoke like fires in their rage,  
 That not with song or viol could assuage  
 The heart's deep anguish, the long discontent,  
 But in their grievous hour to darkness went,  
 Their crowns laid by, and their proud heritage.  
 [Yet is this Love]<sup>16</sup>

In "Summons" the poet decides that she will weep no more, and so goes out at night to enjoy herself, "to ease this heart of mine". Yet at dawn, Sorrow personified comes to claim her:

'Twas Sorrow with my mother's face;  
 She led me through the rain,  
 Unto a dark and shadowed place,  
 Where I might weep again.<sup>17</sup>

There is no escape from sorrow: by giving Sorrow her mother's face, Webster reiterates her conception of this quality as part of the female condition, yet again without questioning why this should be so. In "Last Love", Webster's persona rebels against a stereotype that a potential lover would impose on her, but has internalised society's stereotypes of women to such an extent that she can only offer another in its place:

And, if you hold my hands, say not you found  
 A high-born Princess from the world at length,  
 With fearless brow and a heart tried to strength,  
 And plenteous hair grown nigh unto the ground,  
 But a mad, barefoot girl who lost her shoon,  
 So many nights with journeying to the moon.<sup>18</sup>

"Mad" and "barefoot" may, however, have been correlatives for Webster's own psychological state.

Webster's poem, "In a Cart, in the Sun" expresses her alienation from women in general, or rather from the social concept of womanhood and the reality that it masks.<sup>19</sup> The housewives that she observes with "lust in their eyes" purchasing live



ducks to be killed, contradict society's image of "womanhood, standing in the world for mercy and charity". Webster's middle-class sensibility is repelled by these "products of civilization" that "visit the hairdresser and the cinema" and might "even go to church and read poetry" while still apparently nurturing the primitive desire to kill. The poem also functions to express the distance between the social concept of "womanhood" and the reality of women's lives, where working-class women might indeed have to slaughter fowl to feed their families. Webster feels no sense of identification with *these* women, but judges them from her own obviously privileged position. (Her sense of female community seems to have been limited to the emotional sphere.) Her inability to cope with the world as she found it seems to have led, at times, to an almost Dickinsonian withdrawal: in "To You, Passing the Gate", Webster speaks of her life - "eating and sleeping, 'getting over' things (as one must), and the continual reading and writing of books".<sup>20</sup> She challenges a visitor who sees her as "a human being without much direction", and claims a rich inner life: "an itinerary of a tremendous and awe-inspiring kind". This is her defence against charges that she is "simply (rather foolishly) vegetating in a back room". There is something rather sad - even tragic - in the life of this gifted poet who wrote of sorrow, alienation, and withdrawal, without ever recognising the social sources of her predicament.

In the 1940s and '50s the most important poetic voices were those of Tania Van Zyl, Adèle Naudé and Elisabeth Eybers. (Eybers belonged to a group of Afrikaans poets known as the "dertigers", but she published a collection of translations of her work into English in 1948 entitled *The Quiet Adventure*.) Writing in a period of political upheaval in South Africa - the National party had come to power in 1948 and begun implementing its racial ideology - these women chose not to write on political topics. While poets such as Guy Butler, Anthony Delius, Roy McNab, R.N. Currey and David Wright sought to intervene on the cultural level with the liberal humanist voice of protest and anguished self-examination, the women poets more often wrote about the private, inner world. Yet while national politics might have been absent from their work, gender politics were not. Tania Van Zyl, especially, shows a feminist concern with the nature of patriarchy in her poem "Fathers". Van Zyl, an artist and sculptor as well as a poet, studied in Europe and was influenced by the modernist movements of Expressionism and Surrealism. "Fathers" shows these influences in its Ariel-like depiction of the oppression of women:

Under the beard of iron is the tree  
 to which he had tied her withholding endeavour.  
 The roots of the tree groaned above her head  
 for the wind with a recitation of despair  
 answered women tearing from timber and from earth  
 sweated limbs, smothered in falling leaves.<sup>21</sup>

In "She Waited", a more conventionally written poem, Van Zyl describes the fate of the woman intellectual or thinker:

Who saw her sitting  
 on a stone crowned peak,  
 face held in palms?  
 Her mind lost to the near  
 and to the distant  
 an ear travelling to infinity.

Where is she they ask?  
 No footprint discover,  
 only her shape solid  
 squared in ice waited.  
 The pause she was,  
 that interval held.  
 At what time would the sun  
 melting tilt her into the stream?<sup>22</sup>

Elisabeth Eybers, on the other hand, shows her resistance to patriarchy by writing poems in which she celebrates the strength of women. In "The Woman" she suggests that women's strength derives from her position as the guardian and originator of life:

The gaunt-faced Horseman, seeing her steady eyes,  
 halts in his charge, acknowledging defeat,  
 and hesitatingly inclines his scythe.  
 In *her* has deathlessness its custody:  
 the future quickens in the feeble beat  
 of life awakening primordially.<sup>23</sup>

However, this power is limited in the individual, for as she notes in "Sonnet", woman's "courage and audacity" that dares her "to ape the gods and so create" cannot override destiny:

for after her first challenging of death  
 all things are but a duel between her  
 and him, of which the end is very sure.<sup>24</sup>

In "Narrative" Eybers considers that the inner strength of women is also developed by their "waiting" in a society that seldom fulfils the expectations of women:

The years went by. By turns she woke and slept  
through the long hours of night, but every day  
she went, as women go, her casual way,  
and no one knew what patient tryst she kept.

...

And so at last the narrative has found  
in her its happy end: this tranquil strength  
is better than the thing she's waiting for.<sup>25</sup>

Adèle Naudé is the poet, of the three, who most clearly expresses her difficulties in writing within a masculine context. In "Lament" she considers the problems of trying to create "pearls of imagery" when so many male poets have claimed distinctive styles as their own.<sup>26</sup> Naudé provides a list of major figures from Wordsworth through Campbell to Butler, and ends rather ironically by declaring herself a "dumb wordsworthless poetess". Writing in a pre-feminist era, Naudé is not fully aware that she, as a woman poet, is inevitably outside of the establishment and marginal to its concerns. To the men within she is merely a "poetess". Naudé travelled extensively in Europe, America and the Far East, and it was in Europe that she was often to find her sources of inspiration. Given her position as a middle-class white woman, and the kind of education she would have received at the exclusive girls school she attended before she went on to the University of Cape Town, it is perhaps understandable that she often turned to Europe rather than to Africa for the topics of her poetry. As a poet she was most concerned with the cycles of life and the processes of life and death. In the almost Keatsian poem, "Pity the Spring", she considers the way in which youth contains the seeds of death - "Pity the spring that yet unknowing bears/The seeds of autumn's rotting fruit within"<sup>27</sup> - while in "Persephone" she adapts the vegetation myth of Demeter and Persephone to encompass her own relationship with her daughter.<sup>28</sup> In "Hands" she notes the way in which a woman's hands indicate the passages of her life, for the hands that once "held/Compellingly the reins/Of a runaway household" are now "crumpled and silent" and "corded up with hot pain".<sup>29</sup> Her poem "Rivers Running Inwardly" unites her concerns with the nature of the inner life and the processes of nature:

Rivers running inwardly,  
Slipping, dripping to the cave,  
Flowing slowly through the ages  
To petrify in wave on wave.

Slipping slowly to the cavern  
 Of the hollow heart inside,  
 Rivers flowing through a lifetime  
 Turn to stone and never rise.<sup>30</sup>

Most of the poets included in the Early Period are white middle-class women, and their poems have reflected the concerns of such women. As a result of the structures of race and class in South Africa, black women in general did not have access to the kind of education that would have allowed them to write poetry in English (should they have so desired). This does not mean that black women were not creative - in traditional tribal societies black women played an important artistic and educational role as performers of stories and poems. The ability to tell a story, for example, or to create a praise poem, was learnt by a black woman from her mother and grandmother. Stories were passed from generation to generation in oral form, and would encode the values of the tribe; the woman artist functioned in her society as the inculcator of morals in the young. Similarly, a praise poem created by a woman for a child would help to give that child a sense of its own identity. Women also composed work songs and lullabies to be sung as they went about their daily tasks. Little of the work from this period has been recorded, although efforts are now being made by Africanists to transcribe this oral tradition. In 1902 Charlotte Moor showed an interest in the language of African beadwork in her poem "A Letter from Machuda to Nozilwa";<sup>31</sup> in the 1920s the American, Natalie Curtis, translated (albeit from a male source), several songs of Zulu women, including a love song, "Igama Lo Tando", and a lullaby, "Igama Lo Bantwana".<sup>32</sup> A few privileged black women who gained access to a western education through the missionary schools produced poems in English which were published in the newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal*; these include Mrs A.C. Dube's "Africa: My Native Land" (1913), a hymn to Africa written in a Tennysonian romantic diction<sup>33</sup> - "how beautiful are thy hills and dales" - and Mavis M. Kwankwa's poem "Maybe" (1944).<sup>34</sup>

## 2) The Modern Period

The modern period commences in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and continues through to the 1980s. In South Africa this was a period of political turbulence: in the 1960s South Africa became a republic under Nationalist party rule and left the Commonwealth, events which added to the increasing tensions between black and white that produced the historic confrontations of Sharpeville (1960) and (1976). In women's history the 1960s and '70s were equally important, for

period of contemporary feminism that was to produce writers and theorists such as Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, Kate Millett, Gloria Steinem, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. The women's movement, growing as it did in France and America out of the leftist milieux of the May revolt and the civil rights movement, never took root in quite the same way in South Africa. Nor has it yet had quite the same impact. But it is apparent in the writing of many women poets that the ideas of the feminist revolution reached South Africa and were embraced on an individual level. Most poets writing in the early part of this period show some evidence of feminist thought - there is a great deal of anger directed against the oppressive structures of patriarchy. Unlike their predecessor, Mary Morison Webster, these poets are aware of the reasons for their anger.

A feature of the Modern Period is the noticeable increase in the number of women writing poetry and being published. This was due not only to the increased motivation offered by feminist recognition of women's value as writers, but also because of the general proliferation of literary magazines that offered women an outlet for their work. Credit must be given to Jack Cope as editor of *Contrast* (and the Mantis poets series published by David Philip) in the 1960s and '70s, and to Lionel Abrahams as editor of *The Purple Renoster* and *Sesame* (and Renoster books) in the 1970s and '80s, for their willingness to publish women's work. It is to be regretted that much of this work has, until now, been ignored by subsequent anthologists and literary critics.

Stella Helman, writing in the early 1950s, was a precursor to the angry poets of the 1960s and '70s. Her two collections, published privately, reflect a refusal to accept the gender definitions offered by society. There is something particularly contemporary and feminist about this woman who describes romantic love as "lust plus delusion/A fiction". In "Claptrap" she attacks role division where men are given outlets for their sexual energy, even though it is in 'wars' and 'carnage':

Men are doglike  
 In the simplicity of their needs.  
 But women in their emptiness,  
 Their smarting helpless emptiness  
 Are jeeringly proffered  
 Only the gritty salve  
 Of sublimation.<sup>35</sup>

This anger against the male world is taken up by Ruth Miller who also wrote in the 1950s but published her two collections in the mid 1960s. In "Galatea" she revises the Pygmalion myth so that Galatea expresses her anger at the transformation wrought in her - "I was myself before you touched me. I." - a reflection perhaps of Miller's own anger at the way in which patriarchal society attempts to transform women to conform to masculine ideals.<sup>36</sup> Miller, as a poet, has been taken up by the masculine establishment because her tough existentialist vision and her modernist style allow her work to be assimilated into the mainstream tradition: she is often grouped together with her male contemporaries Douglas Livingstone and Sydney Clouts as a South African modernist poet.<sup>37</sup> However, this inclusion has meant that the particularly feminine element of her work has been suppressed. While critics have noted the tragic circumstances of her life - her unhappy marriage, her son's death at the age of fourteen, and her own early death from cancer - none have considered that the sources of her anger are often her sense of frustration at being at odds with a masculine world. In "The Spoon" she considers psychic distortion:

Nothing is ever right in the spoon's bright mirror  
 Nothing but is converted to gross error.  
 The silver bowl has no need to reflect  
 That which mirrors perform quite adequately -  
 But even *their* left is right. Perhaps it is best  
 To accept distortion, to remain sane seldom and secretly.<sup>38</sup>

There is even more repressed anger manifesting itself on the symbolic level in "Submarine", where Miller defines the submarine in sexual terms as a "sleek phallus" used by the "lords/Of earth and sky" to "ram/Through forests of throttled night and rubber weed". She then offers a graphic description of the destruction of the phallic submarine as the sea resists the invasion:

The sea humps, thick and crammed.  
 Itself upon itself pressed in coiled weight;  
 Gathers a muscled push, one huge Laocoön heave,  
 Rivets melt like motes, bulwarks sway gelid,  
 The steel is mothened and butterflied. There are no more men.<sup>39</sup>

Although anger is present in their writing, many women would probably have liked to have expressed their feelings more openly, but were unable because of social constraints. Women are not socialised to be assertive or even aggressive, and more often repress than express their anger. This is the topic of Petra Müller's poem "Shall I Lodge", in which she longs to give way to the anger mounting inside her following a

lover's desertion. She calls to mind the examples of King David and King Lear - ironically both powerful men who were able to vent their anger in impressive ways - and then records her recognition of her own social limitations in a world where women must "go quietly":

No, I shall go quietly among the people as before,  
 Noting merely how the shadows lengthen prematurely  
 across the winter streets.  
 But O for Samson and the satisfaction  
 of the first fine cracking, deep within the temple pillars.<sup>40</sup>

It was perhaps, in part, this inability to find outlets for pent-up angers that led to the suicide, at the age of 32, of the Afrikaans poet Ingrid Jonker. After her death, a selection of her work was published in English under the editorship of Jack Cope and William Plomer. As a writer and a person of liberal sympathies, Jonker found herself in conflict with the ethos of apartheid society, and of her respected middle-class father who disowned her. Consequently she used her writing as a means of escaping from the pain of her life, as she notes in "L'art Poétique":

To hide myself away like a secret  
 in a sleep of lambs and of vine-cuttings  
 To conceal myself  
 in the salute of a great ship  
 To hide away  
 in the violence of a simple recollection  
 in your drowned hands  
 to hide myself away in my word.<sup>41</sup>

One of the most impressive poems in the collection is "Pregnant Woman" in which she expresses the conflicts surrounding the physical experience of bringing life into a world of sorrow and degeneration:

I lie under the crust of the night singing,  
 curled up in the sewer, singing,  
 and my bloodchild lies in the water  
 ...  
 and the tadpole glides  
 in the slime of the stream  
 in my body  
 my foam-white image  
 but sewer, O sewer  
 my bloodchild lies in the water.<sup>42</sup>



Even in this poem there is subconscious conflict, for Jonker seems to have internalised the masculine belief that the reproductive processes of a woman's body are somehow unclean, associated with blood and "slime ... in my body". Jonker's concern with the injustices of South African society are expressed in her poem "The Child who was shot Dead by Soldiers at Nyanga", where she explains her belief that "the child is not dead" but lives on in symbolic form, he is "everywhere" and fighting for his rights.<sup>43</sup>

Two poets who wrote of the psychological stresses of their lives as women were Phyllis Haring and Eva Bezwoda. In "Fantasy" Phyllis Haring desires to be liberated from the constraints of her woman's body:

There are times when the skin,  
Where it joins down the middle of my back,  
Splits open and lets me out -

This allows her the freedom to possess the world:

And if you will see the faint spirits of tea-cups,  
Of bus tickets and worn shoes; if you will see  
The haunting in hotel rooms and auditoriums,  
Or the large ghosts of whales and cabin-trunks  
- Even of air-ports - that's what I am, at times  
When my skin splits open and lets me out.<sup>44</sup>

Using similar body imagery in her poem "Galatea", Eva Bezwoda (like Ruth Miller) speaks of Galatea's rebellion against her "creation" by Pygmalion.<sup>45</sup> According to Bezwoda, Galatea has been "broken out of stone", is "completed", given consciousness and deified by her creator, yet she "screamed for the stillness of stone". In both cases images of entrapment are used by the poets: Haring wishes to escape from her body to freedom, while Bezwoda's Galatea wishes to abandon her woman's form and return to her primal state. Both poets articulate anger at the limitations placed on those born into a female body.

South African women poets not only use anger and protest to make their statements; some, like Jeni Couzyn, use humour. In "The Red Hen's Last Will and Testament to the Last Cock on Earth", she assumes the persona of a hen who announces:



Mr Cockatoo I'm through.

You  
can take your splendid  
reasoning and quick  
precision and elegant  
vision somewhere  
else.

....

All the hens in the  
farmyard feel exactly as  
I do about you. We have  
decided to quit.

You all  
can take off on your  
massive Coxes High Powered  
Jet Propelled  
wings.

We hens will stay here  
laying our eggs in the  
warm straw, dreaming of  
foxes.<sup>46</sup>

Couzyn, born and educated in South Africa, has spent most of her writing career in England and Canada. She writes openly of lesbianism: in her poem "The Love Woman" she expresses physical desire for another woman.<sup>47</sup> Possibly because she was writing in a more liberal atmosphere than was available in South Africa she felt free to express these aspects of her sexuality. Whatever the reasons, erotic love between women is a subject about which South African women poets, or their publishers, have been most reticent.

One of the most exciting developments of the late 1970s and 1980s was the increase in the number of black women writing poetry in English. In rural communities black women still function in their traditional roles as storytellers and poets, as can be seen in the praise poems collected by Africanist Elizabeth Gunner such as the "Izibongo" of Majele of Hlabisa:

I am she who cuts across the game reserve  
That no girl crosses  
I am the boldest of the bold, outfacer of wizards.  
Obstinate perseverer,  
The nation swore at me and ate their words.  
She cold shoulders kings and despises mere commoners.<sup>48</sup>

However, mass urbanisation of blacks has meant that more black women are receiving formal education. Although this education is the inferior "bantu education" introduced by Verwoerd in the 1960s, it nevertheless enables black women to articulate their ideas in written poetry in English. The establishment in 1978 of *Staffrider* magazine gave black women writers an outlet for their work. Many of them joined the writers' groups that were fostered by the radical-democratic post-1976 atmosphere that engendered *Staffrider*. The aim of the magazine was to provide a forum for people's culture and for writing that would promote the spirit of the struggle. While black women's poetry of this period was primarily concerned with racial politics, they also turned their attention to gender politics. Black women, while "feminist" in their own context, often have little time for western forms of feminism, seeing these as the preserve of middle-class white women. They perceive white women to be their oppressors in a class structure where black women provide labour for middle-class white "madams". For black women who suffer under the triple oppression of race, class and gender, liberation must necessarily free them from all three forms. As a result their writing tends to focus on all three areas and not merely on gender.

At first the *Staffrider* poets concentrated on the hardships of black women's lives under apartheid. They were influenced by the protest poetry being written by their men, which was directed at highlighting the injustices suffered by blacks in this country. In 1979 Ntombiyaka Ka Biyela KaXhoka describes the effects of her daily sufferings:

The wrinkles on my face  
 The rings under my eyes  
 The twisted drooping mouth  
 The sadness in my eyes  
 Are born in the bitterness of  
 Black life.<sup>49</sup>

Boitumelo Makhema Mofokeng voices the anguish of the black mother who conceives only to "throw away" her children as cheap labour in a capitalist society:

My children have gone to the towns  
 To seek bread  
 They never returned  
 They went to the mines  
 To dig gold  
 They died in Shaft 14  
 They went to the mills

They died in the grinding stones  
 They went to ISCOR  
 Their hands were guillotined  
 My children  
 Children of blood, blood of my children.<sup>50</sup>

Sizakele Ndlovu expresses the pain suffered by black women when traditional social arrangements break down under the pressures of the apartheid system of migrant labour and temporary residence in urban townships:

My husband-to-be has forgotten me  
 He no longer comes to me  
 For I'm disfigured.  
 I'll have a baby  
 Who will call me mom.  
 But who will it call Dad?  
 I hate love that drove me into this  
 For now it's no more.  
 It is so disappointing  
 For the father claims not to be one.  
 He is irresponsible  
 He has exploited me.  
 But I was not aware,  
 For he used to kiss me.<sup>51</sup>

In the post 1976 years black women became more radical, influenced by the poetry of resistance that arose when black poets rejected protest poetry as ineffectual, directed as it was at a small liberal white readership which might be sympathetic but was powerless to bring change. The new poetry was militant, directed at fellow blacks, and aimed at promoting revolution. Women, in their turn, included gender politics in their increased radicalisation. In 1987 Gloria Mtungwa expressed her conception of the black woman's part in the struggle:

Fragility, flimsy womanhood  
 flowers on her birthdays  
 luxurious apartments and flashy cars  
 have never been her aspiration  
 ...  
 Standing defiantly  
 in face of brutality  
 resulting from corrupt illegal minority.

...  
 Her beauty is not her criterion  
 but justice for all humanity, person to person.

[Militant Beauty]<sup>52</sup>

In "Fighting Women" Duduzile Ndelu commemorates women who have been imprisoned for their political activities, and in "Dedication" Susan Lamu sings the praises of activist Helen Joseph:

Helen Joseph has defeated aggression,  
 Her soul is free from racial contamination,  
 Mother, lover of freedom  
 Dauntless ever,  
 Look at her refusing bread in old age  
 Eating rock  
 With the downtrodden,  
 Her heart grows fonder, profounder

Her face is carved from steel  
 Her eye is gentle and brave  
 She enters the dock, stands still  
 Listens carefully: the indictment read...  
 It says nothing, nothing base about her  
 Not anything to brand her foe of the people,  
 The people she lovingly serves  
 So she swallows and takes a deep breath.<sup>53</sup>

The image of women promoted by these poets is one of heroic strength and courage - they are determined to play their part in the liberation struggle. Even ordinary working-class black women are seen to have inherent strength; in "Domestic Workers" - a poem written by a group of domestic workers in a literacy programme - the women consider their problem and its solution:

We are women. We are mothers.  
 Too much work can break our bodies.  
 Too much suffering can break our hearts.

....  
 But we find friendship if we meet together.  
 And we find answers if we talk together.  
 And we find strength if we work together.  
 And we find hope if we stand together.<sup>54</sup>

It is interesting to note that these black women's voices have also been largely ignored by the anthologists and critics who have documented the black poetry of the 1970s and '80s. In anthologies such as *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, *Voices from Within*, *One Day in June*, and the *Staffrider* tenth anniversary publication, black women poets were given minimal representation.

Probably the most overtly feminist of the black poets now writing is Gcina Mhlope, who is also an actor, dramatist and storyteller. Mhlope, a young woman of immense creative energy and ability, has won awards in England and America for her acting. She was also resident director at the Market Theatre, Johannesburg in 1989/90, but now devotes most of her time to storytelling and creative writing. Mhlope's work tends to fuse elements of traditional women's performance art with western forms: she is a storyteller who tells her traditional folk tales to contemporary audiences. She also writes and performs her own poems. In "We are at War" she exhorts women to join in the war against all forms of oppression:

Women of my country  
 Young and old  
 Black and white  
 we are at war  
 The winds are blowing  
 against us  
 Laws are ruling  
 against us  
 We are at war  
 But do not despair  
 We are the winning type  
 Let us fight on  
 Forward ever  
 Backward never.<sup>55</sup>

While most of the work by black women discussed so far has been written or published in the Johannesburg area, mention must also be made of the Cape Town poets, Gladys Thomas and Mavis Smallberg. Gladys Thomas first published her poems in 1972 in *Cry Rage* (together with works by James Matthews). The collection was subsequently banned. The title, *Cry Rage*, indicates the anger of the poems, and in "Leave Me Alone" she confronts a white woman across the divide of race and class:

I tear my hungry babe from my breast  
 To come and care for yours  
 Yours grow up fine  
 But, oh God, not mine  
 From school and beach yours I fetch  
 And wonder if school mine did reach

....

My man comes home body all pain  
 From working all day in sun and rain  
 No woman or son in sight  
 So out again into the night  
 On corners he will stand  
 His wine bottle in hand

Your son tucked up in bed  
 Your man in front of fire red  
 You lay and wait for him in bed  
 My man still not at home  
 My sons in streets still roam.<sup>56</sup>

Thomas also published poems in the anthology *Exiles Within: 7 South African Poets* in 1986, and in "Soweto 1976", from this selection she commemorates this important date in the history of black resistance:

The sun rose to give us light,  
 in Soweto  
 We started the day like any other day  
 in Soweto  
 ...  
 And as we count our dead,  
 our courage, dignity and sorrow,  
 your day is dark,  
 we don't forgive,  
 we don't forget!  
 Let the sun rise to light our tomorrows,  
 in Soweto.<sup>57</sup>

Mavis Smallberg, on the other hand, only started publishing her work in the 1980s. In her long poem "June" she recounts the experiences of a woman who is arrested, detained and "interrogated" by the security police:

They came at night,  
 At dead of night  
 Two huge men  
 With deadened eyes.  
 My name was called,  
 And dazed with sleep and fright,  
 I was taken from my cell  
 And thrust into their car that night.  
 They did not state my destination.  
 I did not ask.<sup>58</sup>

Another significant group of black women poets writing in the 1970s and '80s were the exile poets - women who were forced into exile by banning orders or the fear of imprisonment as a result of their political activism. The most prominent of these poets were Christine Qunta, Amelia House, Rebecca Matlou and Lindiwe Mabuza. Their work was not available in South Africa, and they wrote about their exile for a largely foreign readership. Amelia House sums up their feelings of nostalgia and alienation:

exile  
 is not leaving  
 or coming to  
 kentucky  
 or being in london  
 paris or rome  
 but knowing there is no easy  
 going  
 back<sup>59</sup>

Two interesting aspects of the late 1980s within South Africa were the participation of women in the cultural wings of the trade union movement led by Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions), and the establishment of Serita Sa Sechaba, a publishing house dedicated, at its inception, to the exclusive publication of work by South African women. In the mid 1980s the focus of political struggle shifted to the UDF (United Democratic Front) under the leadership of Cosatu. Although women were still a minority both as members and in leadership positions, some overcame domestic and social obstacles to produce plays and poems. The most prominent of these was Nise Malange whose work was published in the anthology of worker poetry *Black Mamba Rising*. Malange is primarily an oral poet; drawing on the oral tradition of her ancestors she crafts her poems to be performed at meetings and mass gatherings rather than to be read in printed form. As a member of the

progressive democratic movement, she identifies with the working class. Her thematic emphasis is on the community and communal experience.<sup>60</sup> Recently she has begun to focus more specifically on the experiences of women in the community that she represents, contributing work to *Speak*, a woman's journal published for working-class women in English and Zulu. Seriti Sa Sechaba, on the other hand, published a variety of work written by women. The publishing house was conceived by black women for black women, and they have, to date, published two collections of poetry - *A Pot of Poetry* by Cikizwe Mokoena and *Moment of Truth* by Portia Rankoane. Seriti Sa Sechaba probably represents a more conservative impulse, since it defines poetry in western terms rather than in communal and African terms. Because their focus is on the written word and poetry in its traditional western form - the inner reflections of a single privileged subject to be read by a single reader - the work of both Mokoena and Rankoane lacks the political immediacy of Malange's. Although both poets touch on political topics, their focus is on individual rather than communal experience.<sup>61</sup>

In the last decade of the twentieth century it is encouraging to note that women in South Africa, both black and white, are coming into their own as poets and critics. Not only are black women focusing their attention on and writing of women's topics as part of their struggle for social liberation, but white women poets too are beginning to produce the kind of poetry that Elaine Showalter termed 'female': poetry that does not depend on men's work - either in imitation or resistance - but finds its subjects in women's lives.<sup>62</sup> It is woman-centred. Cherry Clayton's "Poem for Jean" and "Unwritten Poems for my Mother" are examples of such work; in the former she writes a sensitive elegy for a woman friend and in the latter she celebrates her bond with her mother through a series of shared memories that represent moments of emotional intensity.<sup>63</sup> In "Monet", Marta Proctor recounts the easy intimacy between two women who share an interest in painting:

After working in her winter garden  
We go inside  
She brings out two books on Monet.<sup>64</sup>

Ingrid de Kok, one of the most distinctive young poets of the 1980s, also writes of a community of shared female experience in "Women, Mourning", a poem in memory of a deceased friend.<sup>65</sup> De Kok can be stridently feminist, as in her poem "Woman in the Glass", where she debunks male fantasies of female sexuality - "I am not the woman in the train/who pulls your hand between her legs/and then looks out of the window"<sup>66</sup> - but her best work is that in the "female" mode, as in "Small Passing" where she writes a



poem for a white woman who has given birth to a stillborn child. Although, as she notes in the epigraph, this woman was told by a man not to mourn "because the trials and horrors suffered daily by black women in this country are more significant than the loss of a white child", de Kok knows that black women will share in a community of female sympathy and love:

They will not tell you your suffering is white.  
 They will not say it is just as well.  
 They will not compete for the ashes of infants.  
 I think they may say to you:

Come with us to the place of mothers.  
 We will stroke your flat empty belly,  
 Let you weep with us in the dark,  
 and arm you with one of our babies  
 to carry home on your back.<sup>67</sup>

De Kok's poem suggests that this feminine sympathy can transcend barriers of race and class. As women poets proceed through the 1990s in the "new" South Africa, it is to be hoped that this sense of feminine community will motivate much of the poetry that is still to be written.

iii) **Searching for Words: Towards a Gynocritical Model for the Study of South African Women's Poetry**

The previous section of this chapter has demonstrated clearly the viability of a gynocentric tradition of women's poetry in South Africa. The purpose of that section was to (re)cover the terrain of poetry; yet having rendered these poets visible (and audible) within the poetic landscape, it now becomes necessary to establish a mode of critical discourse that will do justice to this newly recovered work. For women poets the search for words has often been a painful process. Women have been required to alienate themselves from their gender identity, to assume the language of men, and to express themselves in terms of discourses shaped within an androcentric society. How, then, would a Feminist critic analyse and evaluate the work of South African women poets, and what are the methods such a critic might employ? Masculine paradigms and models cannot be used, or even - I believe - appropriated and adapted. I have shown elsewhere how the masculine poetic tradition in South African English letters has functioned to marginalise and exclude women, rendering them as absences within the critical discourse of the institutionalised study of literary writing.<sup>68</sup> Yet despite their marginalisation, in South Africa women poets have constantly fought to affirm their presence, both as women and as poets. It will be my aim in this section of the chapter to develop a basic theoretical model that will acknowledge the voices of these poets and attempt to provide an outline of the parameters within which such poetry may be examined.

In contemporary Feminist scholarship critical and intellectual energy has been focused primarily on theory and the novel. Very little work has been done on attempting to provide models for studying women's poetry, although recently Feminist critics, especially in America and England, have begun to explore this area. I will use their work as a point of reference in my own attempts to provide a model that can be applied to the work of South African women. In beginning to construct such a model it is necessary to ask the questions: What is it that such a model must do? What kind of information must such a model provide? American radical Feminist critic and poet Adrienne Rich suggests a starting point: "A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name - and therefore live - afresh."<sup>69</sup> Rich argues that a radical re-reading of androcentric "literature" would need to concentrate on ways

in which language - and this must include the language of poetry - has trapped and liberated women, and she encourages women to take the initiative in the crucial activities of "seeing" and "naming" from a fresh perspective. In other words, Feminists must formulate their own theory and discourse. Yet it is important to heed Elaine Showalter's warning that in framing a "gynocritical" model, the Feminist critic must develop this with reference to women's work and women's criticism: "So long as we look to androcentric models for our most basic principles - even if we revise them by adding the Feminist frame of reference - we are learning nothing new ... I do not think that Feminist criticism can find a usable past in the androcentric critical tradition. It has more to learn from international Feminist theory than from another seminar on the masters."<sup>70</sup> Showalter's caveat in effect means that the Feminist critic of South African women's poetry should not attempt to adapt current theoretical models for the study of poetry, such as those proposed by contemporary critics of South African poetry such as Stephen Watson, Douglas Reid Skinner or Michael Chapman - nor would she attempt to insert women's poetry into the existing canon.<sup>71</sup> Feminist inquiry into this field needs to turn away from the overwhelmingly androcentric, and often misogynist, tradition and to begin to listen to, and learn from, the voices of the women poets on the margins.

\* \* \* \* \*

The primary way in which a feminine critical paradigm would differ markedly from its masculine counterpart would be in terms of aesthetics and value judgements - since it is in this area that women have been excluded as poets. It is clear that the criteria used to create the South African poetic canon have been, and continue to be, gender-specific. The predominant critical approach to poetry practised in South Africa in this century - formalism or "prac crit" - has evolved from the intellectual endeavours of Anglo-American male critics, and even contemporary historical and sociological criticism, that practised by academics such as Michael Chapman and Kelwyn Sole, examines poetry within the confines of masculine social and historical parameters. To be effective in reinstating the woman as poet in South Africa, a feminine discourse needs to develop a poetics based in the history and sociology of women as a marginalised group. American critic Josephine Donovan outlines the basis for such a discourse:

Women's aesthetic and ethical judgements, when authentic, are rooted in woman-identified, or woman-centred epistemology. That epistemology derives from women's cultural experience and practice (praxis). To understand women's art one must have a knowledge of women's experience

and practice. A women's poetics will be constructed from comprehensive studies of women's stylistics and thematics, but those studies must be informed by an understanding of women's ways of seeing, a woman's epistemology.<sup>72</sup>

Donovan's proposal that a "women's poetics" must be based in a women's epistemology is a valuable point of departure, but can only be accepted in the South African context with two modifications: firstly, Donovan's insistence on the authenticity of women's experience must not be seen as a sanctioning of biological essentialism; and secondly, one must accept that in South Africa the community of women is not homogeneous and that there is, therefore, no single or universal "women's experience".

In the first instance, it is my contention that "women's experience" is not an essentialist category - rather what constitutes women's experience is determined by socially and culturally imposed gender roles which are formed by cultural gender politics. Women's experience *is* different, but it is so because women are socialised differently to men. It is difficult to speak about the "authenticity" of their experience if this is the case, since all experience will be "authentic", unless one accepts that Donovan is referring to women's experience unmediated by androcentric assumptions about women's inferiority and women's "place". In the second instance, it is important to note that the community of women in South Africa is heterogeneous, and that the "experience" of white middle-class women who live under gender oppression will be separate and distinct from that of working-class and black women who must cope with the oppression of class and race as well as gender. It is therefore not possible to develop a single women's poetics since allowances must be made, in the critical study of the work of women, for intersections of issues of race and class with those of gender. The importance of such distinctions can clearly be seen in an analysis of the Jennifer Davids poem "Searching for Words":

Searching for words  
to contain the morning  
I looked beyond the line of trees  
at the white sky  
hung in the branches

And the words swarmed out  
like bits of black grit  
from the dark spreading pine  
cutting the sky  
and darkening my mind  
till I turned away

turned back to a garden  
 overgrown with words  
 sharp as blades

I searched  
 till bleeding  
 I found  
 a flower  
 with a face  
 black as the sun<sup>73</sup>

Read from a purely Feminist or gendered perspective, the poem records the difficulties of a woman poet in her "search for words". Davids focuses on the painful nature of her search, where "words/sharp as blades" cut into her until she bleeds. Yet the search is not fruitless, for it culminates in the discovery, in the garden of words, of a flower "with a face/black as the sun". This climax might suggest that the "flower" of poetry held by women poets is a dark and negative gift, one imbued with the energy of the sun, but nevertheless bitter. The Feminist critic might conclude that even when Davids finds creative energy to "contain" her experience, its face is dark and destructive because she is bound within a masculine poetic tradition of "words/sharp as blades". Yet if the critic is sensitive to the issues of race, it becomes clear that the black woman poet is also learning to negotiate her way within a tradition that is not only androcentric, but Eurocentric. The emphasis on darkness and blackness does highlight sombreness and pain - but the flower whose face is "black as the sun" is also a symbol for black creative energy, an energy that must flower in the garden of words, so long the preserve of white middle-class men. The fact that Davids looks up at the "white sky" suggests that the transcendent realm of poetry is dominated by white writers, yet the flower whose face is "black as the sun" presupposes an energy that can fill the sky and overwhelm the whiteness. The poem is therefore ambiguous, but its readings multiply to a critic who considers both race and gender. The creative experience of a black woman poet such as Jennifer Davids also includes elements of class conflict and oppression. Her best known piece, "Poem for my Mother", illustrates class conflict, for in becoming a poet Davids locates herself within a middle-class group of educated women, and this in turn places her at a remove from her working-class mother. The poem records their failure to "meet" on the issue of her creativity:

A poem isn't all  
 there is to life, you said  
 with your blue-ringed gaze  
 scanning the page  
 once looking over my shoulder  
 and back at the immediate  
 dirty water

and my words  
 being clenched  
 smaller and  
 smaller.<sup>74</sup>

Josephine Donovan, who proposed the idea of a women's epistemology as the basis of a women's poetics, also identifies "structural conditions" that have shaped women's lives and therefore, their world views, and uses these in her suggested "women's poetics".<sup>75</sup> Several of these proposals may also be usefully adapted for formulating a discourse of South African women's poetry. The first condition she points to is that of oppression:

Women, whether in community or in isolation, share a condition of oppression, or otherness, that is imposed by governing patriarchal or androcentric ideologies. Women as a group, therefore, share certain awarenesses that are common to oppressed groups. There is a psychology of oppression, of colonisation ... aspects of the colonised mentality have been described by a number of theorists, notably Franz Fanon ... one of the most important manifestations is the "internalisation of otherness", a psychic alienation that is fundamentally schizophrenic.<sup>76</sup>

Donovan classifies women as a colonised group, one that has been colonised by men. As such they have been forced to submit to the will or power of the dominant male culture. They have had to suppress or relegate to a secondary place their own cultural values and their own experience. Women are taught to accept the values of masculine culture as primary and to internalise such values: these include a world view that sees women as the "other". The internalisation of otherness produces a psychic alienation akin to schizophrenia since women - especially women writers and artists - must develop two selves. The poetic self attempts to create a persona who can participate in the dominant culture, while the feminine self necessarily lives in and partakes of the subculture of women. The inevitable psychic alienation manifests itself as neurosis, sometimes as extreme as that of Sylvia Plath, which led to suicide, but often in more subtle ways that can only be discovered by a critic sensitive to these currents in



women's poetry. Here, for example, are some of the ways in which South African women poets have expressed their sense of alienation and otherness:

I set aside the things I wear,  
Beads, silk, and mundane stuff;  
Still my anxious body's there,  
I can not get bare enough.

Not till I shed flesh and bone,  
Divest myself of clay, I'll be  
Quite sufficiently alone  
For mine ownself's company.

(Mary Morison Webster "I Set Aside")<sup>77</sup>

A woman's hands always hold something:  
A handbag, a vase, a child, a ring, an idea.  
My hands are tired of holding  
They simply want to fold themselves.  
On a crowded bus, I watched a nun's empty hands  
Till I reminded myself that she clutched God.  
My hands are tired of holding.  
I'd gladly let them go, and watch a pair of hands  
Run ownerless through the world  
Scattering cooking pots and flowers and rings.

(Eva Bezwoda "A Woman's Hands")<sup>78</sup>

The case with the work of black women is more complex, since in South Africa black women have, so far, identified primarily with black men as part of an oppressed group that has been colonised in racial, geographic and cultural terms. The black woman writer will also feel alienated, but she is more likely to identify the source of her alienation in the hegemonic white culture (although many contemporary black women are beginning to realise that issues of race and gender are interrelated and that both must be addressed in their struggle for decolonisation). In terms of racial oppression - and many would argue that racial oppression is still the most important determinant in their daily lives - black women identify white women as part of the colonising group. This tends to prevent a sense of shared gender struggle between black women and white women, and ensures that black women will express their alienation in different terms. Black women poets not only face the conflict between the writing self and the woman's self, but they must also cope with added conflict between the dominant white culture and their own oppressed black culture, between the white bourgeoisie and the black working class, and between different class interests within their own social

formations. Political convictions have often led them to valorise traditional black culture as an oppositional gesture to the will of the white coloniser, but this leads to further internalised conflicts between the patriarchal values of black culture and women's aspirations. A discourse of women's poetry that aims to do justice to the work of black women poets in South Africa must take into account these psychic dislocations in its reading of their work. For such poets, issues of race and class interface with those of gender. However, in the case of both groups of women writers, "the construction of a women's poetics" must be seen as a part of the "conscientisation" process, and gynocriticism as a form of "revolutionary praxis".<sup>79</sup>

The second "structure of experience" identified by Josephine Donovan as shaping women's art is the fact that women have always been located primarily in the domestic or private sphere.<sup>80</sup> While women, especially black working-class women, have been economically active for almost the entire twentieth century, in cultural terms women's place is still considered to be the home and rearing of children her special obligation, whether it be her own home and children or that of her "madam". In the past, and to a certain extent even now, this has meant that women have been socialised differently to men: girls have been trained to focus their interest primarily on the domestic sphere, learning to maintain a home and care for a family, while boys learn to strive and aspire to things outside of the home, and are psychologically equipped to make their way in the public world of men's affairs. While such unequal cultural conditioning results in women being less prepared to succeed within a competitive market economy, it also inevitably produces different modes of thinking within the two groups. Women learn to focus on their immediate environment, on everyday realities; men learn to aspire toward intangible but rewarding goals. Women are involved in the repetitive and cyclic tasks of housework and child-rearing; men are generally involved in the linear progression of careers, if they belong to the middle class. (Working-class [black] men tend to be involved in repetitive and cyclic tasks in factories and mines similar in nature to those of women, and in South Africa this has produced a psychology of oppression and alienation in racial terms similar to that produced in gender terms in women.) Domestic tasks are repetitive and interruptible - public careers ascend in linear fashion and are rarely interrupted. This means that women will, more often, tend to think in cyclic modes, while men will think in linear modes. Transferred to the realm of poetry, this concept means that the trope of the quest or journey - whether expressed as Wordsworth's aspiration towards the sublime or T.S. Eliot's journey through the shattered waste land of his culture - is a particularly masculine mode of thinking. As Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi notes: "Both history and story, traditionally so full



of quests as to be synonymous with them, may not be formally appropriate to express traditional female experience."<sup>81</sup> A women's poetics would, therefore, not denigrate women's poetry because it has failed to engage with such overtly masculine modes of creative thinking, rather it would seek to valorise the feminine ways in which women writers have expressed their world and their experiences of it in poetry. Careful observation of domestic immediacies and shorter pieces of work, instead of being trivialised, may instead give an added dimension to our poetry in both social and aesthetic terms. Moira Lovell's poem "Making Bread", for example, brings a transcendent quality to a simple household task:

I who will bear no children,  
 Hold in the plastic womb of my hands  
 The breathing dough. In thick living folds  
 It stretches warmly through my fingers  
 And oozing, binds my knuckles  
 In its sluggish, pulsing flow.  
 Nestling again in my cupped palms  
 The naked mass exudes its life-stench.

In a film of sweat. Breathing the smell  
 Of its being, I drown, mindlessly  
 Succumbing to the rhythm of growth.  
 And when it has expanded enough  
 I see myself pressing the life-ball  
 Into a little tin coffin. Trembling,  
 I recoil from the dark cremation  
 Which will dessicate my dough into bread;  
 Hold the life-pulse in my hands instead.<sup>82</sup>

This particular poem has a feminine focus: it brings together traditional feminine concepts of childbirth and homemaking in a piece that concerns the larger issues of a woman's role as the protector of new life. Perhaps, in a gendered society, a feminine path to the transcendent may not be through traditional religion or romanticised nature or any of the other masculine routes; it may be through simple tasks that put the woman poet in touch with the sources of life and growth - such as baking bread.

As a social and cultural group women also have in common the physiological experiences of their female bodies. The most common of these is menstruation, but many others also share the experience of childbirth. The common experience of monthly menstruation may reinforce women's view of their lives as cyclic and

interruptible, but it also provides an indicator of an important female rite of passage, as noted by Marilyn Keegan:

One afternoon  
just after I'd turned fourteen  
I would walk under a shell-white moon  
to the mine canteen  
for my Kotex with loops

Mrs van Aswegen would lean to listen,  
smile at me, sisterly  
but with bloodshot eyes and wolfish lips.  
She'd disappear behind the counter  
come back the secret messenger,  
then slide over  
a square, brown paper bag..

And I would walk home, delicately  
pinching  
off rose-buds that swung  
over the wire mesh fence,  
hoping that no-one would see  
the change in me  
but hoping they would.<sup>83</sup>

In addition, the female-specific experience of childbirth provides a range of poetic experience entirely unavailable to men, and it is probably precisely for this reason that childbirth is generally a taboo subject in poetry (except where it has been appropriated by men as a trope for male creativity). For women it is a real and often miraculous physical experience, as for example, for Tess Koller:

I journeyed last night to a far halt  
My mother's mothers knew.  
The sea plied criss-cross weft and shed its rind  
in the spin and loom of my tide,  
The tide that sliced me small with its flooded scythe  
And burgled my bones.  
I sped the blooded dew.

The mountains last night were the same walls  
My mother's mothers balked.  
The great crags clawed back toward the floor  
Of the sky and tore on the caul  
That covered every gleam, every thread of light.  
Those craters I toiled.  
Those steepes perforce I walked.  
("I Journeyed Last Night")<sup>84</sup>

In her long poem "Woman with Child", Susan A. Wood also celebrates the growth of new life:

...  
 The baby's turned - the doctor says -  
 head well down and waiting for birth.  
 And I know you are there, immobile,  
 your universe become  
 a hoop of muscle  
 and a crown of bone.  
 Through my body  
 I have sung to you  
 of perpetual love  
 lulled you with the pulses  
 of my breath and heart  
 and to you I have seemed  
 unending  
 ...<sup>85</sup>

However, not all women see this experience as solely celebratory. Here, for example, is an extract from Ingrid Jonker's ambiguous poem "Pregnant Woman":

I lie under the crust of night singing,  
 curled up in the sewer, singing,  
 and my bloodchild lies in the water.  
 ...  
 Still singing flesh-red our blood-song,  
 I and my yesterday,  
 my yesterday hangs under my heart,  
 my wild lullaby, my lullaby world,  
 and my heart that sings like a cicada;  
 my cicada-heart sings like a cicada,  
 but sewer O sewer  
 my bloodchild lies in the water.<sup>86</sup>

An even darker vision is that of Ruth Miller in "Voicebox":

I have known her since I was a child.  
 I recall her in the suffusion of one morning  
 With her firstborn in the incredible bed,  
 Its white horizon steppes stretching flatly  
 Past the headlands of the two fat pillows,  
 Furrowed with grooves of valley legs and loins;

Biblical birthing of the dark damp fur,  
 The cracked egg of the baby's skull repeating  
 "In, out breath; save me from harm  
 I am egg thin, have mercy on me Lord."<sup>87</sup>

Obviously, for all these poets, childbirth is a central feminine experience. Yet androcentric cultures reduce this creative experience to the trivial world of female domestic concerns and it is consequently seen to be unrelated to the important spiritual issues of men's poetry. Alicia Ostriker, poet, critic, and mother, argues for the advantages of such experience for the woman artist, and points to the misogyny behind male attitudes:

The advantages of motherhood for a woman artist is that it puts her in immediate and inescapable contact with the sources of life, death, beauty, growth, corruption. If she is a theoretician it teaches her things she could not learn otherwise; if she is a moralist it engages her in serious and useful work; if she is a romantic it constitutes an adventure which cannot be duplicated in any other, and which is guaranteed to supply her with experiences of utter joy and utter misery; if she is a classicist it will nicely illustrate the vanity of human wishes. If the woman artist has been trained to believe that the activities of motherhood are trivial, tangential to the main issues of life, irrelevant to the great themes of literature, she should untrain herself. The training is misogynist, it protects and perpetuates systems of thought and feeling which prefer violence and death to love and birth, and it is a lie.<sup>88</sup>

For poets such as Ostriker, childbirth can be a gateway to the sacred - it puts the woman poet in touch with the creative side of her physical life; she can find transcendence in her participation in these processes. Rather than the negative focus on disintegration and death that seems to underlie so much masculine literary and critical thinking, a feminine discourse of women's poetry will offer a positive view of these creative and constructive aspects of women's lives.

Since western culture has consigned the role of childrearing to women, it is possible too that "maternal" thinking has developed a different mode to "paternal" thinking. Culturally assigned childrearing duties ensure that the woman is the one who nurtures the child and protects it in its earliest years. Sara Ruddick, in her paper "Maternal Thinking" suggests that the practice of mothering produces a certain mode of thinking: "I am increasingly convinced that there are female traditions and practices out of which a distinctive kind of thinking has developed."<sup>89</sup> Ruddick draws a distinction between maternal thinking and public or paternal thinking which she

defines as "scientific". The mother, who must nurture the child, develops an attitude that Ruddick terms "holding", which involves caring and preserving, while the ethos of the masculine scientific world is that of "acquiring": "The recognition of the priority of holding over acquiring ... distinguishes maternal from scientific thought."<sup>90</sup> Maternal thinking is more inclined to produce respect for the processes of life and to realise that control over these is limited. Ruddick defines this as an ethic of humility, one that "accepts not only the facts of damage and death, but also the facts of the independent and uncontrollable developing and increasingly separate existence of its object and accepts, as a precondition, that the child will eventually outgrow the need for its mother's nurturing protection". Feminine maternal thinking accepts loss of control which paternal or scientific thinking finds untenable. Adèle Naudé accepts the loss of a child in her sonnet "Persephone", but expresses also the pain and yearning that follow such acceptance:

She went away that day, my child, upon the train  
 Away to school. I stood there lost, bereft,  
 Upon the station platform in the rain.  
 It seemed as though all things had gone and left  
 Me empty-handed there. And then I knew  
 How once with outstretched arms Demeter'd tried  
 To hold her daughter when, withdrawing through  
 Dark Dis's door, she went at autumntide,  
 For pomegranate seed she'd eaten there.  
 But now it is again the time to sow  
 For summer's bearing, till the ground, prepare  
 Earth's slow awakening soil and soon, I know,  
 Persephone will come to still my yearning.  
 Already it's the spring of her returning!<sup>91</sup>

With their acceptance of cycles, of loss and decay, women poets are less likely to insist on their immortality and rage against the dying of the light, and more likely to accept the processes of corruption as part of normal life. In her poem "Fallen Leaves", Lilian Smit even finds beauty in these processes:

Faded and fallen are the leaves;  
 Old age is like a tree in autumn.  
 Subtle, silent are the thieves  
 That bare duration's chilly branches.

Small seem the first few falling leaves,  
 The slightly strained eye, ear and feet;  
 The days are long that summer weaves  
 And for defiance life is youth.

...  
 All bare, bare is the tree of leaves;  
 No young disguise hides autumn lines,  
 No gown, no flutter of green sleeves,  
 Clear, clear, truly the bare tree shines.<sup>92</sup>

Both the poems by Adèle Naudé and Lilian Smit might seem slight when viewed from a masculine perspective, but a feminist critic needs to be aware of the ways in which "maternal thinking" might manifest itself in the work of women poets and writers.

\* \* \* \* \*

A discourse of women's poetry, based on the above principles, would privilege content above form and would show itself to be sensitive to the lives of women poets and the ways in which their poetry mirrors their lives. However, such a "poetics" might find itself open to the charge that it ignores the special character of poetry as a genre - its distinctive use of form. This is the problem raised by Jan Montefiore in her book *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing*, the first extended study of the relationship between feminist theory and poetry:

To read the women poets of the past and present for their covert or declared awareness of themselves as women is to lay a kind of grid of feminism over the map of poetry. Of course, this is in many respects a critical gain, for since women have throughout history endured oppression through their femaleness, and since women poets have written of this suffering with varying degrees of obliquity, bitterness or generosity, this grid at best enables the critic to read the map of poetry with a clear sense of direction and an enlarged richness of detail. But because if we stick exclusively to this grid we can read the map in no other way, the method makes for a finally limited critical practice. Graves's "There is one story and one story only" is a wonderful line but a warning to critics. And criticism based on the assumption that what makes a poem valuable and interesting is its author's awareness enacted within it, of her own dilemma as a woman (which in practice generally means her sexual/domestic life) risks reducing everything to the personal ... A poem is always a pattern of words, creating its particular meaning from the relation between the material reality of language - sounds, breathing, letters on a page - and the images and ideas which they signify. As Pasternak wrote "The music of the word ... does not consist of the euphony of vowels and consonants taken by themselves, but of the relationships between the meaning and the sounds of words. This relationship, of course, exists wherever language is used. But it is the power of poetry, uniquely among forms of speech and writing, to manifest this relation, whether as pleasure or as paradox."<sup>93</sup>

There are several assumptions in Montefiore's argument that can only be termed androcentric. She considers that the Feminist "grid" placed over the "map" of poetry is reductive and that "reducing" the field of poetic study to the personal - which she defines as the sexual/domestic side of women's lives - is to diminish the interest of poetry. I would argue strongly with her use of the word "reducing", since a focus on these specific areas is not only enriching to poetry in general, but may also demonstrate the ways in which women think, write and use language differently to their male counterparts. Furthermore, the "personal" has been a specific topic of Feminist study since the late '60s and '70s when Kate Millet showed how the personal impinges on the critical in her pioneering study *Sexual Politics*, and radical Feminist activists in England and America adopted the slogan "the personal is political". It is a political and Feminist activity to study and evaluate women's poetry in terms of the personal and to illuminate gender struggle in terms of poetic praxis. Montefiore, in her turn, reduces the field of Feminist criticism to interest only in "the woman poet's awareness ... of her own dilemma as a woman". She equates this "awareness" with oppression and suffering; as I have shown above, the Feminist discourse of poetry *must* include not only an awareness of oppression, but also, and more importantly, an awareness of the ways in which feminine thinking and writing have contributed positively to poetry. The Feminist critic, in turn, must also emphasise the positive aspects of women's work and not merely simplify Feminist criticism into a study of women as victims.

As a critic, Montefiore seems to have internalised much of the masculine discourse of poetry, and this weakens her argument considerably. She seems happy to rely on masculine definitions of the nature of poetry, such as those provided by Graves and Pasternak. She ignores the misogynistic basis of androcentric discourses about poetry and the fact that formalism is a male discourse that has functioned to exclude women. It has done this by privileging certain forms *and their content*, and yet claiming that content is not the issue, but rather form. For example, the epic form so beloved of masculine poets from Homer to Campbell, presupposes the content of the heroic quest, a particularly masculine topic. Yet women poets are supposedly judged merely according to "formal" criteria, while the content presupposed by the sanctioned masculine form is overlooked in the attempt to provide ideological justification for silencing women on the grounds of formal incompetence.

It cannot be argued, however, that Montefiore is not correct when she notes that poetry derives its specificity from the relation between language and form, and meaning. But in recognising this, the Feminist critic must also recognise that language

and discourse have always been male-dominated areas where women must struggle to be heard. Josephine Donovan draws on French poststructuralist theory to make this point: "To enter into the public realm of the Symbolic means in a sense to capitulate to male domination. But to remain in the pre-literate, pre-Oedipal realm of the Mother, of female dominance and authenticity, means to remain silent."<sup>94</sup> Montefiore seems to recognise as much when she discusses the relationship between masculine tradition and the woman poet: "Tradition appears as determining in the way it defines the symbolic and referential context of the poems, and not necessarily as a product of the poet's own intention ... poetic tradition needs to be seen not only as a defining context, but as an area of perpetual struggle, both political and intellectual."<sup>95</sup> Yet despite her implied acceptance that poetry *must* be an area of conflict for women poets, Montefiore is still prepared to make evaluative statements, based on formalist criteria, concerning "good" and "bad" poetry. For example, in her discussion of a recent anthology of women's poetry, *Scars Upon my Heart* (1981), she says: "However grateful we are to the editor for disinterring these poems (which are full of interest to the social historian of ideologies), it cannot be pretended that many of them are good, most being uncomfortably reminiscent of the 'original contributions' section of an old-fashioned school magazine. In other words the general effect is conventional, sincere and amateurish."<sup>96</sup> From a formalist perspective, Montefiore is probably quite right about this work, yet her judgement denies the very specificity of the socio-historical context of women as poets, and the constant struggle of women with an alien medium. For a Feminist critic of poetry, or a Feminist theorist aiming to create a discourse of women's poetry, formal value and linguistic competence cannot be the determining factor in evaluating women's work.

Perhaps what is lacking in Montefiore's analysis is a clear vision of the aims and objectives of Feminist literary criticism, whether of poetry or of any other form of writing. A Feminist critic is interested, before all else, in what Ellen Messer-Davidow defines as "the feminist study of ideas about sex and gender that people express in literary and critical media".<sup>97</sup> Consequently, in analysing poetry, this will be the main perspective of the critic, rather than formal competence. Messer-Davidow goes on to point out that traditional critical paradigms, such as formalism, are based on male norms:

Traditionalists make the male the norm - the pattern for a group, the model for humanity, the standard of quality. Focussing exclusively on the male, they make it the norm by default. If they construe the male as the norm for a male population, the standardisation effaces race, class and other



specificities, or if for humanity, the standardisation effaces sex/gender. They incorrectly extrapolate a human norm from a homogeneous population when they derive models of psychological development from male subjects, of linguistic competence from male speech, of genre from male-authored works. More perversely, focussing centrally on the male, they make it the human norm by a democratic logic that converts majority into quality and female marginality into deviance.<sup>98</sup>

Messer-Davidow goes on to quote the critic William W. Morgan, who asserts that literary tradition,

... like the governmental, religious, educational, economic and social traditions of which it is a part, has operated by and large according to male norms and has excluded, distorted or undervalued female experience, female perceptions, female art and female scholarship and criticism ... *insofar as it presents itself as a history, analysis and evaluation of human literary activity*, everything that we know as the literary cultural tradition is, simply, wrong; it is a history principally of male activity, analysed and evaluated according to male norms.<sup>99</sup>

The fact that women's poetry has always been undervalued when judged by male standards is most graphically illustrated in the South African context - where that which constitutes the tradition is overwhelmingly masculine, and where academics and students speak with authority about the rarity of South African women who are poets.<sup>100</sup> There have been, and still are, a great number of women poets in this country, their work fills the pages of the anthology *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women's Poetry*. But if we are to appreciate their contribution to the culture of letters in this country we have to develop new ways of speaking and writing about their work. The methodology that I have outlined above dovetails with the recommendations of Ellen Messer-Davidow that, in order to liberate women's work from the constraints of masculine paradigms, Feminists must develop their own discourses: "The methods of feminist literary study include specifying, patterning, and approximating systems that include us: they are employed to discover and change the gendered literary-cultural system. While traditional literary critics as agents fade from the domain of study, leaving their stances like plumes of smoke trailing behind them, feminist literary critics stand forth in a domain of our making, revealing our perspective - and theirs."<sup>101</sup> Messer-Davidow goes on to develop an approach which she calls "perspectivism", which is eclectic and implicitly includes many of the ideas outlined in this essay:

Feminist epistemology is based on the assumption that we as diverse knowers must insert ourselves and our perspectives into the domain of study and become, self-reflexively, part of the investigation. These perspectives are the requisite of our knowledge. Perspective is the effect of relative position and distance; visually it means that the configuration seen varies with the observer's standpoints. Through the circumstances of life, people acquire specific feelings, ideas and values that situate them relative to *any* subject. Because their situations differ, their perspectives diverge. The circumstances that diversify perspectives are: (1) our affiliation with a sex, race, class, affectional preference, and other cultural circumstances; (2) our personal histories; (3) our technical approaches to inquiry; and (4) our self-reflexivity or awareness of the ways these factors organise existence ... Reflecting multiple stances, we need to develop *perspectivism* ... Perspectivism would bring together, in processes of knowing, the personal and cultural, subjective and objective - replacing dichotomies with a systemic understanding of how and what we see.<sup>102</sup>

In the study of women's poetry we need, as Messer-Davidow suggests, to rise above the value judgements inherent in traditional dichotomies such as those of good:bad in relation to the binary opposition of male:female. Messer-Davidow's perspectivism urges an amalgamation of perspectives important to women both as poets and as critics and theorists - an amalgamation of the personal, the cultural, the subjective and the objective. Such fields of interest, based in the discourses of women's poetry, must replace traditional masculine value systems. This is not to suggest that Feminists eliminate formal competence from their discourse entirely - rather it will become just another of many perspectives, and one recognised to be subject to historical constraints. A poem judged to be "bad" in formal terms may reveal a richness of interpretation when viewed from another perspective - whether personal, social, economic or gendered. Its very failure to attain formal excellence may reveal a wealth of information about the writer, her context, and her struggles with her work and her gender identity.

\* \* \* \* \*

The ideas discussed above form the basis for a theoretical model for the analysis of South African women's poetry. This section of this thesis thus determines the critical discourse that will be used to discuss and analyse the work of South African women poets in the remainder of this study.

**Notes**

1. *The Companion to South African Literature*, (ed) David Adey et al, Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1986.
2. *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women's Poetry*, (ed) Cecily Lockett, Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1990.
3. Elaine Showalter, "Towards a Feminist Poetics", in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*. London: Virago, 1985, p.128.
4. Dorothy Driver discusses this point in her essay "Woman as Sign in the South African Colonial Enterprise". *Journal of Literary Studies* 4(1) March 1988.
5. *Breaking the Silence*, pp.40-1.
6. *Ibid*, p.45.
7. *Ibid*, pp.46-7.
8. *Ibid*, p.52.
9. *Ibid*, pp.57-8.
10. *Ibid*, pp.60-1.
11. *Ibid*, pp.73-7.
12. Angela Buckton, *The Burden of Engela: A Ballad Epic*. London: Methuen, 1904. See also *Breaking the Silence*, pp.65-67.
13. *Breaking the Silence*, pp.70-1.
14. *Ibid*, pp.78-9.
15. *Ibid*, p.92.
16. *Ibid*, pp.92-3.
17. *Ibid*, pp.93-4.
18. *Ibid*, p.95.
19. *Ibid*, pp.97-8.
20. *Ibid*, p.96.

21. Ibid, pp.127-8.
22. Ibid, p.129.
23. Ibid, p.130.
24. Elisabeth Eybers, *The Quiet Adventure*.
25. *Breaking the Silence*, pp.130-1.
26. Ibid, pp.139-40.
27. Ibid, p.138.
28. Ibid, p.138.
29. Ibid, p.142.
30. Ibid, p.144.
31. Ibid, p.54.
32. Ibid, pp.102-3.
33. Ibid, p.72.
34. Ibid, p.125.
35. Ibid, p.152.
36. Ibid, p.160.
37. I use this classification myself in an earlier essay. See "Radicals of the Imagination: The Poetry of Douglas Livingstone, Ruth Miller and Sidney Clouts" in Chapman, Gardner & Mphahlele (eds) *An Introduction to South African Literature*, Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1992.
38. *Breaking the Silence*, p.164.
39. Ibid, p.163.
40. Ibid, p.165.
41. Ibid, p.176.
42. Ibid, p.174.

43. Ibid, p.175.
44. Ibid, p.205.
45. Ibid, p.193.
46. Ibid, pp.240-1.
47. Ibid, p.239.
48. Ibid, p.224.
49. Ibid, p.235.
50. Ibid, p.233.
51. Ibid, p.247.
52. Ibid, pp.311-2.
53. Ibid, p.307.
54. Ibid, p.324.
55. Ibid, p.349.
56. Ibid, p.187.
57. Ibid, pp.188-9.
58. Ibid, p.343.
59. Amelia House, *Deliverance: Poems for South Africa*. Published privately by Amelia House in the U.S.A.
60. *Breaking the Silence*, pp.340-1.
61. Ibid, pp.300-1, and 361.
62. Elaine Showalter, "Towards a Feminist Poetics", p.137.
63. Ibid, pp.278, 280.
64. Ibid, p.283.
65. Ibid, p.367.

66. Ibid, p.365.
67. Ibid, p.364.
68. Cecily Locket, "The Men's Club", *Upstream* 6(4), 1988, p.50.
69. Adrienne Rich, "When we Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision" in *On Lies, Secrets and Silences*. New York: W W Norton, 1979, p.35.
70. Elaine Showalter, "Towards a Feminist Poetics" in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature & Theory*, p.247.
71. Stephen Watson and Douglas Reid Skinner, both published poets, have established themselves as prominent critics of South African poetry through their control of the journal *Upstream*, which recently amalgamated with *Contrast* to form *New Contrast*. Michael Chapman's influence is felt mainly through his study *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*, Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1986.
72. Josephine Donovan, "Towards a Women's Poetics", in Shari Benstock (ed) *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p.72.
73. Jennifer Davids, *Searching for Words*, Cape Town: David Philips, p.6.
74. *Breaking the Silence*, p.201.
75. Josephine Donovan, "Towards a Women's Poetics", p.100.
76. Ibid, p.100.
77. *Breaking the Silence*, p.95.
78. Ibid, p.194.
79. Josephine Donovan, "Towards a Women's Poetics", p.101.
80. Ibid, p.101.
81. Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi, *The Sacred and the Feminine: Towards a Theology of Housework*. New York: Seabury, 1982, p.153.
82. *Breaking the Silence*, p.236.
83. Ibid, p.285.

84. Ibid, p.190.
85. Ibid, pp.266-71.
86. Ibid, p.174.
87. Ibid, p.161.
88. Alicia Ostriker, *Writing Like a Woman*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1986, pp.130-131.
89. Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking", *Feminist Studies* 6, Summer 1980, p.346.
90. Ibid.
91. *Breaking the Silence*, p.138.
92. Ibid, pp.120-1.
93. Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing*. London: Pandora, 1987, pp.6-7.
94. Josephine Donovan, "Towards a Women's Poetics", p.101.
95. Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry*, pp.19-20.
96. Ibid, p.65.
97. Ellen Messer-Davidow, "The Philosophical Bases of Feminist Literary Criticism", *New Literary History* 19(1), 1987, p.84.
98. Ibid.
99. Ibid.
100. In a review of the work of Ingrid de Kok (*Weekly Mail* September 16-22, 1988) Stephen Watson says: "Among the many anomalies of South African English poetry is the absence of women poets who figure prominently in it". In the same year I was given an essay by an Honours student comparing the work of Ingrid Jonker and Ruth Miller. The student commenced the essay by pointing out that both poets were members of a very rare species - the South African woman poet.
101. Ellen Messer-Davidow, "The Philosophical Bases of Feminist Literary Criticism", p.88.
102. Ibid, pp.88-9.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE STRANGERS IN OUR MIDST

#### 1.



The next two chapters are concerned with in-depth study of those women poets whom I consider to have contributed significantly to the gynocentric tradition of women's poetry in South Africa. As such, these chapters also represent the first extended critical work on these women poets in English, with the single exception of Ruth Miller who has been extensively analysed by Michael Chapman in his study *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*.<sup>1</sup>

The organisation of the two chapters is roughly chronological. This chapter begins with Mary Morison Webster who published most of her work between 1922 and 1938; she is followed by Elisabeth Eybers who published her English collection in 1948, Tania Van Zyl who published her work between 1947 and 1968, and Adèle Naudé between 1953 and 1974. The next chapter examines the work of Ruth Miller, Ingrid Jonker and Eva Bezwoda who were published in the 1960s and 70s.

Mary Morison Webster's work is concerned primarily with relationships and the discourse of romantic love. Although she does not write from a Feminist perspective, Webster's work lends itself to a deconstructive Feminist reading. Her focus on the suffering of women within the ideology of romantic love functions to subvert that discourse within her society. The second poet, Elisabeth Eybers, introduces into South African English poetry the subject of childbirth and motherhood. Because she redefines the role of the mother and rejects patriarchal definitions that equate motherhood with weakness and the feminine with passivity, Eybers is also a subversive voice. The third woman, Tania Van Zyl, introduces a Feminist voice into South African women's poetry. She argues, by means of her allegorical poems, for a redefinition of the role of women in society and their relationship with nature. Like Eybers, she perceives of the link between women and nature as a source of creative strength, although she warns that this bond may be used to enslave women within a patriarchal society if they are not sufficiently cautious. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the work of Adèle Naudé, whose poetry is not overtly Feminist but articulates a concern with nature and its cycles that lends itself to a Feminist reading.

Each of the sections offered in this chapter is presented as a self-contained study of the poet in question. The aim is therefore not comparative, although comparisons have been drawn where necessary, but rather to allow the reader to experience the work of each individual poet: to introduce to a South African readership the "strangers in our midst". I have included in each study as much contemporary opinion, in the form of reviews and essays, as I could find, in order to allow the reader to gauge the critical reception of the poet when her work first appeared in print. In most cases it will be evident that there was much positive approval and critical commendation by reviewers of both sexes, making each poet's subsequent marginalisation and silencing by academics and critics all the more disturbing. The reader will also find that this chapter includes much primary material. This has been necessitated by the pioneering nature of these studies and the fact that much of this material is not readily available to the general reader since it is dispersed in journals and collections to be found only in libraries within South Africa. I felt that it was more appropriate to attempt to incorporate this material into the individual critical studies than to include it in lengthy appendices.

(i) Mary Morison Webster: Subverting the Discourse of Romantic Love

We women, we were made for suffering,  
 The race is built on the sarcophagus  
 Of our devotion to dead loves and lips.

.....

And I am here, swift, warm, responsive still,  
 With love-words choking for wont utterance,  
 A passive creature, molten for your will.

Mary Morison Webster was born in Scotland in 1894. She emigrated to South Africa (with her family) in 1920 to marry her penfriend, a Boer War guerilla called Roland Schikkerling. The marriage was not a success, and after her divorce she moved to a small cottage in Pietersen Street, Hillbrow, where she lived for the rest of her life. She appears to have led a solitary and introverted life, developing her literary and critical abilities and attempting to create a career as a professional "woman of letters". Doreen Levin describes her: "surrounded by cats and dogs she had rescued from the city's sewers, books to review crowding her shelves and floor space, her paintings lining the walls of her parlour, herself locked away from the outside world with a 'one and sixpenny' door latch that never failed her ...".<sup>2</sup> Yet Levin also describes her as "... a woman of deep sensitivity and compassion for human and animal suffering, a fierce fighter for their rights and staunch crusader against capital punishment and vivisection."<sup>3</sup>

After the failure of her marriage, Webster devoted her life to writing and painting. She never married again. She came from a talented family – her elder sister Elizabeth Charlotte wrote novels,<sup>4</sup> and the younger, Eliza Ronald, was a painter. Mary herself not only wrote poetry, but also several novels (one with Charlotte) and was, as Doreen Levin noted, an acclaimed book reviewer. She won a Pringle award for her review of Nadine Gordimer's *Guest of Honour*. Gordimer paid tribute to her as "a critic not a book reviewer", who could see the new book "not just as a book, but as a part of the writer's development."<sup>5</sup> Webster was also a painter, although this was a part of her creative life that she tended to keep to herself. She painted at home on her kitchen table, using the index and third fingers of her right hand and thumb for outlining details.<sup>6</sup> Her paintings were exhibited and sold after her death, according to her wishes. Her niece, Frances Graves, describes her paintings as "a revelation in paint of a soul in torment, a creature of sorrow for most of her life, but in her painting she found release and was impishly happy."<sup>7</sup>

It is the sorrow and torment, the anguish and despair, that one encounters in Webster's poetry. Her career as a poet spans more than fifty years. She was "discovered" by Harold Munro of The Poetry Bookshop in London, and her first book of poems, *Tomorrow* (1922) was published by him. This collection was followed by *The Silver Flute* (1931) and *Alien Guest* (1933), (both published by Munro) and then *Garland in the Wind* (1938) followed by *Flowers from Four Gardens* (1951) and a selection from her poetry entitled *A Litter of Leaves* (1977). Although her work has fallen into relative obscurity, many of her contemporaries recognised her for the poet that she was. The British critic Herbert Palmer included her in his book *Post-Victorian Poetry*, and compared her favourably with Charlotte Mew "... in that she is quite as much a poet of sorrow".<sup>8</sup> He went on to say that she has "not yet received a quarter of the attention which is her due. Her best poems are characterised by much depth of feeling united to precision of form."<sup>9</sup> Among South Africans who paid tribute to her poetic ability was Christina van Heynigen who described her work as "perfection in miniature."<sup>10</sup> Miller and Sergeant, in their *A Critical Survey of South African Poetry in English*, note that "...there are few South African poets who possess such a mastery of form as she does,"<sup>11</sup> and Uys Krige referred to her as "South Africa's finest elegiac poet".<sup>12</sup> Thirteen of her poems were included in Francis Carey Slater's *Centenary Book of South African Verse*; Slater selected poems that fitted his belief that romanticism was the best poetic style for South African poets, and so Webster is constructed in the anthology as a skilled practitioner of the romantic style of writing. Roy Campbell was so impressed with Webster's technical ability that he wrote to Slater: "You have made a find in Mary Morison Webster."<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that these critics tend to focus on Webster's technical abilities and her control of form rather than on her subject matter.

With such glowing praise one may wonder why Webster's reputation has suffered an eclipse. The answer may lie, in part, in a recent criticism of Webster's work by Rhodes University professor Malvern van Wyk Smith, who claims that her work "attests to a pervasive desire for a classically sculptured verse that could appear to be politically innocent."<sup>14</sup> Webster's work does not engage with the politics of race, but it cannot be described as "politically innocent", or even as appearing to be so. Her work is overwhelmingly concerned with the politics of gender. It is this political aspect of her work that makes her poetry valuable within a gynocentric tradition of South African poetry.

The subject matter of her poetry can be defined as female suffering, which she sees as the necessary condition of women's lives: the first quotation that prefaces this section bears witness to her contention that the human race "is built on the sarcophagus/Of our devotion to dead loves and lips". Characteristic of her verse is also the view of romantic love and sexual relationships as a form of female martyrdom, where women suppress their needs and desires in order to please men as "passive creature[s], molten for [their] will". She appears, on the evidence of her early poetry, to have accepted the traditional values of the "double standard", that men are conquerors who need sexual adventure while women are morally superior because they accept and suffer the sexual inconsistency of men. Yet in making this acceptance the subject of poetry, and in showing how it only produces pain and suffering for the woman, Webster subverts the discourse of romantic love. The passionate love affair produces not happiness, but pain and disillusionment for the woman. The emotional and moral integrity of the "woman as victim" is only a thin veneer over the deep psychological wounding that Webster describes. Webster's subversion of this ideology is thus not overt. She does not assume what might be termed a Feminist position. She never openly rejects the institution of romantic love, but her emphasis on the suffering of her female subjects suggests a nascent awareness of the flaws within the ideology of romantic love.

\* \* \* \* \*

In her first collection *Tomorrow* (1922) Webster explores the emotional world of women. She focuses on male infidelity and inconstancy, and on a perceived lack of male empathy and compassion within relationships. *Tomorrow* was published in 1922 in Britain, two years after Webster arrived in South Africa, and it is reasonable to surmise that many of the poems were written when she was still living in the United Kingdom. The pervasive influences of British poets are evident in the collection. Much of the poetry in this first collection might be categorised as being in the Georgian style that was popular in the post-war period, and it also shows evidence of the influences of Shakespeare, Coleridge, Keats, Wordsworth and Tennyson. It is evident that even in this early and experimental stage of her writing career (she was 28 when *Tomorrow* was published), Webster was already attempting to master the poetic syntax of the great tradition of English poetry.

In the poem which opens the third section of her collection Webster originates one of the consistent themes of her work, the concept of the woman as blameless emotional victim:

Through no fault of its own  
 Was the rose-leaf blown  
 Over the river to die alone.

Through no fault of the bird  
 Did the bough it stirred  
 Send back its melody all unheard.

And my dreams and my doves  
 Died within their own groves  
 Through no fault of my loves.

The poem, with its simple construction of rhyming tercets, also introduces another characteristic feature of Webster's work – the use of negative imagery to describe the experience of love. The rose dies, the bird's song is unheard and love is unfulfilled. All these are seen as inevitable processes of nature. Yet this is not how Webster desired love to be; in her poem "Fancy" she examines the disparity between "real life" experience and the ideal dream world where a lover fulfills all emotional expectations:

You wander with me in my dreams  
 Along the paths of night,  
 Soft, soft, beside the shadow-streams  
 You hold my hand, ah tight!  
 And smile on me and whisper low,  
 In sooth you never would do so,  
 In dreams, dear heart, you might.

It seems that in Webster's poems love invested always receives a very low return. In the poem "Gipsy Love" she uses the archaic diction, favoured by poets such as Keats and Tennyson in their romantic love poems, to express the nature of a woman's devotion and commitment which is not returned by her beloved, a failure which is the source of unhappiness and despair:

My love hath felt my kisses in the South,  
 And from the South unto the North came he,  
 And he hath drunk the red wine from my mouth,  
 And he hath ta'en my pledge three times three,  
 And he hath ta'en them molten from my mouth,  
 But never a one hath he given back to me.

Even at this early point in her poetic career Webster characterises the woman in love as a victim, for it is the man who fails to play his part, and it is Webster as poet who

accepts this as inevitable and makes it a constant theme in her poetry. There is no evidence that she considers the possibility that a woman might refuse such treatment: a product of a patriarchal society she not only accepts the right of men to behave in this manner, but also ascribes positive virtues – devotion, love, commitment – to women who accept such behaviour from their partners.

This acceptance by the poet of male indifference gives rise to a neurotic fear of emotional abandonment and rejection on the part of her female personae. In "After Opera", she writes of a relationship in which the woman expects to be abandoned, but rationalises her fear in terms of a social ideology according to which it is the woman's place to remain faithful while the man is free to roam the world in search of fresh romance and sexual adventure:

You smile upon us for a day, then pass  
 You wander like the bees, and God has made  
 The Garden of the World so wide for you.  
 In love there never should be faithfulness,  
 For life decreed a larger, greater thing.  
 Only the women, from whose breasts the age  
 Waits nutriment, these only must be true.

Webster accepts the patriarchal view that woman, as the bearer of the next generation, must remain faithful in order to nurture the offspring of her husband. The subtext of this social institution is that the offspring in question will be those of the husband and the property of the family will remain in the hands of the husband's children rather than those of any lover that a woman might take. The man, on the other hand, is not under this constraint and is free, "like the bees", to fertilise and spread his seed wherever he desires. The ennobling of female loyalty and the acceptance of male promiscuity is one of the cornerstones of patriarchy that Webster accepts without question at this stage. But the anguish of the women in her poetry implicitly criticises the injustice of this double standard in western society and reveals the subtle contradictions in her work: she writes within the discourse of romantic love, yet her poetry subverts this discourse by revealing its ideological biases. The poem closes with the woman attempting to spiritualise her love and so give transcendent meaning to her suffering:

... So do I lean o'er you  
 Most sorrowful, most loving, most replete,  
 For one brief night the Priestess of your vows,  
 Your part of womanhood.

My dear, my dear,  
 I loosen down my hair for your caress,  
 I kiss you through the wet leaves and the rain,  
 Through all the darkness I salute your soul!

Here Webster idealises love as a mingling of the spiritual and the sensual, and there can be no doubt that this was her ideal of the function of romantic love.

In the last poem of the collection, "World's End", she romanticises the role of the "fallen woman" who sacrifices all for a love that is all-encompassing:

Be my sun and my stars and my God.  
 How shall I need these if I have you here?

The woman willingly offers herself as a sacrifice to her love:

I come, uncovered, like a naked thing  
 To offer you my soul's bare worshipping.  
 O be to me my slumber and my waking,  
 My starlight and my dawning, be to me  
 All that the outer, wide creation durst  
 Not ever be.

The body of the poem reveals that the woman has left a marriage in which she experiences both kindness and intellectual companionship for a man who offers her erotic and transcendent passion. The poem concludes with the lovers enclosed in their own physical and spiritual world:

Ah hold  
 My hands, my heart, forever be to me  
 All that the others durst not, cannot mean,  
 Look down on me and let us smile between  
 This sadness. But awhile and we shall be  
 At peace. My head is weary, I am whirled  
 In infinite spaces with accusing stars,  
 Close down the curtains now and draw the bars,  
 Most dear, for whom I sacrifice the world,  
 And light this lamp and let me look on you.  
 Time will grow kind to us, and most of all  
 Will death be kind, and the long interval,  
 How kind are death and sleep!...And loving too...  
 And sorrowing and love have each an end.

.....



What time is it? Ah what a night it was!  
 How fitfully the shadows strike that vase,  
 How sweetly the light flickers where you bend.

This poem demonstrates Webster's conviction that the ideal of love cannot be attained without great sacrifice, and that sacrifice seems to require the woman to give up her selfhood and her identity in order to achieve emotional and sexual union with her chosen lover. In using the "fallen woman" as subject, Webster equates a woman's sexual reputation with her identity, which was indeed the case in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But she also seems to suggest that the kind of transcendent passion that she idealises, that complete merging with the other, can only be achieved if the woman is prepared to give up her identity in order to become the passive recipient of the selfhood and identity of the loved one. Such immolation of the self would produce tensions and pressures which would inevitably erode the relationship, leading to suffering and sorrow, and as Webster notes, "sorrowing and love each have an end". In this particular case, it is the woman who gives up her respectable position to withdraw with her lover into a world of erotic passion. If the love were to end, the man could return to his social position, but the woman would be forever branded as a "fallen woman" for her actions.

While the poems in *Tomorrow* reveal a young Webster beginning to find her voice as a poet of female suffering, her most comprehensive statement on romantic love, as well as her most accomplished technical achievement, is to be found in the two cycles of sonnets from "Perdita to Paloris" contained in *The Silver Flute* (1931) and *Alien Guest* (1933). Webster probably chose to develop the sonnet cycle as a technical challenge, since the sonnet form is one of the most difficult to master. Her sonnet cycles are based both on the English or Shakespearean sonnet form and on the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet form, although she does experiment with different rhyme schemes within these basic templates. The sonnet form was developed particularly for love poetry in Europe in the early Renaissance and was imported into England in the late sixteenth century. The sonnet cycle soon became popular, and many poets made use of lovers with classical pastoral names such as Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), Daniel's *Delia* (1592), Lodge's *Phyllis* (1593) and Constable's *Diana* (1594). The vogue for sonnets, at its height in the Renaissance and arguably perfected by Shakespeare who developed his own form, the English or Shakespearean sonnet, was over by the seventeenth century, but in the Victorian period a number of poets re-established the sonnet cycle as a means of writing about love. Possible influences on Webster's work were Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1847-50), Dante

Gabriel Rosetti's *The House of Life* (1881) and George Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862). Webster's own cycle is written through the persona of a woman called "Perdita" to her lover "Paloris", their names alluding to earlier classical and pastoral models. But Webster's Perdita also alludes to the princess of Shakespeare's play *The Winter's Tale* whose love is redemptive and healing. Webster may have intended her Perdita to perform a similar function, although the allusion may also be read as ironic or even subversive since the second sonnet cycle is a record of abandonment and despair.

The first cycle of sonnets, those found in *The Silver Flute*, record the emotions of Perdita as she undergoes the process of falling in love. It expresses her hopes and fears and ends with her acceptance that her love is finally not to be returned in kind. Webster initiates the cycle with a sonnet that describes the joys and hopes of a new love and extols the transformations wrought in the woman by this love. The poem is based on the English or Shakespearean sonnet form, although the rhyme scheme is not that of the classic Shakespearean sonnet. Webster's use of archaisms such as "hath" and "thee" indicates her debt to earlier Victorian sonneteers such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning who also used this form of poetic diction:

Now with this love I shall walk regally.  
Henceforth I shall go proudly as a queen,  
No longer sorrow-bowed for what hath been,  
But joyful in the things that are to be.

Now all men shall see beauty grow in me,  
And loveliness that springs from thoughts unseen  
Shall be expressed alike in word and mien;  
I shall forgo my old humility.

In the third quatrain she describes how her love fills her with pride, and how she wears her joy like a wedding-dress, symbol of nuptial union:

Now doth my love endow me with new pride,  
Now joy becomes me like a wedding-dress,  
Now all my days are filled with graciousness,  
And hope and peace walk ever by my side;

Yet the poem's concluding couplet indicates that these emotions can only be experienced by yielding up the self to the other:

I go so crowned to all men, but to thee,  
Yielding myself, I yield all sovereignty.

Webster uses here the metaphor of the woman as queen; she is crowned and made regal by love, and yet ironically this status can only be achieved by surrendering "sovereignty" to the beloved. Webster is suggesting that the plenitude of love can only be fully experienced by complete submission of the woman to the man. The unwritten subtext is that this submission involves the complete surrender of self and the submersion of one's identity in that of the dominant male partner. This is also the subject of Sonnet III, "What is This Season", in which Webster uses the imagery of the seasons of life to describe the gift she offers her lover:

What is this season that I give to thee?  
Is it my springtide or my golden prime,  
My April or my fullest summer-time,  
Or my sad autumn, the first fall in me?  
Which is it that I yield now of these three,  
Bud, flower, or fruiting time to be thine own?  
Are my spring birds still mating or half flown,  
With silent wings across Time's silent sea?

In the sestet of this sonnet she describes her belief that this "yielding" of the self to the other produces the "fullness" of emotional reward:

O this I know, only that I find  
Fullness whereof I never dreamed before,  
And sweetness, rich and ripe unto the core,  
Such plenitude of body and of mind,  
That never lover yet, alive or dead,  
Was so divinely by love visited.

Again Webster idealises love to the realm of transcendent or divine visitation.

In sonnet V, "Now Love is Like a Plant", Webster uses natural organic imagery to illustrate the way in which women are seen to be at the mercy of the whims of the lover:

So doth love bourgeon now at last in me,  
Who had forgotten and forgone the sun,  
So open now my heart's leaves every one,  
Grown fairer for my winter's husbandry.  
Life in a gentle tide makes green this wood.  
For thee my blossoming. Pluck thou the bud!

The lover is invited to "pluck" the bud. This is a traditional metaphor for sexual conquest, and can be traced, in English poetry at least, to the seventeenth century where "gathering rosebuds" was a popular pastime of courtly poets of the "carpe diem" persuasion. Yet the metaphor implies an act of destruction and despoilation – in plucking the bud one breaks the stem and so prevents the bud from attaining its full perfection as part of a healthy plant. It may flower briefly, but then it will die. In inviting this metaphorical act of violence, the poet invites psychological self-mutilation: she offers herself as a bud and in so doing accepts that in order to experience emotional flowering she must also accept the psychological violence that is involved in being chosen and "plucked". In using this traditional metaphor, Webster allows the reader to perceive that the "carpe diem" philosophy, when applied to sexual love, is ultimately destructive for women. In so doing she both employs and subverts this traditional motif of English poetry. A similar point is made in Sonnet VIII, "I Love You, Yet in Loving", in which Webster recognises that what she ambiguously terms "love's deceit" will destroy her, and she sees herself as "waiting destruction":

In my brief hour I am already lost;  
A flower am I out of its season blown,  
That on a desolate landscape stands alone,  
With all its tender leaves prepared for frost.  
I bow my sacrificial head to wait  
Your reason's certain and appointed date.

While Perdita identifies herself with strong emotional currents, her lover, in contrast, allows reason to dictate his actions, suggesting Webster's belief that in love, at least, women are dominated by emotion and men by reason.

This view of love as an overwhelming emotional force is further developed in Sonnet VII, "Love's Beggar and Love's Fool". Perdita becomes a slave of her emotions in that her "heart...o'er my head/Win(s) mastery". In the sestet she draws a comparison between the relative security and safety of self-identity, "my own door's safety", and the dark and dangerous "pathway" of love that must be traversed for the sake of the lover:

Love's beggar and love's fool, I stand outside  
My own door's safety, like a gypsy maid,  
That, heartning her wild lover, unafraid,  
With all her senses speeding in a tide,  
Nor backward looks, nor pauseth, but doth take  
The dark and utmost pathway for his sake.

The contrasting imagery makes the point: to be self-contained is safe and positive – to venture into an emotional entanglement, however romanticised, is to confront the negative and the destructive. Perdita admits that the experience of love renders the woman weak and impotent, and she describes her as a victim of this emotion, the passive recipient of a destructive force:

This did I not, of my volition, seek,  
That love should so confuse my old content,  
And waste my nights with tedious argument,  
Yet am I, none the less, destroyed and weak,  
An impotent darkness, blinded by your sun;  
Refute, say what you will, the mischief's done!

As the cycle draws to a close, one encounters Perdita's fear of the failure of love and her acknowledgement that while women may devote their whole being to the pursuit of love, men do not. The cycle concludes with Perdita adopting a Shakespearean pose and claiming that her poetry will immortalise her lover despite his indifference. This can be read as a last attempt to exert power over the lover who is perceived to be slipping away from her. Her defence, in this poem, is to argue that the rational and ordered male who refuses emotional passion is to be judged as unadventurous and dull:

It shall be Fame's fine jest, when all is told,  
That unto this, my singing, you were mute,  
Turning a cautious ear unto my lute,  
Not reckless in your hour, nor overbold,  
But fitting your life's pattern to a mould  
Of outward law and ignoble peace,  
Fearful of love's full measure or surcease,  
Grown dull in apathy, as men grow old.

The woman, on the other hand, who experiences the adventure of love with all its dangers and conflicts, is able to create art of this encounter, and thus bestow the ultimate gift of love – poetic immortality:

I tell you, whether you love me or not love me,  
You'll be remembered, when yourself are dust,  
For a word's beauty or a line made just;  
So shall Time rise, a final ghost, to prove me;  
I bear within me that, my tears and laughter  
Down death's long corridor shall echo after.

The woman as poet assumes a defiant stance: the man may choose to "love me or not love me", but the woman who writes has the ultimate power to confer immortality on those whom she chooses to love. She asserts here that the woman poet has the power of the word and the power of language, and that this power is stronger than the power of the man to refuse her love. The woman may be subject to the will of the man, but the poet exerts her own will in the poems that she creates. Here Mary Morison Webster touches on the paradox that many women poets experience in their lives. This paradox was to create tensions for assertive women poets, such as Ingrid Jonker and Eva Bezwoda, whose work will be discussed in the next chapter.

Despite Perdita's arguments for the advantages of complete emotional surrender, as opposed to the lover's refusal to abandon the self in emotion, it is clear when reading the first cycle as a whole that Webster herself saw romantic love as something to be desired, but which was fraught with dangers and suffering. In the very act of offering the self and attempting to dissolve ego boundaries in the love of the other, one also ironically invites self-destruction and self-negation. This is the contradiction that lies at the heart of the ideology of romantic love, an ideology that was the primary social force in the lives of young women in the age in which Webster lived. She herself was unable to penetrate to the dark centre of the myth, but her poetry reveals her sense of the failure of this ideology to bring fulfilment to the lives of women.

The poems in the second sonnet cycle, contained in the collection *Alien Guest*, focus on Perdita's emotional responses to abandonment – pain, sorrow, bitterness, self-pity, anger, but finally hope and the suggestion of renewal. The collection commences with a poem written in rhyming tercets in which Perdita explains how she, as poet, creates the "sweetness" of art from the bitterness of an unhappy love:

Lord, who gavest this grief to me,  
See, from out its bitter Tree,  
How, all night, I sing for Thee.

Though my heart with anguish break,  
Out of sorrow, for Thy sake,  
I, Thy Bird, do sweetness make.

(Lord, Who Gavest)

The first sonnet in the cycle, "This Garland That I Set", establishes the theme of the cycle as a whole. Perdita sees the fruits of love as bitter and harsh, yet accepts these emotions equally as the "gift" of love:

This garland that I set upon my hair  
Mock not; it is love's own' though harsh it be,  
Love's very crown thy fingers plucked for me,  
Which still, because of love, I must find fair,  
Seeking this comfort now, that though it bear,  
From its sweet budding, berries, bitter, keen,  
It was thy gift; no less am I a queen,  
For this proud anguish which, through love, I wear.

This is the fruit of love, the acrid berry,  
The bruising spine, the dark and bitter thong;  
Yet since I loved thee well and loved thee long,  
Go, faithless and beloved King, be merry,  
Be gay, be wise! Thou durst not understand  
What Fate this hour demanded from thy hand.

Webster continues the metaphor of the woman as queen that commenced in the first cycle, and the lover is now the "faithless and beloved King". She affirms that even in abandonment Perdita remains regal. Webster suggests the woman's emotional superiority – sending her faithless lover off to be "merry" and "gay" while it is only she who understands the depth of the loss, an echo of her view stated earlier in *Tomorrow*, that women are naturally loyal while men are not. The concept of the woman as martyr to love is also suggested in the image of the garland that Perdita wears. She describes the garland as "harsh" and as a "bruising spine", a "dark and bitter thong", an obvious allusion to the crown of thorns worn by Christ. Like Christ, the woman is a spiritually superior being who is prepared to accept the crown of thorns as proof of her love.

In Sonnet III she focusses on the physical consequences of the failed love, mourning the loss of erotic contact with an almost Keatsian sensuality:

For evermore now I must climb this stair  
In loneliness and sorrow to my chamber,  
Draw the silk curtains, light the lamp of amber,  
Look round forlornly, and with wistful air  
Slip garment after garment to the floor,  
Till naught remains, and I am stilled before  
The spectre of my body standing there.

(For Evermore Now)

In Sonnet IV, "Behold How, like a Ghost", the poet considers that the loss of her love renders her wraith-like, and she links this experience with the loss of sexuality:

Only the moon, sad, unavailing sister,  
 Spending her sterile sweetness on the sky,  
 Is kin with me from now until I die,  
 Virgin, that fled before the huntsman kissed her!  
 Only the cursed moon, that keeps, as I,  
 Her stark, invulnerable chastity.

Perdita refers to herself as becoming as insubstantial as a ghost: "Behold how like a ghost before the sun/I flee and flee down this path and the next". Perdita infers that a woman without her lover is a shade or a shadow, and that she gains her "substance" from her lover. Certainly, in the kind of society in which Webster lived this would probably have seemed true. It is possible to understand the poet's dismay and her sense of loss at Perdita's betrayal, for to lose a lover meant to lose also one's sense of self in a society that recognised women only in terms of their relations with men.

Despite the martyred nobility that Perdita displays early in the cycle, there are poems that express her anger. In Sonnet VI, "Go Softly Thou", the tone of the poem is accusatory, with Perdita accusing her former lover of emotional theft and implying that he will not escape unpunished:

Go softly go thou, with as fearful mien  
 Bearing thy stolen treasure through the dark;  
 Nay, on thy casual shins no dog will bark,  
 Thou enterest the temple all unseen;  
 This thing was in a corner done and hid,  
 None save thine angel knoweth what thou did.

Yet even as she expresses anger and indignation she also reinforces the image of the woman as the wronged victim whose emotional well-being is stolen from her by the man. In the next sonnet, "Had I my Heart's Sweet Will", she professes sorrow for the failure, but it is a sorrow tinged with accusatory anger:

But, to my sorrow, I must register,  
 The season being past now and well over,  
 Thy false and fickle strutting as a lover,  
 How chivalry is stripped and honour bare,  
 And lastly the imperishable this  
 Of my unguessed betrayal by a kiss.



In the last line Webster likens the lover to Judas, who betrays the woman with a deceitful kiss, and it is implied, sells her into suffering and sorrow.

Towards the end of the cycle the emotional timbre changes, and Perdita begins to hope for the return of her lover. In Sonnet XI, "Know This, That Never More", the poet emphasises her constancy and devotion to her love: "For of what worth is love, if it shall wince/Beneath the sabre stroke of fate, or cower/ Before mischance". In Sonnet XIV, "This Thing I Fear", she expresses her conviction that her emotional wounds will never heal, and in Sonnet XV, "It Well May Be", she affirms her desire to wait for her lover's possible return: "It well may be that, even at this hour,/Thou art weary. Yea, for this I wait;/The linnet builds no farther than thy gate/The song shall yet be sung, the tree shall flower". However, as the cycle draws to its close, even this vain hope must be relinquished as Perdita realises that her departed lover will never return and that the way ahead is uncertain:

How long must stretch this dark and bitter track,  
 These tedious milestones set so far apart?  
 Heavily lieth sorrow on this heart!  
 Yet onward, feet, there is no turning back!  
 But to what end or to what bourne we go  
 I durst not question, nay, I would not know.  
 (Lo, In these Days)

Finally, in "Yet this I know", she acknowledges that suffering, like love, is finite:

Wherefore, O puny Sorrow, play thy part!  
 Strut thou and fume, take sackcloth for thy wear!  
 Weep the salt tear, set ashes on thy hair!  
 Beseech the unheeding gods, tear out thy heart!  
 This is thy destined role, yet know, no less,  
 There is a certain term to thy distress.

The concluding sonnet, "What Shall We Do, O Heart?", expresses the knowledge that renewed happiness can only be found in a new relationship. To convey this idea Webster employs the organic metaphor of a garden: in winter the plants hide their roots under a blanket of snow, but when summer comes the garden blossoms again:

What shall we do? O heart, lie still, lie under  
 The rifled pasture, the inviolate snows!  
 So the wise roots do hide them warm and close

From the sharp icicle, the frost's keen plunder;  
 Lie still then, heart, lie still thou! From thy pain  
 Behold a garden blossometh again!

The final sonnet suggests that Webster has come to accept that grand passion and overwhelming love are impossible fictions. Ironically, she also suggests that the only hope of happiness for Perdita, and women in general, seems to lie in enduring the pain and sorrow and hoping for renewed blossoming of emotion in yet another relationship.

The two sonnet cycles, read as a unit, demonstrate Webster's difficulties with accepting the social definition of romantic love in her society. Her persona, Perdita, longs for a love that will fulfil her emotional needs, yet finds the reality of relationships between men and women to be unbalanced and unjust, and thus damaging and painful. Perdita's arguments for the emotional superiority of women do not mask her sense of despair and betrayal. Webster's sense of being contained within a rigid social code of behaviour is also reflected, to a certain extent, in her choice of the strict formal conventions of the sonnet form as a vehicle for her ideas. Yet while Webster may have chosen a traditional form in which to express herself, she also undermines and subverts this traditional form. Her sonnets celebrate not love so much as its failure within a discourse based on a double standard of gender-defined behaviour. She offers in Perdita a subversive feminine voice that reveals the shallowness of traditional masculine poetic stances and so breaks the silence in that tradition by suggesting what the woman who is the object of "carpe diem" poetry and love sonnets might say were she given a subjectivity within this poetry.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the five years between *Alien Guest* and her next collection *Garland in the Wind* (1938), Mary Morison Webster seems to have undergone a process of intellectual reassessment. There is a change not only in the subject matter, but also in the style of her work. She no longer writes of romantic love and passion, and so she no longer employs the archaic romanticisms and diction of the Victorian style (except for a few poems). She also abandons the strict confines of the sonnet form for a more relaxed style of writing that suggests a distancing from the influences of Victorian and Georgian poetry and an attempt to be more consciously "modern" in her technique. The shock of the early death of her beloved sister, Elizabeth Charlotte, might have contributed to the tone of the collection. There is an increased awareness of the transitory nature of life, but there is also increased existential alienation. This

alienation was already present in *Alien Guest*, for Webster prefaced the collection with a quotation from Francis Thompson:

"And ah, my foster-brethren, seem not sad –  
No, seem not sad,  
That my strange heart and I should be so little glad.  
Suffer me at your leafy feast  
To sit apart, a somewhat alien guest."

This epigraph suggests that Webster perceived herself to be an outsider, an alien guest among poets who were her "foster-brethren". On the evidence of the sonnet cycles, as discussed above, Webster seems to have become alienated from the social discourse of romantic love, and so she withdrew from society and determined to conduct her life in an increasingly eccentric (in the views of most people) woman of letters in Johannesburg. This gesture of defiant withdrawal was both positive and negative: positive in that she seems to have recognised the destructive nature of patriarchal social relations and refused to submit, but negative in that her withdrawal contained within it elements of the self-destructive as well. Since physical love was perceived as the betrayer of women, Webster appears to have become increasingly alienated from her female identity. This can be seen in "I Set Aside":

I set aside the things I wear  
Beads, silk, and mundane stuff;  
Still my anxious body's there,  
I can not get bare enough.

Not till I shed flesh and bone  
Divest myself of clay, I'll be  
Quite sufficiently alone  
For mine ownself's company.

The poem suggests a stripping away of the outside signs of femininity – beads, silk – until the woman is left with only her female body. But even her body is alienating, and she expresses a desire to escape from the physical to the spiritual. This desire to flee from the harsh constraints of a gendered world manifests itself in the poet's increased interest in the spiritual realm, and a conviction that "...the voice of creation, of the Creator himself [is].../In everything that lies about us under the skies,/In the sturdy oak, in the flowering thorn, in the blade of grass beneath the feet." This pantheistic view of the cosmos, which echoes the Romantic convictions of a young Wordsworth, included a belief in the spirit world and Webster was certain that she was in contact with this world.

Her withdrawal into a world of her own seems to have been gradual and partial at best. It was marked by an increasing distaste for the perceived shallowness of her fellow humans and their insensitivity. In "Aftermath of a Social Evening", she clearly expresses her rejection of Johannesburg society. Her sense of an enlarged intellectual freedom is reflected in the far more relaxed form of her writing. Although she still uses end rhyme as a constant feature, her line length is determined more by the cadences of natural speech rhythms than by strict metrical arrangement:

Coming back through the night, back from the  
     clinking of cups and idle conversation,  
 My step grew light and swift, I lifted my face to the rain;  
 With an air of secrecy I covered the miles and  
     filled with a fierce elation;  
 Like an animal, I was bent only, with an  
     unreasoning urgency, on reaching my lair again.

"Good-night and goodbye, my friends!" in my heart of panic,  
     increasing the distance between me and them I said,  
 "Light and easy you are, buoyant, pleasant and young,  
 But dunking the tea from your cups,  
     eating your cake and bread,  
 I was a stranger in your midst, hardly, even though  
     I tried, understanding your tongue.  
 Not of your tribe assuredly, Oh not of your kind indeed!

Her distaste for the company of her fellow humans in general was also motivated by her horror at the suffering which humans inflict on the animal world. Her consciousness of animal suffering is reflected in a series of poems on the topic, of which the most effective is "The Ox". The horror is developed by means of the contrasting imagery; the ox is "sleek and beautiful" but his fate at human hands is painted in images of blood and pain:

This animal, this sleek and beautiful ox  
     ambling along the pleasant road,  
 Is being led to the slaughter; a noose is about  
     his head;  
 Is being led to the slaughter, to an unspeakable  
     place of horror and blood,  
 In an hour or two, in a few hours at the most,  
     he will be dead.

In the meantime, he walks lazily, contentedly  
 sniffing the dust,  
 Delicately patterned still and darkly, with the  
 drops of the baffled storm,  
 His hooves slipping heavily in his ease, his head,  
 with its mild eyes, out-thrust,  
 His flanks, shaken with their own weight, spatted  
 oozily with dung still living and warm.

.....

Yet in an hour or two, in a few hours at the most,  
 he will be dead.  
 Will have suffered the final indignity at the hands  
 of man in a pen of blood,  
 His quivering flanks stilled forever on a dreadful  
 floor,  
 his nozzle red,  
 His cries, living and terrible still, hovering above  
 the place where he stood.

This perceived horror of the base nature of human society was among the factors that forced Webster more and more into her own world, until, as she describes in "To You Passing the Gate", she seems almost a recluse. The title of the poem suggests not only the literal gate to her home, but also the gate to the inner world of the poet. In this poem she replies to a concerned visitor who has obviously tried to urge the reluctant poet back into the world of human relations. The poet herself suggests that the visitor is not able to perceive the riches of the inner world that she inhabits beyond the "gate":

To you, passing the gate, calling casually, it has  
 only seemed  
 That I slept and ate, toiled and lived, in this  
 little room,  
 Filled to overflowing with its pictures and  
 treasures and the  
 faintly ridiculous things I dreamed,  
 Daylight filtering with difficulty, through the closed  
 curtains, to assuage the gloom.

Eating and sleeping, "getting over" things  
 (as one must), and  
 That is all it has seemed to you, and not particularly  
 important either,

Myself a little more fined down some days than others;  
     proclaimed by my looks  
 A little more weary – the result, you decided easily,  
     of under-nourishment and the weather.

She argues that rather than "simply vegetating", as it must appear to the visitor, she is in fact engaged in an arduous intellectual journey:

To you, indeed, I have only remained here,  
     day after day,  
 a human being without much direction,  
 Living out life quietly, seeing nobody, paying no calls.  
 Perhaps in heaven (if you ever get there), they will  
     unroll a scroll for your inspection,  
 A map, showing my itinerary during these last years,  
 bounded (curiously enough), by four walls.

An itinerary of a tremendous and awe-inspiring kind,  
 Desert land, a thousand miles of it, without water or root,  
 No shade anywhere (except a great steadfastness of  
     purpose and mind),  
 A merciless sky overhead, and a bruising and burning  
     underfoot.  
 And "Oh, what a terrible journey!" staring  
     surprisedly you will agree  
 (You will be forced to agree with this stalwart,  
 authoritative Angel of Doom);  
 In the meantime, hand of farewell on the door knob,  
 it seems to you, as you think of me,  
 That I am simply (rather foolishly) vegetating  
     in a back room.

The poem contains the same tone of absolute disdain for her fellow humans that is characteristic of the other poems from *Garland in the Wind*. Whatever her proclamations, there is something rather sad about Webster's determined, almost Dickinsonian, withdrawal from human society into an isolated world of her own intellectual making. As woman, and as poet, Webster was never able to integrate inner and outer worlds. She was unable to express herself except in terms of rejection and withdrawal. The caustic tone, and the rejection of humanity, reveals a bitterness and a psychic wounding that could not be healed through social interaction. Yet at the same time it is a brave gesture by a woman who refused to compromise in order to "fit" in with the preconceptions of others. She was an intelligent woman who had perceived

the flaws in her society and its system of social relations, but she did not know how to cope with this knowledge except through withdrawal. Lionel Abrahams, a fellow writer and critic, describes her in her later years in her home, a "parlour, where the lattices admit insufficient daylight and the overhead electric light has to kept on...".<sup>15</sup> He remembers her as a "Scottish lady with her rosebud mouth and gray hair wound in two plaited buns against her neck [who] regale[d] her guests with sherry, cake and tea and a flood of witty petulant talk about past times, books and their authors, reviewers and editors, pets, vets, doctors, neighbours, servants, her paintings and the spirits of the dead."<sup>16</sup>

After *Garland in the Wind*, Mary Morison Webster seems to have almost ceased to write poetry, since her last two volumes, *Flowers from Four Gardens* (1952) and *A Litter of Leaves* (1977), were both in effect selected poems composed largely of work from the four earlier collections published between 1922 and 1938. The reasons that she ceased to be productive as a poet can be surmised from several of the poems that appear in *Garland in the Wind*. These poems show that the poet had reached a creative crisis that can best be explained by a Feminist reading. Her inability to realise the fiction of romantic love and the shock of the loss of her sister gave impetus to a process of questioning of the nature of "reality" as constructed by her society. In "Strange Country" she expresses the recognition that language is inadequate to contain her perceptions of the world:

Everywhere I walk, earth seems strange country; there  
are strange things to see;  
I note this and that, as I proceed.  
Here, for instance, is a thing called a tree;  
Monosyllabic definition of man; but what is it indeed?  
The root of something, certainly, but as undefined, as  
inexplicable, as unrecognisable to you as to me.

Having reached this recognition of the inadequacy of language to comprehend her reality, Webster stands on the brink of a discovery – a discovery concerned with the relationship between language, discourse and power relations in society. Part of this discovery would inevitably have concerned the gendered nature of language, and of poetry, and the recognition that her existential alienation could be explained by reference to her subjection to a social and cultural discourse created to favour men and masculine values. But Webster was unable to take this step. She feared the consequences of such a recognition:

There is something unreal about it all; it seems that,  
 in a moment, if I paused sufficiently, I might find the key  
 To all this strangeness, to the peculiar functioning of  
     instinct and mind;  
 But I dare not pause; destruction would lie with my  
     discovery; something would snap in me.

Acknowledging her marginality in a masculine world would have been too great a step, in 1938, for a woman who, having failed to form a successful sexual or marital relationship, derived her sense of identity from her role as a poet, reviewer and woman of letters, inscribed within the dominant cultural discourse. To confront her marginality within this discourse – a marginality subsequently proven by the eclipse of her reputation and her work – would have been too bitter and too harsh.

However, despite her refusal to admit such insights, there are two poems in *Garland in the Wind* which articulate a protean feminist consciousness, in terms of the paradigm set up in this study in the previous chapter. In her poem "Unreality" she describes a world divided into "reality" and "unreality", for which one might effectively substitute masculine and feminine perceptions of the world:

Reality, wherever it may be chanced upon, is not this side;  
 In a strange world of impermanence and perceptual  
     change we exist;  
 A world of deciduous trees, of alternating seasons and tide,  
 Of fluctuating sound and colour, kaleidoscopic,  
     never for a moment static, never at rest.

Webster perceives a part of life that is restless and cyclic, subject to diffusion and change. This is characteristic of feminine modes of consciousness, as argued earlier. In contrast, the masculine hegemonic discourse of "reality" claims the fixing of meaning and the establishment of order and hierarchy:

Somewhere, without a doubt, is Reality, fixed and secure,  
 Where a man may grasp that which he desires, nor feel it slipping  
     even as he touches it, through his hand,  
 Where the things of the imagination and the hope  
     of the heart take shape and endure,  
 Existing verily, erected on foundations more  
     substantial than sand.

The feminine world of her perceptions is not like this:



On this side, certainly, there is only instability, fluxion,  
A continual and continuous dripping, a corroding  
a scattering, a fretting-away,  
Everything we behold and touch, and ourselves,  
rooted, from the first breath, in destruction,  
Born to disaster, fashioned in a unique and perplexing  
pattern of decay.

Webster expresses her feminine acceptance of the inevitability of process and decay:

Nothing even for a moment still, the tree shedding its leaves,  
the bud hastening to its death in the flower,  
Life, in the hand moving across the paper, dwindling  
growing imperceptibly, less and less  
The warm body turning cold, changing its chemical  
process within the hour,  
And love faltering, failing, eluding its own theme,  
setting itself new questions, before the  
conclusion of the caress.

The poem concludes with an acceptance of beauty to be found within the cyclic processes of the feminine perceptions of life, which amounts to an affirmation of feminine consciousness:

Beauty there is, maybe, in our queer tragedy,  
and comfort , too in a sense,  
(Reality, more blatant perhaps, will appear,  
artistically, a much poorer state),  
In the very uncertainty of purpose, in the  
urgent coming and fearful hurrying hence,  
In the surrender of the seasons, the laying down  
of tools, the sealing of the eyelids, the closing of the gate.

Webster's acceptance, in this poem, that the world is characterised by flux and change, indicates the distance she has travelled, in intellectual terms, from her early poems in which she attempted to locate transcendent meaning in romantic relationships, expressed within the rigid formal conventions of the sonnet form. Now she admits that nothing, not even love, can be fixed and permanent, and that a woman's life is characterised by her ability to hold and then to let go at the appropriate time. Her writing too is more fluid, more conversational in style, yet still indicated as poetry by her consistent use of end rhyme and the occasional poetic archaism.

This acceptance of flux and process as the determinant of life was accompanied by a recognition that the (masculine) language of poetry could not adequately express the emotions of her life. In "This Was a Sorrow", a poem probably written on the death of her sister, Webster points to the inadequacy of language to express this kind of sorrow and grief:

This was a sorrow to be spoken of and sung,  
 A sweet sorrow, sown darkly in the spirit like a seed,  
 Afterwards to flower, to bear fruit, although the  
     heart was wrung,  
 A gracious harvest and rich, although from sorrow indeed.

A sorrow to be spoken of and sung,  
 In soft accents and clearly. Many such have I known;  
 Sorrows that learned, after a time, to list themselves,  
 and that spoke freely when they were full grown;  
 Many such. But here's a sorrow of a new kind,  
     a terrible sorrow without a tongue,  
 A dumb sorrow, that cannot speak or hear, or be heard,  
     or be spoken of or engraved in stone.

Webster seems to admit that androcentric culture has no language to express the emotions that she feels. For her the discourse of romantic poetry served to describes the emotions that a woman might feel within the sanctioned confines of heterosexual relationships. The form of the sonnet and the diction of Victorian romanticism also helped her to express these emotions in poetry. Once she abandoned this topic, and allowed herself the intellectual freedom to search for alternatives, she became aware of her alienation from her society and its values. This is expressed in poetry that is more discursive and speculative, freed from the confines of strict formal convention. However, as she examined her reality more closely, the alienation increased and the she became aware that language, and the discourse of poetry itself, was inadequate to her poetic needs. Unable to create or discover a suitable alternative, Webster retreated into silence.

(ii) **Elisabeth Eybers: Introducing the Discourse of Motherhood**

In her has deathlessness its custody  
the future quickens in the feeble beat  
of love awakening primordially.

Elisabeth Eybers was born in 1915 in Klerksdorp, the second of three daughters. She grew up in Schweizer-Reneke, where her father was "predikant" (pastor) of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Church (Dutch Reformed church). She established her reputation as an Afrikaans poet in the 1930s, and was associated with a group of poets that came to be known as the "Dertigers" (poets of the 1930s). This group included I.D. du Plessis, C.M. van den Heever and N.P. van Wyk Louw. In 1948 she published a selection of her poems translated from the original Afrikaans into English by herself and Olga Kirsch, called *The Quiet Adventure*. The volume included work from her four collections. *Belydenis in die Skemering* (1936), *Die Stil Avontuur* (1939), *Die Vrou en ander Verse* (1945), and *Die Ander Dors* (1946).

A prominent Afrikaans critic and poet, D.J. Opperman, paid tribute to Eybers' contribution to Afrikaans literature in his study *Digtters van Dertig*. In a chapter entitled "Elisabeth Eybers: Die Vroulike Aanvulling" (Elisabeth Eybers: The Feminine Complement), Opperman begins: "Die Afrikaanse letterkunde was baie lank hoofsaaklik 'n letterkunde van die man se siening van die lewe ... eers met die Dertigers ... kry ons die vroulike aanvulling in ons letterkunde." ("Afrikaans literature was for a long time a literature of the male view of life ... it is only with the Dertigers ... that we find the feminine complement in our literature.").<sup>17</sup> Opperman, as a critic, shows a sensitivity to the lack of a feminine discourse in South African poetry that is unusual for a male critic and writer, but more importantly he also identifies the significance of Elisabeth Eybers' poetry for this study. In Afrikaans poetry in South Africa she is the first poet to intrude a feminine subjectivity or feminine "view of life", as Opperman puts it, into a poetry dominated, at that stage, by men. In South African English poetry she is the first woman poet to introduce the discourse of childbearing and motherhood into a tradition focused on the virile male hunter/ explorer settler who was the favoured persona of the English-speaking colonial poets writing within that masculine tradition. But Eybers does not merely accept the traditional patriarchal definition of motherhood as a role that confines women within the sphere of the domestic. Rather she redefines motherhood as an adventure that allows a woman poet to explore the limits of her creativity both as a woman and as a poet. She is therefore to be read as a radical innovator and a deeply subversive presence within both traditions.

The title of her English collection is a direct translation of the title of an earlier Afrikaans collection, *Die Stil Avontuur*, which Opperman described as being concerned with "...die avontuur van die huwelik, die intieme verhouding tussen twee jong mense en dan veral die avontuur van hul eerste kind." ("...the adventure of marriage, the intimate relationship between two young people and then, above all, the adventure of their first child.")<sup>18</sup> In contrast, *The Quiet Adventure* focuses only on the woman and her experiences of pregnancy and motherhood. Eybers writes of the feminine experience of the process of life that begins with conception, gestation and birth. Not only was Eybers the first South African woman poet to make poetry out of an exclusive focus on the creative adventure of motherhood, but she also appears to have been the first woman poet who consciously attempted to place herself within a tradition of women poets. Opperman records her intense study of women's poetry: "...sy lees of herlees byna alle digteresses se werk wat sy in die hande kan kry. Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Brontë, Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, Henriette Roland Holst, Jaqueline van der Waals, Helene Swarth, Ricarda Huch ...". (...she read, or re-read, nearly all the women poets whose work she could find. Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Brontë, Christina Rossetti, ...").<sup>19</sup>

Elisabeth Eybers married A.J. Wessels in the mid-1930s, and subsequently became a mother. The poems in *The Quiet Adventure* reflect those experiences. Eybers argues, as do contemporary feminist thinkers such as Adrienne Rich and Sara Ruddick, that feminine roles of motherhood and nurturing impart strength and insight to women.<sup>20</sup> These special qualities are a result of a woman's close contact with the processes of life. In contradistinction to patriarchal definitions of femininity as weak and passive, such women suggest that motherhood makes women stronger individuals, stronger than men who suppress the feminine or nurturing side of their psyche in favour of a masochistic masculinity.

When reading Eybers' English poetry, one needs to be aware that these poems were written originally in another language, (although the translations were made largely by the poet herself), and that the problem of transposing concepts from one language to another is compounded by the problems of transposing poetic form and diction from one tradition of poetry to another. Eybers' choice of form is conservative: she favours the sonnet form primarily, but she also writes poems using the quatrain stanza form. Her choice of such traditional forms can be read in two ways: firstly, she may have chosen to demonstrate her technical ability as a poet by demonstrating her

mastery of the difficult sonnet form, and secondly, she may have felt that since her subject matter was so revolutionary, it needed to be presented in a form that was recognisably "poetic" to a readership unprepared for such material. Her sonnets, although recognisably traditional in that they are derived from both the Shakespearean and Italian forms, indicate their modernity by her willingness to experiment with different rhyme schemes within these basic patterns. In this she may be compared with Mary Morison Webster, but unlike Webster she felt no pressure to employ the archaic diction associated with Victorian sonnet cycles. Her poems are written mostly in clear, modern English with only the occasional indication that a word or a phrase has been translated from Afrikaans, being discernible to the alert bilingual reader.

The collection opens with a series of poems on the experience of pregnancy and childbirth. The first poem, called "Initiation", records the woman contemplating the potential for life that she carries within her even before the actual moment of conception:

Her eyes, with some strange light ashine,  
stare past the things as yet unseen:  
Grant her her wish – she's never been  
so nearly beast, so half-divine!

Eybers points to the ambiguous nature of the experience of procreation: gestation is a physical process that humans have in common with animals, and yet a comprehension of the creative processes of life also renders this a deeply spiritual experience. In "Sonnet", Eybers suggests that the depth of this experience also provides the woman with wisdom and insight that she cannot gain elsewhere:

This is her only secret: she achieves  
but little of the wisdom that is sought  
deliberately; her quiet deed receives  
a meaning deeper than the reach of thought.

This "deeper meaning" gives the woman access to the realm of the transcendent:

The everyday, the earthbound things has she,  
as only one who blindly loves may do,  
invested with a strange transparency;  
and so have bread and wine been touched afresh  
by unpossessive hands and turned into  
the sacramental Blood, the broken Flesh.



Here the traditional symbols of the mass, wine and bread, are transmuted by the unselfish and "unpossessive" love of the woman into "blood" and "broken flesh", symbols of the sacred ritual of birth.

In the next poem, "The Woman", Eybers contrasts the feminine world of renewal with the masculine world of carnage and aggression. These poems were published shortly after the end of World War II, and Eybers must have been conscious of the death and destruction unleashed on the world by the patriarchal societies of Europe:

Summer, autumn and winter slowly swing  
in their unceasing cycle through the land,  
but love uplifted her that she might stand  
above the seasons, bearing always spring.

In countless cities carnage, ruin and hate  
plant their dark banners, trumpeting alarm;  
still sounds the song of comfort and of calm  
for her, whom blood and struggle too await.

Both worlds involve blood and struggle, but for the woman the struggle is creative and life-giving. Eybers suggests that the creative power of women can even challenge death, for the woman triumphs over her adversary, at least in the short term:

The gaunt-faced Horseman, seeing her steady eyes,  
halts in his charge, acknowledging defeat,  
and hesitatingly inclines his scythe.  
In her has deathlessness its custody:  
the future quickens in the feeble beat  
of life awakening primordially.

Eybers defines woman as the guardian of life and of the future, a role that is "primordial" and has its origins in human prehistory. This role as the one who can ensure the future again emphasises the power of the mother, even in a patriarchal society where the significance of the social role of motherhood has been downgraded and marginalised and where women who are mothers are often disempowered and viewed as the possession of the man who fathers the child. In the sonnet "Spring tarries late this Year", she again draws a comparison between the creative cycles of nature and the creative cycle of the woman:

Spring tarries late this year: I've waited long  
 among the yet unfestive trees whose roots  
 are arduously gathering, as they throng  
 the secret earth, sap for new leaves and shoots.

I had not grasped their patience previously  
 as now I do, stirred by the selfsame urge,  
 now that which must perfect itself in me  
 forces fulfilment slowly to emerge.

The next three sonnets are addressed by the woman to her unborn child still within the womb, and reflect the early bonding process between mother and child, as well as the mother's recognition that this child, now a part of her body, will acquire its own identity and will also have to face the crises of life once parturition has taken place. The first sonnet expresses the woman's love for her child and her acknowledgement that they will never be so interdependent again: in later years each will have a private existence and things may remain unsaid between them as each retreats into this private self:

Before we are acquainted, while you're still  
 unbodied urge, dream not made manifest,  
 I may make bold to say the things which will  
 in later years surely remain suppressed ....

In the second of these sonnets she records her recognition that even as she carries the child within her it is developing its own separate being that will part from her at the moment of birth:

I do not know you and I scarcely dare  
 surmise, but deeper than my hammering heart  
 your restlessness revolves; one blood we share  
 and, strangely one, we yet remain apart.  
 ...  
 The coming struggle through which you must gain  
 release, begins the parting and the pain.

She identifies the moment of birth as the time when separation, both literal and emotional, takes place. For both this begins a process of pain – the literal pain of childbirth and the psychological pain of the mother who can no longer protect her child from the world and the pain that the world will inflict on the child as it grows to maturity and adulthood. The power of the mother to give life is counterbalanced

against her inability to ensure the continuation of that life once the child begins its independent existence. In the last sonnet she considers how a mother must suffer when her child suffers because of her inability to guarantee a happy life:

I shall be put to penance all my life  
for wrenching you from your primaeval rest  
into the snare of flesh and blood and strife  
at my lightheartedness' and lust's behest.

She also emphasises that after the creative triumph of producing life, the woman is unable to exert further influence over that life, and must learn to accept that, inevitably, loss and death are the logical and natural conclusion of all life:

A woman's courage and audacity  
dare her to ape the gods and so create,  
leaving her, after triumph's brevity,  
helpless to hold off harm or consummate.

Such is her chosen lot: never will breath  
of joy be simply drawn, beauty be clear,  
never shall she rest carefree and secure;

for after her first challenging of death  
all things are but a duel between her  
and him, of which the end is very sure.

The woman may be able to ensure the future through her ability to give life, but she has to acknowledge that she cannot ensure the continuation of an individual life. Thus the creative power of the mother is tempered: she may be able to challenge the "gaunt-faced Horseman" in general terms, but she cannot bestow immortality on those to whom she gives life as mother.

The next series of poems focuses on women from Christian and Classical myth. Each poem serves to illustrate the way in which a woman's destiny may be determined by her role as a mother. Each poem also examines the way in which women interact with men and with their children, and with society, in fulfilling this role. In "Adam and Eve", Eybers re-reads the Genesis myth: Adam and Eve are seen as united against a jealous deity:



Not till defeat and the emergency  
 of sorrow dulled the laughter from their eyes,  
 did she, her glance impelled in quick surprise,  
 behold his strength, did he her beauty see.

Two exiles against destiny allied:  
 he held her safely, unassailably,  
 tender and ultimate retreat where she  
 from God and from His envious wrath might hide.

God created the original man and woman – woman creates a new human being every time she gives birth. In a daring and radical re-reading of the Genesis myth, Eybers suggests that the wrath of God with the human couple is motivated by God's envy of the procreative abilities of the human pair. It is Eve's ability to be a mother that causes their expulsion from Eden. Here Eybers invests the role of the mother with such great creative power that she is seen as a threat by the patriarchal God. The original "sin" that leads to the expulsion of the human pair is thus read as their usurpation of the creative power of God; it is woman who is primarily the cause since it is she who is the locus of this creative power. In this reading Eybers sees the man in an ideal light as protective, an "ultimate retreat", rather than the self-justifying and accusatory figure of the book of Genesis.

In "Hagar", Eybers draws on another story from the book of Genesis, that of Hagar's expulsion from Abraham's family, at the behest of his wife Sara. This poem further develops and describes the intricacies of emotional interaction between men and women on the basis of parenthood. Hagar's poem is addressed to her son, Ishmael:

Three lives have strangely shaped my destiny:  
 Abraham, promoting me to pride and shame,  
 briefly his favour did bestow on me,  
 fertility my virtue and sole aim.

Then Sara came: how enviable remain  
 her easy laugh, her guile, her certainty,  
 to me, who tasted naught but infamy.

You are the third: my loneliness, my pain  
 have shed their wan submission and of late  
 been tempered to a man's defiant hate.

Hagar's destiny is shaped by her role as mother. Like Eve, she is cast out because of her procreative abilities. She is used as a concubine to bear a son for Abraham, but is then abused and dismissed when Abraham is able to produce a son by his legal wife, Sara. The poem describes the passions that are involved in this domestic drama. In considering the way in which Eybers uses the biblical allusion as a metaphor, D.J. Opperman notes: "Haar poesie speel hom af binne huishoudelike dimensies en betrekkings: die verhouding tussen vrou en man, vrou en vrou, tussen moeder en kind en tussen die vrou en haar ego. Hierdie hele spel van verhoudings vind sy volledigste en suiwerste uiting in "Hagar"..." ("Her poetry unfolds within the parameters of the domestic: the relationship between woman and man, woman and woman, mother and child and between the woman and her ego. This whole web of relationships finds its most comprehensive expression in "Hagar"...) <sup>21</sup> But while Hagar's suffering may be played out within this "parameter" of the domestic, its consequences were far reaching within the wider world. Hagar's son, Ishmael, became the father figure of the Moslem faith, which became a force to challenge Judaeo-Christianity, the faith of the descendants of Isaac, Sara's son. The "defiant hate" that Hagar nurtured within Ishmael led to generations of conflict and bloodshed amongst the descendants of the two women who bore children to Abraham. The political drama that is played out within the "confines" of the domestic will be played out in the theatre of history for centuries to come. In this way Elisabeth Eybers suggests that what Opperman defined as "parameters of the domestic" are in fact an illusion; the power of the woman as mother extends into the society in which she lives to a greater or a lesser extent. As Eybers shows in this poem, the role of the mother can be a powerful determinant both in individual life and in history itself. The fact that the patriarchal society of the Genesis period allowed women to be abused in the way that Hagar was, is an indictment of patriarchy, but as in the previous poem Eybers re-reads biblical history. Where the book of Genesis applauds Abraham's gesture in casting off Hagar to please Sara, Eybers makes it quite clear that this was a disastrous decision with far-reaching and negative consequences.

The poem "Mary" examines the relationship between mother and child in the light of the gospel story of the Virgin Mary. Mary is chosen to be the mother of God's son on earth, and yet despite this honour the mothering role also brings her suffering and pain. The poem, written in rhymed quatrain form, begins with the annunciation:

One of God's holy seraphim  
with joyful news came down to earth:  
in humble praise you sang a hymn  
Mary, maid of Nazareth!

But when the neighbours looked askance  
 and Joseph thought he'd go away,  
 could you predict the dreary load  
 of shame your son would bear one day?

When with a little secret smile  
 you stroked your body – could you tell  
 the mingled love and dread with which  
 he'd have to brave the pit of hell?

Motherhood, for Mary, will also involve her in a significant historical drama, for her son will become the Christian Redeemer; but in order to fulfill this role he must be subject to sacrificial death as the ritual scapegoat who carries away the sins of his people. Mary's inability to prevent this violent death for her son illustrates, in a larger way, Eybers' contention that the mother suffers because of her incapacity to protect the life that she has originated:

When darkness flooded you, and John  
 came up and took you by the hand,  
 Woman of sorrows, did you then  
 remember all and understand?

Mary's destiny, like Hagar's before her, has been determined by her ability to bear a child: she is remembered purely for her role as a mother. Both women suffer pain and sorrow as a direct result of their motherhood, but both women gain strength and insight as well. Eybers hints that patriarchal Christianity has misread the significance of these three women in its accounts of their lives. Neither Eve, nor Hagar, nor Mary is seen by Eybers as merely an instrument to be used by God and man, rather each woman has her own strengths and her own emotions and her own power as a mother who gives life.

One of the more interesting poems on the topic of a woman's procreative ability is the sonnet that follows "Mary". It concerns an incident in the life of Christ, where a barren woman touches his garment in the hope of becoming fertile. In the biblical story, Christ feels the power drain from his body as the woman is cured. The poem suggests that the power of procreation is divine, and that this power passes from God to man to woman. In the poem the woman expresses her wonder at what has taken place:

How could I know he'd mark me in the throng?  
 Was it God's voice ... or a man's voice... that said  
 ...What woman touched me? as I trembling lay,  
 restored...? Oh, but my body has grown strong  
 to bear the burden of this sweet dismay  
 of having looked on One I can't forget.

The poem serves as a metaphor of the inexplicable physical and emotional forces that come into play in the act of procreation. The final poem in this series, "Circe", also written in rhyming quatrain form, draws on Classical myth and records a woman's realisation that ultimately men and women are driven by different libidinal forces:

How can I, piteous and unknowing,  
 between my wings and fetters riven,  
 impede thy destiny of going,  
 when thou, by alien forces driven,

and faring forth, must ever be  
 the bold, the imperturbable,  
 paying small heed to one who still  
 must learn how to dispense with thee.

Eybers, through Circe, suggests that women are torn between their "wings" or their desire to explore and adventure, and their "fetters", the necessity of creating a nurturing environment for their children. Men, on the other hand, like Jason, seek meaning for their lives in "faring forth" beyond the domestic. This conflict of desires, both within the woman herself, and between the woman and the man, produces the anguish that Eybers describes in Circe. Yet the conflicts revealed here may be better explained, in contemporary western society, as the results of a socialisation process that focuses women entirely on the domestic and men entirely on the public. As with much of Eybers' ascription of inherent qualities – beauty for women and aggression for men, for example – the gendered nature of socialisation can be traced as the source of her conceptions. (Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, the first study to suggest the social construction of gender, appeared only in 1948, the same year as *The Quiet Adventure*.) While Eybers may rely, to a certain extent, on social constructs of biological essentialism, her poetry still conveys the feminist message that women are not weak, their reproductive and mothering roles give them strength and stature.

The next series of poems, drawn from her collection *Die Ander Dors*, as was "Hagar", move the focus of attention from motherhood to the complexities of intimate

relationships between men and women. These poems speak of the failure of love and its implications for the woman, and they can productively be compared with Mary Morison Webster's poems on the same subject. Both women use the sonnet form to express their ideas, but whereas Webster's diction placed her within the tradition of Shakespearean and Victorian sonneteers, Eybers does not write with reference to this tradition. Also, the tone of her poems is sad, even sorrowful, but the poems themselves reveal a maturity and insight that does not allow for the alienation and despair that one finds in Webster's work. Where Webster portrays the woman as betrayed victim of the discourse of romantic love, Eybers is more inclined to operate within the parameters of a discourse of love in which the woman is a strong and equal partner in a mutually responsible relationship. The ethos of "Adam and Eve" – men and women as mutually supportive partners – informs her examination of emotional crisis. In "Moment" she describes the underlying tensions in the interaction between a man and a woman:

While speaking quietly – how could it be  
that in her words some secret sting had lain? –  
she turned her gaze away, as suddenly  
she saw his listening face grow tight with pain.

The moment passed perceptibly; the next  
instant he made unfaltering reply,  
but she was still bewildered and perplexed  
at having hurt him without knowing why.

"Time and Chance" are acknowledged as major factors in the failure of a relationship, in a poem of that title. But Eybers recognises that, despite failure, the relationship has given its rewards:

Though time and chance decree that they must part,  
she will not be entirely bereft;  
the tide of joy and grief ebbs from the heart,  
but still its clear precipitate is left.

And part of him will still abide with her  
when he has turned to his appointed way:  
what love has once elected will endure  
beyond the reach of hazard and decay.

The poem also accepts that the complex pain of a difficult relationship is "simplified" by the pain of "being-left-alone":

She will have more than mere remembering  
to cherish; like a lingering afterglow  
the curious joy she took from him will cling

And suffering will be simple when he's gone  
for every unessential hurt will so  
become engulfed in this being-left-alone.

A characteristic feature of the poems of emotional pain in *Die Ander Dors*, as mentioned earlier, is the poet's awareness of the essential complexity of intimate relationships between men and women. In "L'Inconnue de la Seine", Eybers writes of a young woman who has drowned herself in the Seine because of a failed love, (death by drowning in the Seine being the preferred method of suicide for young Parisiennes who had failed in love):

All that your mask with gentle reticence  
records, is that your childlike love had no defence  
against betrayal but complete despair.

And though you must, like all anonymous  
and broken hearts, forever nameless be  
we cannot ponder without envying this  
despair its unimpaired simplicity

and its complete belief: who could be loth  
towards the Lover who has long been known  
to grant forgetfulness – the single oath  
that's never broken ... When you went alone,  
too weary to resist his plea, you smiled  
remotely, like a tired, contented child.

Eybers knows that for a woman to abandon herself to "betrayal" and despair is to simplify, in a childlike way, what is always an immensely complex network of issues and conflicts. This is the root problem in Mary Morison Webster's poetry: she sees relationships in terms of monolithic concepts derived from the discourse of romantic love, and is unable to perceive that failure occurs on the level of human interaction and human inscription into flawed social systems. Eybers, on the other hand, has recognised this, and so is able to identify that she may, in fact, be her own enemy:

You thought that you could build a fortress where  
you and your happiness might dwell alone,  
but iron bars nor parapet of stone  
could keep him out, and so he trapped you there.

He wanted your destruction. Blow by blow  
it was the bloodiest fight you'd ever fought;  
after each bitter round in vain you thought,  
pausing to gasp for breath: "It's over now."

Victory at last! You battled till at length  
he lay unstirring. Gather now your strength  
and though you're still too dazed to feel elate,  
approach him, tear his visor off and see  
the enemy – yourself. Spurn him: you're free  
and life still waits beyond the open gate.

Eybers' acknowledgement of self-destructive and counterproductive behaviour is indicative of maturity and insight. She is able to cope with failure because she accepts that she is not a victim: "life still waits beyond the open gate". There is always a future. In her quiet but intense sonnet, "Narrative", Eybers suggests that a woman alone can develop an inner strength and beauty by virtue of her courage. In the octave she describes the process of life that is compared to waiting, the woman's "tryst" with herself and her own inner resources:

A woman grew, with waiting, over-quiet.  
The earth along its spiralled path was spun  
through many a day and night, now green, now dun;  
at times she laughed, and then, at times she cried.

The years went by. By turns she woke and slept  
through the long hours of night, but every day  
she went, as women go, her casual way,  
and no one knew what patient tryst she kept.

In the sestet, Eybers shows how the passing of time and the experiencing of varied emotions produce a person of "tranquil strength", a quality that is a gift more valuable than anything that material life could offer her:

Hope and despair tread their alternate round  
and merge into acceptance, till at length  
the years have only quietness in store.

And so at last the narrative has found  
in her its happy end: this tranquil strength  
is better than the thing she'd waited for.

Her willing acceptance of the solitary state is further elaborated in "Emily Dickinson", where she observes that a woman might deliberately make this life choice in the interests of her work:

...

She climbed the scaffolding of loneliness  
not to escape from living, but to gain  
a perilous glimpse into the universe;  
and tunnelled down into the mind's dark mine,  
through tortuous shafts descending to obtain  
its flawless fragments, glittering, crystalline.

The last poems in the collection are concerned with death, and they serve to close the cycle of life that commences with birth. These poems are not as powerful as the earlier poems, perhaps because they are based on observation rather than personal experience. Nevertheless, in "Portrait", a poem written in rhyming quatrains, she captures the emotions of a woman who is approaching death:

Like a dull tide that strains no more  
but gently filters from the land,  
the thin blood slowly courses through  
the dark veins on my withered hand.

The days and nights are undefined,  
of equal dimness, drenched in dreams;  
around me nothing breaks apart  
but blurs and melts away, it seems.

The things nearby become diffuse,  
but what is past and far away  
stands clear and still and separate  
where all things that have perished stay.

.....

Of all the strong and straight-backed ones  
who still pursue some anxious quest  
there is not one that envies me  
now that I've nothing left but rest:

the final rest when glitteringly  
the candle-flame now shrinks, now grows,  
and sinks, that darkness over me  
like one vast wall of water flows.

\* \* \* \* \*



Although she has established her reputation as an Afrikaans poet, Elisabeth Eybers' volume of poetry has left little impression on the English-language poetic establishment in South Africa, despite, or perhaps because of, its radically innovative subject matter. The masculine reaction to Eybers' work can best be illustrated by the complete lack of comprehension or interest displayed by Herman Charles Bosman in the review of *The Quiet Adventure* that he wrote for *Trek* magazine. Bosman describes Eybers' work in the following terms: "Elisabeth Eybers' work is sweet, pretty, feminine. She is at her best when she makes up little sad songs about old familiar aspects of life."<sup>22</sup> In Bosman's masculine discourse the term "feminine" is insulting and is one of the attributes of inferiority that are ascribed to "poetesses". "Sweet" and "pretty" are others. The comment on "little sad songs about old familiar aspects of life" defies explanation, except perhaps as an example of Bosman's patronising inability, or unwillingness, to understand Eybers' project or to recognise the challenges of her "discourse of motherhood" for South African poetry. Bosman himself was the most masculine of South African writers: a Hemingwayesque figure, he was imprisoned in the 1920s for shooting and killing his stepbrother. Situated firmly within the discourse of the aggressive hunter/explorer, Bosman feels he can dismiss Eybers as marginal and unexceptional. He uses the body of the review to discourse at length on a topic of interest to himself, the "subjacent issues" of translating poetry from Afrikaans into English. At the end of this indulgence, and in order to best dismiss a poet with a substantial reputation in Afrikaans letters, Bosman comes to the unjustified conclusion that Eybers' work fails in translation.

It is to be regretted that D.J. Opperman follows Bosman's cue in his discussion of *The Quiet Adventure*, in his study *Digters van Dertig*. He observes that "...dit is 'n sekere aksent wat haar beste Afrikaanse verse tot eersterangse poesie verhef, en die onvertaalbaarheid van daardie aksent wat hulle in Engels tweede rangse poesis laat word en herinner aan duisende soortgelyke gedigte in *The Ladies Home Journal*." ("... there is a certain accent that elevates her best Afrikaans poems to the ranks of the first class, and it is the impossibility of translating this accent that renders her English work second rate, and reminds one of a thousand similar poems in *The Ladies Home Journal*.")<sup>23</sup> This criticism is unfair and unfounded: certainly Eybers' work was different from anything that had yet appeared in South African English poetry, and certainly it spoke in the voice of the feminine, but it is not "second rate". The poetic forms that Eybers uses are conservative, as mentioned earlier, and so her work is not formally innovative. Yet the poems themselves have a competence and an assurance that takes them beyond the "second rate". The refusal of subject matter within the

English-language tradition led to a refusal of poetic recognition that was to effectively prevent Eybers from any further forays into the masculine domain of South African English poetry. It seems strange that the critic who had praised Eybers' work in Afrikaans and commented on her importance in providing what he termed a "feminine complement", should pass such stern judgement on her work in English, a language in which he was not entirely competent to pass judgement. Since he, like Bosman, focuses on the perceived problems of translation, it seems more than likely that as an Afrikaans-speaking critic, he was merely accepting the validity of the bilingual Bosman's patronising and chauvinistic views (*Trek* is in fact listed as one of Opperman's sources). In so doing both men dismiss what is a singular contribution to poetry in English in South Africa: the introduction of the poetry of the creative adventure of motherhood as described by the woman poet.

(iii) **Tania van Zyl: Allegories of the (Eco)Feminine**

True to their birth  
 their strength and their power  
 women will rise  
 to defend the great earth

Tania van Zyl was born in 1908, and lived for most of her life in Cape Town. She published three collections: *Window and Other Poems* (1947), *Shadow and Wall* (1958), and *Rock, Leaf and Grass* (1968). She also published poetry and fiction in journals such as *Standpunte*, (sometimes under the pseudonym of Anna Ducat), and *Contrast*. Van Zyl's poetry focuses on nature, and she is at her most interesting when she writes of a special feminine bond between women and nature. Yet she is careful to distinguish between the "woman-as-nature" concept of patriarchy – which she characterises as a form of bondage – and her own conception of a unique and harmonious relationship between women and nature that predates certain aspects of the of eco-feminist theory of the 1980s and 1990s.

Van Zyl's view of nature is radically different from that of other (masculine) poets writing within the tradition of South African poetry in English. As I pointed out in chapter three, the dominant subject position in this poetry was the hunter\explorer settler figure originated by Thomas Pringle and developed notably by Roy Campbell, and then in self-reflexive and ironic ways by poets such as William Plomer, Guy Butler and Douglas Livingstone. This subjectivity, essentially masculine, is based on the concept of dominance of the land and of nature. The poet sees Africa and "nature-in-Africa" as something to be confronted and conquered, and this requires qualities of toughness and aggression. Thomas Pringle journeyed into the wilds of Africa armed with "the death-fraught firelock"; William Plomer saw Africa as symbolized by the emblem of a violent natural world in "a scorpion on a stone"; Guy Butler writes of an Africa of violent confrontation with nature where "smash[ing] a five-foot cobra's head to pulp" leaves him feeling alienated and doubtful. Livingstone's encounter with another African snake and its psychological subtext has been discussed in the previous chapter.<sup>24</sup> Tania van Zyl, on the other hand, perceives this approach to nature as essentially destructive and arid; she urges a more feminine approach, receptive, nurturing, and qualified by a deep respect for nature and its regenerative powers, as the discussion of her work will show.

Stylistically, Tania van Zyl's work is often dense and obscure, since she favoured modernist forms of expression such as symbolism and expressionism, and she also favoured the device of the allegory. A reading of her work shows that Van Zyl was familiar with the psychoanalytical side of modernism, and that her writing was influenced by the ideas of Freud on the function of the subconscious in everyday life, and Jung on the function of myth in conveying social wisdom. From the realm of psychoanalysis she discovered the potency of the image or symbol as the carrier of complex psychological meaning. From expressionism she learnt that a poet may project a highly personalized image of the world, and that imagery, form and syntax could be made to serve the needs of this self-created world. In her lyric poetry she produces simple fragments that reflect the natural world, and the power of her imagery is the most noticeable element of this work. A reviewer of her collection *Rock, Leaf and Grass*, who signs the piece J.C. (probably Jack Cope), identifies the character of her poetry of nature: "...to touch with insight and a certain tense strength the heart of things and so reveal the immanence of life and a world that our coarsened sensibilities pass over with brutal unawareness. In this world the poet is only a minor part, a fragment, a chip but with his [sic] own gleam and iridescence."<sup>25</sup> This quality in her work can be seen in a shorter lyric poem such as "Lose":

Touch and in an instant  
it is gone. Colour  
shot with peacock eye  
or pink gills;  
or a fire-bellied wave.  
To hold there is nothing,  
the taken withers as ash.

The moment of epiphany is described in bright, luminous images that are made more evocative by their very transience and their inability to be held. Beauty is transient, yet it may be experienced briefly in the images within a poem. Yet, in a poetry that relies on the associative power of imagery for its impact, the poet herself may be perceived to be absent. This is a quality that the reviewer, J.C., also notes: "there is a certain aloofness, almost an anonymity, about many of the best poems as if the sculptor had carved her image to the last chip, raised it as a witness and left unobserved."<sup>26</sup> The reviewer goes on to contextualise this aloofness and "anonymity" within the social parameters of apartheid South Africa: "Carried to the extreme, poetry shrinks from the horror of our time into fragmented associations and images and an obliqueness that, beyond a certain point, becomes a private code of despair and suffering or sinks to the incomprehensible".<sup>27</sup> The reviewer expresses what many poets writing in the

repressive South Africa of the 1960s must have felt, a sense of being forced into a poetry of anonymity and obscurity as a means of protecting themselves. The iridescent image with its fleeting beauty can then be interpreted as a gesture of defiance against a political regime that seeks to censor and control the free expression of writers and poets. The country may be plunged into a gray mediocrity by political force, but poets can still create and share private moments of transcendence.

Tania van Zyl was not the kind of poet to limit herself only to brief epiphanic moments. She knew that there were other ways of making her views known that could circumvent the laws of censorship. She wrote freely of her views of political topics, but she did this within the cloaking device of the allegory. As J.C. notes, "It is in Tania van Zyl's longer allegorical or dramatic poems that she approaches nearest to an explicitly social or political reality."<sup>28</sup> Tania van Zyl's "social or political reality", as a South African woman, concerned aspects of both race and gender oppression. The laws of censorship in this country in the 1960s and 70s affected the politics of gender as well as of race: in the 1970s feminist texts such as Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* were banned along with other politically "subversive" material. Several of Van Zyl's longer dramatic poems such as "the Willing Victim" and "Return from the Country" are allegories of racial oppression in South Africa<sup>29</sup> – but the more interesting allegorical poems, in terms of this study, are those that focus primarily on the politics of gender such as "Ulyssa, or the Broken Quest" and "Women of Sola".

The term "allegory" derives from the Greek word "allegoria" which means "speaking otherwise", which reveals the nature of the literary sleight of hand that can be involved in the use of allegory. Because of its double level of meaning, allegory can be used to comment on sensitive political issues. The best known allegory in English literature is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), which is an allegory of the quest for Christian salvation. Bunyan's use of allegory as psychological quest is taken up by Tania van Zyl in both "Ulyssa, or the Broken Quest" and "Women of Sola", while the device of political double-comment, but in gender terms, is also a feature of both works. Tania Van Zyl, as a woman poet, recognises that the allegorical form can be effectively utilised as a vehicle for gender-specific criticism in a literary and political climate that is generally hostile to such criticism.

"Ulyssa, or the Broken Quest", which was published in *Rock, Leaf and Grass* (1968), is an allegory of the quest of women for self-definition and a purpose in life

other than that offered by patriarchally defined roles as wives and mothers. The poem is loosely patterned on *The Odyssey* and its tales of the voyages of Ulysses: it tells the story of a female counterpart, Ulyssa, and three women companions who set out across the sea in a small craft to seek their "war wrested men". In the poem Ulyssa represents the questing spirit of woman, just as Ulysses represents that spirit in man. But the men are "war wrested", involved in death and destruction, while the women seek reunification and healing. The four women serve as symbols of the different facets of the female psyche, and their voyage is an allegory of a psychological feminine quest for wholeness or unity within the self that can only be achieved once the feminine is reunited with the alienated and "war wrested" masculine. This desire to achieve a unification and balance of masculine and feminine, or yin and yang, is difficult to achieve in western society since men and women are socially gendered to remain at opposite poles, represented by biological male and female. In her poem, Van Zyl attempts to suggest that the key to the quest, and to the desired healing, lies in the way in which humans relate to nature and the "nature within".

The poem, or fragment – it is unfinished and consists of only two parts – is an attempt to provide a feminine equivalent of the masculine epic poem of quest, and therefore has allusions to Homer's *The Odyssey* as well as Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner* and Roy Campbell's *The Flaming Terrapin*. However, unlike these earlier works, Van Zyl's poem does not use strict metrical forms or patterns, but in modernist style relies on the richness and allusiveness of its imagery and the natural rhythms of free verse to create its effects. The poem opens with an Homeric allusion, for the four women cross a sea that is described as "dawn gold wine", a variant on Homer's "wine dark sea". The journey on which they embark is described in idealistic terms: "..dreams spun, fluttered and filled four heads with webs\and visions, now swift unfurled to skim away."

The four characters, as mentioned, represent aspects of the female psyche. Ulyssa represents the intellectual and philosophical, for the voyage is, for her, a quest for "truth", however "flawed" it may prove to be. Van Zyl creates Ulyssa as a feminine counterpart to Campbell's terrapin, who represents the forces of masculine creativity. Where Campbell's creature controls and dominates the sea world, Ulyssa's entry into the symbolic sea of consciousness is fraught with danger and threat:

Ulyssa dived, plunged deep into the watery gulf  
 where wrasse and turtle passed, dark sea faces formed  
 that cruelly held in thrall her searching mind,  
 here lost she and refound another face.

Ulyssa's companion, Goldbend, represents feminine sensuality and earthiness. The imagery that Van Zyl uses to describe her swimming beside Ulyssa is rich and sensual:

Goldbend swam, gold and green like some great eel,  
twisted, turned, upward churned to meet the sun; his guilt  
her head made a smaller sun.

Goldbend's meeting with the sun is a metaphor of sexual union, for the sun is typically a masculine or male force. Goldbend's sensual sexuality is, however, characterised by an indiscriminate appetite:

...Three husbands  
lost she, yet fretted not for them in vain,  
all men loved nor knew where difference lay.  
Love renewed: her truth and constant lesson.

This facet of Goldbend's character will prove to be a fatal flaw, for she is ultimately seen to be a woman whose entire energy is focused on physical pleasure:

Within the void happy played, she joyed  
in surging ebb and flood of being, a creature  
with a questing thirst and mighty appetite.

The third woman, Sylvia, as her name suggests, is wraith-like, the opposite of Goldbend:

...boy frail, bronzed face and limb,  
her gaze stilly watched earth and heaven;  
lone unbonded, those empty silver eyes  
bespoke a nearness to the void ...

Sylvia is in search of a twin brother, "in whom she sought\ a greater trueness...". It seems that Van Zyl meant Sylvia to represent the woman in search of a Platonic "soul mate" or Jungian "animus". The quest to find one who is an exact replica of the self in order to create meaning in one's life is fraught with psychological dangers, and Van Zyl describes Sylvia as: "More vulnerable by that likeness and confused,\ self love to self hate grown". The fourth woman, Cerite, hardly features in the narrative, but she appears to be an earth mother figure patterned on the Roman goddess Ceres (as her name suggests). She is associated with the elements, and with bitterness:

The fourth, Cerite, stood at the wheel, taut,  
 her crystal glance flinched not from the wave.  
 Her bitter need and doubts with wolf-belling  
 harried a passion not easily spent, none guessed  
 the acrid ashes.

The bitterness that Van Zyl associates with Cerite may reflect on her belief that the "woman-as-nature" concept, symbolised by the goddess Ceres, ultimately enslaves women. The "acrid ashes" may signify the bitter remnants of a relationship based on the premises of bondage to nature and the cycles of reproduction in Cerite's life.

The narrative of the voyage commences with the description of a storm, patterned on the storm motifs of poems such as *The Odyssey*, *The Ancient Mariner*, and *The Flaming Terrapin*. In this case, as in the poems to which Van Zyl alludes, the storm represents a period of psychological testing. Eventually the storm abates and the women arrive at an island where they are met by a "locust gold youth" who speaks for "The Earth One", a matriarchal earth mother figure who is the ruler of the island. "The Earth One" may be read in the poem as representing the concept of "Mother Nature". She is the goddess, the power behind generation and procreation. As such she is generous, sensual and extravagant. But, she is also voracious, dangerous and cruel. Van Zyl creates her to embody the forces of nature that our culture attributes to the feminine. In her own island domain, "The Earth One" rules by confining all to her pattern. Ulyssa recognises that in such an environment a woman's quest may be endangered, and she warns Goldbend: "...use no art or spell to draw\her lovers, lest trouble snare us here". While they are following the youth, Ifan, to the home of the Earth One, they traverse a woodland in which Ulyssa and Cerite hear "a song to the earth". The song, written in the form of a lyric, is a celebration of the creative powers of the earth and of the relationship between the earth and her daughters based on this power:

...  
 Her daughters will dance  
 to the rule and the power  
 that makes them create.  
 They spring and turn  
 in the maze where they mate.  
 Now the dance leads  
 to the world's hardened floor,  
 where the battle is lost.



Burden and break,  
 tussle and storm,  
 trample earth, trample worn.  
 True to their birth  
 their strength and their power  
 women will rise  
 to defend the great earth.

The fact that the song is audible only to Ulyssa and Cerite, but not to Goldbend and Sylvia, suggests that only two kinds of women can understand the allure of what is represented by the island and its ruler: one is the Cerite figure, who has already experienced bondage to nature, and the other is the Ulyssa figure who can analyse and understand the traps and pitfalls in the patriarchal pattern of the earth mother. The procreative power of nature is to be celebrated, but it can also represent a danger to women who can be "vanquished" when the mating dance is performed in the patriarchal arena of "the world's hardened floor", and so bonded into servitude to that power in themselves. The relationship with nature and the earth is thus ambiguous: the earth is the source of women's power, they have a special link with her and will defend her, but they can also become her slaves and lose their individual identities in hers. This difficult relationship is explained allegorically in what befalls Goldbend in the palace of "The Earth One".

The matriarch who holds power on the island, "The Earth One", is described as ugly, withered and voracious, the "dark side" of "Mother Nature":

Under gold lamps as brood toad a woman sat  
 every fold her ancient history told:  
 whale, brood hen, red mare, behemoth,  
 leathern bat, compost pit, star and owl,  
 fire wombed queen, jewelled fish,  
 winged sow, dugged bitch or snow swan.  
 ...  
 No life she spurned ... all flew or returned  
 to her.

The women request her aid in their quest to find their men, and her reply that it is her qualities in them that will guide them:

"Search where you will, learn what you can, help  
 is given in the strong natural  
 skills and cunning of your heritage  
 from me..."

The earth mother, like women who accept patriarchal definitions of the feminine, sees women's strength as lying in "cunning" and feminine wiles. This, however, is not the object of the quest for a woman such as Ulyssa, yet Ulyssa is forced to stay on the island since the matriarch extends her hospitality to them until the spring, when she will cast off her dark and ugly mask and become transformed into a sexually desirable rival:

Here you may stay and new companions  
find until the spring equinox releases  
the burgeoning sap in me and sloughs  
this rugous hide then as an almond core  
or smooth and nacreous moon, I'll be  
briefly purged of earthy hue.  
Then all Women my rivals will be  
and I a natural enemy to them.

The Earth One reacts differently to each of the four women. She approves of Goldbend, for she recognises the seeds of a corruption that will grow within her and eventually turn her from the quest:

Goldbend laughed for strength as yeast bud  
moved and answered in her flesh.  
A ridged paw stroked her, the Earth One  
as in a mirror saw herself in neighbouring  
perfection for that loved the girl,  
though wilful and insolent judged her.

Sylvia, on the other hand, is rejected:

On Sylvia alone part in harshness  
part in pity looked as if there  
a fragile shape with doomed legs danced  
a rigid weary pattern, never  
to desist.

Van Zyl examines the two extremes of feminine response to erotic union: Goldbend, the sensualist, will accept any lover, Sylvia will accept only her "twin", the ideal partner. The Earth One favours Goldbend, for unbridled sensuality is conducive to earth-like proliferation. However, Van Zyl goes on to suggest that sensual self-interest and abandon, as symbolised by Goldbend, is as destructive as the search for ideal perfection, as symbolised by Sylvia.

While the women are the guests of the Earth One they are invited to survey her domain, "...that all creation\ they might know: where potters and craftsmen\their skills tried...". This passage is symbolic of human creative activity, suggesting a link between art and creativity and the "goddess" or Earth One. Van Zyl notes both the positive and negative aspects of this link:

...Often while they wrought they despoiled.  
Some even would break the mirror image.  
Intuition's rod touched and lighted  
crest or corner to aid perception.

Intuition and emotion are the dominant features of creativity in the halls of the Earth One. The women spend their days observing this activity, while their nights are spent feasting "with the Earth One and her followers", suggesting that the world of physical sensuality is the complement to the realm of intuitive creativity. The women soon become weary of this daily pattern, sensing the lack of a balance to intuition and sensuality, and yearn to continue their quest:

The women chafed at sensuous bonds  
when rather would they journey further.

Only Goldbend seems happy in this environment; Ulyssa decides to stay. "Lest we offend who gives\ these fruits and gifts...". Their stay is cut short, for the Earth One's transformation is imminent and they are in danger:

On the fourth day Ifan came: "Take no  
brews or heady wines tonight, lest they  
are drugged. Before dawn's bird-wing skims  
east, the Earth One her wrinkled pelt casts  
and lovelier will be than any woman  
with art more cunning. Then men as bee-comb  
will seek to plunder her. To woman  
an enemy she'll be. So must you sail this night."

The coming of spring, symbolised by the rejuvenation of the Earth One, is a danger to women. Spring releases the natural riches of the earth, which men seek to harvest: to Van Zyl, however, patriarchal relations with the bounty of the earth, and with women, are seen more in terms of "plunder" and aggression than a harvesting that is to the mutual benefit of all. The Earth One, and what she represents, is thus a danger to all

women, since the biological forces associated with spring – renewal and reproduction – may enslave them to their own reproductive cycles in a world where women are valued only for their ability to reproduce. Once a part of this endless cycle of reproduction, the woman stands to lose her individuality and her autonomy.

The women escape the island in time to prevent this fate, but discover to their dismay that Goldbend has smuggled Ifan onto the boat. Despite their protests Goldbend is unrepentant. Ominously, Ifan claims that he chose to follow Goldbend since this was the wish of the Earth One:

... At noon Goldbend,  
red-gold as cysanthemum slow came,  
with Ifan at her side. Sylvia cried:  
"She has stolen the Earth One's son!"  
"My blame not hers" Ifan soft replied.  
"My choice and the Earth One's will to follow  
her. When land comes I shall go!"

Goldbend defends her actions in terms that suggest that her sensual appetites have come to dominate her life:

Angry Goldbend stood: "To wake and take  
and find Ifan not there; to pluck, part  
press, yield, rise and with dull surprise  
to be unmated ... no! By my past love I know  
this passion's strength."

There is deep irony in her words, for we already know that Goldbend has no discrimination when choosing partners, and that the only strength involved here is that of her physical desires. Her fellow voyagers argue that the quest must be given primacy, but Goldbend replies that for her the quest has ended:

"My quest is man and where I find him!"

For a woman such as Goldbend, the quest for meaning in life begins and ends with finding a sexual partner. She shows no judgement in the partner she selects, since Ifan as the son of the Earth One will make her heir to the realm of his mother. As such she will be eternally bonded to the cycles of nature and instinct as manifest in her through her biological ability to reproduce. She will also be subject to the male who introduces her to this way of life, and there is an indication of this in Ifan's assertion that rather

than his being "found" by Goldbend as the object of her quest, he in fact is the one who has made the choice and now owns Goldbend, for she is "mine to be found!". When they reach land, Goldbend and Ifan leave together, and the animal imagery used to describe their departure only emphasises the nature of their bond:

Goldbend and Ifan in shallow bay  
like seals rolled or raucous cried  
as questing gulls, then dived and turned  
riding the breakers to sandy shores.

Goldbend has been turned aside from the quest for psychological wholeness by her desire for immediate sexual gratification. Van Zyl shows that the Earth One recognises her weakness and so provides the means, in Ifan, to end her quest. Nature is fecund and productive, but this very productivity can prove hostile to women in a culture where women are equated with nature and imprisoned by their fertility. The forces of nature, both in the land and within women, need to be recognised for the power that they represent, and properly managed with thought and with respect. The poet warns women against the bondage inherent in the physical functions of reproduction if this is not carefully considered, for it may turn them aside from the human quest for self-definition. The poem does not end here, and part 11 is focused on developing the further questing of Sylvia. This section is only a brief fragment and is generally of little interest. Van Zyl seems to have lost direction after her account of Goldbend's fall, possibly because she had already made the point that she wished to convey in her allegory. Van Zyl's poem is not specific to the South African context, and so does not allow for easy assimilation into the developing tradition of "South African" English poetry that was being built by her male colleagues. Equally, it is out of step with the dominant approach in that poetry both to nature and to women. Van Zyl's poem challenges patriarchal perceptions of nature, and argues for a more considered and more respectful approach to the land and the forces of reproduction in nature. It is this articulation of an alternative and feminine perspective that makes her work important within the field of South African women's poetry.

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The difference between bondage to the earth and the forces of nature – which is negative and counter-productive for women – and a desired harmony with the earth is further developed in a short story that Tania van Zyl published in *Contrast*.<sup>30</sup> It is called "The Sorcerer's Dilemma: (A Myth)". As the title indicates, the story is a "myth", in allegorical mode, in which a simple story of the interactions of a woman sorcerer

with two male sorcerers functions to illustrate the conflict between the different modes of masculine and feminine wisdom in a patriarchal society. This conflict is represented in a conflict of skills between a woman sorcerer and her male counterparts, the Black and Great Sorcerers (perhaps representative of the triumph of an aggressive and destructive wisdom):

In a far corner of the desert lived two Sorcerers known for their feats of magic, their power over people and their wise words and not always wise ways. Their nearest neighbour, a woman sorcerer, lived a day's journey away under the Crocodile Mountains where she had built a garden of flowering shrubs, rare herbs and lilies and planted forests which were not seen elsewhere in the desert. Many made the difficult journey to see this garden and some never found it.

Of her magic and wisdom the Black and Great Sorcerers thought little, and her powers to make the desert blossom and fruit convinced them that she was in servitude to the earth and revealed her as one with little understanding of higher and greater matters. Nevertheless they were envious of her valley, believing they could put it to better use and that it would be a suitable setting for their magic and learning.

The woman sorcerer represents the woman who is not enslaved to 'Mother Nature', but who understands the powers of nature and is able to work with them. The male sorcerers have little respect for the woman, since they consider that her wisdom derives from her "servitude to the earth", that is her knowledge of the productive abilities of the earth derives from her knowledge of her own reproductive cycles. As such she is considered to know little of conventional male wisdom, the "higher and greater matters". Yet they admire her garden, the fruits of her feminine wisdom, and desire to gain ownership. The woman sorcerer is aware of their plans to appropriate her realm:

Sensing their hostility, well aware that she could not compete with their cunning or their wisdom, knowing that she was small of stature and that trickery would not make her bigger, she felt humble yet did not think that the Sorcerers stood very far above her.

The imminent arrival of the representatives of masculine wisdom in her garden domain is sensed by the woman as "some inharmonious vibration, a sense of wrongness, that persisted ... presently the two Sorcerers rode up on their mules". As she meets her visitors she is aware that their desire is to dispossess her and appropriate her achievement:

...When they compared their arid desert home with this green valley, she sensed the calculation in their cold praises and in what direction their intention moved, and she prepared herself to meet it.

The male sorcerers commence their attack, attempting to trap her in a web of logic and rhetorical argument and persuade her thereby that yielding her garden to them will be in her own best interests. Such arguments reflect patriarchal assumptions that rationality and logic are superior forms of thinking, and that persons who operate by such methods are therefore more able to take care of those who operate by the more "primitive" and child-like methods of intuition and co-operation with the forces of nature:

That she lived alone and lacked the skill to protect herself or the experience to realise she was not immune from attack was a theme they worked on, with the Great Sorcerer doing the talking and his friend helping with a few nudging, shrewd words. They worked the idea backwards and forwards, drawing tighter round her a web of words, and arguing as if she were advancing her points and objections instead of just watching them with large still eyes.

Ironically, the only attack the woman has to fear comes from the very people who are offering her their protection. Likewise, the Sorcerers fail to perceive her as a person with her own integrity and ideas; they think for her, and carry on their argument as though she were participating, failing to recognise that her refusal to be drawn into their argument indicates her refusal both of their propositions and their way of thinking and reasoning. She remains completely impervious to any offers made by the sorcerers:

...In a steady voice she answered that the Crocodile Mountains had given her the solitude and peace she sought and they were in fact the first to intrude on it with their different aims and intentions which might destroy its harmony and force her to leave. Without her care the garden would disappear and the spring would dry up.

Here the woman points out that in order for feminine wisdom to flourish, it must be able to do so in an atmosphere where it is not dominated by the masculine with its "different aims and intentions". Whereas in "Ulyssa, or the Broken Quest", Van Zyl had argued that in order for psychological wholeness to be achieved the masculine and the feminine must be united, in this story she further suggests that there must be an atmosphere of mutual respect between masculine and feminine. Each has their own

sphere of "magic" and power, which should co-exist; neither should seek to dominate the other. In this story it is the aggressive and acquisitive masculine that seeks to dominate and control the more nurturing feminine, a reflection of the mechanisms of patriarchal society. The sorcerers are incredulous that one so insignificant as the woman sorcerer should turn them down, and they refuse to accept her answer:

This was of course difficult for them to believe. As with some men it was enough to want something to justify every means of getting it, and it suited them to believe that this would benefit her more than themselves. That they could model and shape her as it suited them they did not doubt, and furthermore were they not two against one and was not the brains of one more than a match for her, simple as she was and unaware of the necessary craft and skill to protect herself. Like two hunting leopards they believed their prey cornered with only the final jump to make.

But the sorcerers underestimate the woman, who has encountered male oppression previously and is thus familiar with its ploys and tactics:

Once she had had a husband who thought to use and chain her to his ways and render her powerless. After years of struggle she freed herself and went north to live with a community near the Fish River at the desert edge.

The woman realises that the only way to adequately defend herself against the aggressive sorcerers is to rely on generations of accumulated feminine wisdom, and on her own experiences of working the earth and creating the garden:

However, she recalled what her mother, a sorcerer, had taught her on their searches in the mountains for herbs, plants and food, and she realised if these teachings were followed she might save the garden... Though not of a combative nature, she had nevertheless persisted with her work and learnt to overcome problems that concerned construction and irrigation, and to work in accord with desert growth, its lacks and abundance and the magical rapidity with which it could transform itself into an endless carpet of colourful flowers if rains came; or again its obstinacy to endure life in death and to live with the slowness of a hibernating tortoise. Though she could work and struggle to bring about something, she had no desire to set herself in opposition or to fight another; this it seemed to her would be a misuse of her powers, turning them in the wrong direction. Yet she had now to defend her rights or else lose all.

The essence of feminine wisdom, according to Van Zyl, is the ability to nurture, to work with the processes of nature and to learn how to create within these parameters.



It is a wisdom that is not aggressive, it has no desire to set itself in opposition to another, and yet it will defend itself when it must. The woman therefore enters into an alliance with a Water Spirit who offers her the use of his powers; in return she offers him a share of her garden for this is all she has:

"I can only give you what you have, a share in the garden and the building of it... More than that I have nothing to give, Without you the valley would dry up, without me this garden would never have been."

The partnership between the woman sorcerer and the Water Spirit represents the powerful creative partnership between feminine wisdom and nature; it is a partnership formed as a defence against aggressive, acquisitive and ultimately, destructive patriarchal modes of thinking. The male sorcerers wish to acquire and possess, while the woman sorcerer wishes only to hold and nurture. Van Zyl's story illustrates the difference between "paternal" thinking and "maternal" thinking that was argued in the previous chapter. It also illustrates her belief that a sympathetic and co-operative attitude towards nature is preferable to the dominating and aggressive attitude of patriarchal society.

The sorcerers refuse to give up their attacks on the woman, and they return in another attempt to take possession of the valley. They are tricked by an illusion created by the woman – that the garden has been destroyed by fire – and then removed from the valley by a flood created by the Water Spirit. After a while they realise that they have been tricked and they return. This time they are better prepared: "A second venture, they thought, would be more successful. The Black Sorcerer had some doubts and hoped she possessed no further tricks for he felt in her an instinct for this game that bettered anything he could think of ...". When the sorcerers arrive at the woman's valley they discover that she has erected a great stone wall and restricted entrance to a wooden gate. This portal is guarded by one known as "The Guardian", whom the sorcerers recognise, to their consternation, as "a former student who came to them for autumn tuition, and their surprise covered the thought that it was in the nature of a betrayal that he should be here ... it seemed as if they had lost a good student to the woman sorcerer".

The sorcerers request to see the Great Forest within the woman's garden, for they imagine that within its depths they may set their schemes for a takeover in motion. The sorcerers are obliged to stay on in the garden after an "accident" involving the Water Spirit "renders them too small to ride their mules". Because of their reduced

stature in her realm, the woman imagines them to be relatively harmless and so allows them the freedom of her garden. The Great Sorcerer chooses to go into the forest to "study trees", while the Black Sorcerer is given a field in which to plant that which he most wishes for in life. The woman allows the two sorcerers to become the agents of their own destruction:

The first indication of trouble was a message from the Giant Tree summoning the woman to the Forest Synod to arbitrate in the case of an intruder who had destroyed trees despite warnings. In the grassy amphitheatre of the old forest the court met and here the woman found the Giant Tree swaying in anger while on the ground, bound with creepers, lay the Great Sorcerer. What she feared had happened. On the north side were many felled trees and a partly constructed fort while above her was an angry beating of leaves.

The fort is a symbol of the aggressive intentions of the sorcerer, constructed to assist him in his bid to take control of the garden. For his wanton destruction of nature, the sorcerer is sentenced to be "punished according to an ancient law, by being crushed or planted in the earth to learn the hard ways and trials of trees ... One small tree in the clearing withdrew to another place and into this cavity the Water Spirit pushed the groaning Sorcerer and then poured water over his head and feet and stamped the earth around him." The Great Sorcerer must learn by hard experience what he cannot be taught any other way: his lesson is to perceive trees as living beings by undergoing the same "hard ways and trials of trees". The object of the lesson is to teach him respect for the forest, and how to co-exist with it rather than seeing it merely as a resource to be used to further his own desires. Meanwhile, the Black Sorcerer is also in trouble:

Then the guardian reported that the Black Sorcerer was harvesting a difficult crop and might possibly be in danger. The woman could imagine what might be produced if not sufficient care were taken to plant the right thing, or in weeding out what was noxious. The field as she approached resembled a luxuriant weed-and-thorn patch with the Black Sorcerer cornered at one end by a mob, part animal and part plant, which pulled and thrust at him with every intent to harm ... Since the battle was between the Sorcerer and his creations, the woman would not intervene.

Seeing the monster (a post-like shape, tall as a man) rear to get at him, she shouted "Jump the fence!" He did so, landing safely beside her. The moment the post reached the fence she struck and toppled it over. There it began to crumble and rot. With the Sorcerer out of the field the savage harvest withered and the woman suggested that they leave the vicinity.

The malicious half animal, half plant creatures are obviously part of the Black sorcerers plan to capture the garden, and like the Great Sorcerer's plans, represent an abuse of the natural world. The Black sorcerer's desires have manifested themselves as violent and aggressive, contrary to the spirit of the garden. These creatures can only flourish within the parameters of the Black sorcerer's field and within the range of his magic, within the sphere of the woman sorcerer they merely crumble away. Despite being savaged by his own creations, the sorcerer has learnt nothing: he blames the woman, and demands to leave with his friend.

The Great Sorcerer is rescued from his tree-like prison, and they are allowed to leave. The Guardian sees them off, and the sorcerers urge him to go with them since the garden seems so dangerous. The Guardian replies "that in his work he never wilfully injured or destroyed plants or animals so expected no trouble." Van Zyl's implication is that men can live in harmony with nature if they respect feminine modes of thinking, if they learn to view nature as more than just a resource, and if they learn the wisdom of nurturing. Van Zyl allows her two sorcerers to gain a measure of wisdom from their encounter with the wisdom of the feminine, even if they refuse to acknowledge the debt:

With time many changes came to the arid hill where the Sorcerers lived, and these were now mantled with green ... The Sorcerers in their deep leafy retreats were often difficult to track down. They did not like to be disturbed and some even said that the golden fluid had robbed their words of power. [The fluid is distilled from the fruit of a tree grown from a seed given to them by the woman as a parting gift.] This might have been malice.

Now they had no desire to exchange their fruitful groves for any other. Of the Woman Sorcerer they seldom spoke except to dismiss her as someone outside their world, nor did they feel that anything was owing to her, for what she had given them. That was as she wished it, seeing that in the building of their world they would leave hers alone.

Van Zyl implies that much of what is best in patriarchal society is derived from ancient feminine wisdom, although this debt is unacknowledged. The woman sorcerer, who derives her considerable powers from her alliance with nature, may also be read as a metaphor for the woman writer. (Certainly, the sorcerer or magician is a common symbol of the writer or artist, as in Shakespeare's Prospero from *The Tempest*.) The woman writer is interpreted by Van Zyl as gaining her inspiration from the natural world and from its principles of nurturing and growth as opposed to the patriarchal principles of aggression and acquisition. Van Zyl also suggests that women writers,

like the woman sorcerer, are quietly nurturing a tradition of their own, largely unrecognised by patriarchal tradition. It is, however, a tradition that reflects the garden of feminine wisdom. This short story reflects Tania Van Zyl's belief in the ability and strength of the South African woman writer, and her recognition that this contribution is not always acknowledged by her male colleagues.

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The concept of the necessarily close creative bond between the woman writer and nature is elaborated, again by means of allegory, in Tania van Zyl's dramatic poem "Women of Sola", which appeared in *Contrast*.<sup>31</sup> This poem was written in 1965, and Van Zyl situates it in a fictional society much like the South Africa of the 1960s, a place of political oppression and fear. As mentioned earlier, oppression in South Africa was based on both race and gender, and the poem can be read as a criticism of both aspects of oppression, for the poet plays with concepts of "otherness" and exile in her work. The protagonist of the poem is a woman called Rachel who is described as a "word-weaver"; she has been exiled from her community because of the subversive nature of her words. She is thus a metaphor for the oppressed "others" who attempt to claim a voice within society, but she is also a metaphor for the woman-as-writer, the "other" in literary criticism. The society which oppresses is described in patriarchal terms, and the voice that cries for dignity and freedom – Rachel – as feminine.

The poem itself is written in dramatic form, and could be performed as a verse play. Van Zyl uses the form of free verse, but as with the poetry discussed above, it is the vivid nature of her images that carries the aesthetic impact. Terms such as "word-weaver" for poet evoke the magical essence of the role of the poet, the original shaman in primitive society. The poem is set in a mythical society, and the Biblical resonances in the names of the characters suggest a mythic and spiritual purpose to the poem. Rachel, the protagonist, seeks to reinvest her society, and indeed her role as poet, with the original magical essence and respect for nature of earlier cultures that has been lost in the arid secularism of patriarchal culture. Part I of the poem\ drama commences with a soliloquy delivered by Rachel as she returns from the city from which she has been exiled, to Sola, a rural community which is the place of her birth. Her experience echoes that of many South African women, such as Winnie Mandela and Mamphela Ramphele, who were exiled to distant rural communities because of their "subversive" words. Rachel begins the poem by lamenting her fate in terms that emphasise her awareness of a history of aggression and oppression among her people:

Time is old, her wrinkled folds about us hang.  
 Since life began beast banished beast, man turned on man,  
 From earth wounds like blood the exiles flow, unnamed,  
 unclaimed, unwanted go, now south, now east. Mountains  
 oppose, winds strip their clothes, mouths censure; child bones  
 rattle for centuries. April, December,  
 February exiles, winter, spring or autumn  
 will ban or blow you away. So nameless I am  
 and hold neither hearth, nor man, only this child.

As a "strange" woman alone, and in effect a "single parent" since her husband does not accompany her, she represents a threat to a people who live by strict codes of gender behaviour. She is approached by one of the residents of Sola, John, who demands, in a suspicious and accusatory manner, to know why she is there and what she wants:

Woman, why do you tread our soil?  
 Why have you come with shadows and want?  
 What rights are yours?  
 ....  
 By what right do you tread this soil,  
 or lodge in the cracked walls of Jacob's hut?  
 Who has cast you out? Why have you forsaken  
 your home to wait rejected or unwanted  
 lost to your kin, in this dusty land.

John recognises that Rachel now lives outside of any recognised social structure, she is an outsider and an exile, and thus must justify her intrusion into their lives. Rachel gives the reasons for her exile, and her claim to residence in Sola:

The blame was not mine; to speak as I thought  
 to know where still our dignity is hung,  
 to wear it as it should be worn, though torn  
 that was my aim. To show it had no worth  
 for the hard handed, who misused and cast us  
 out, weed uprooted, ploughed us in  
 and conceived not that we suffered.  
 In Sola I am no stranger, but the daughter  
 of Miriam and Jacob the school teachers.

Rachel derives from a family of educated people, school teachers, but she identifies with the oppressed whom she terms "we" and "us". She is the artist or poet who writes or creates with a social conscience. Her crime has been her willingness to speak out on behalf of her people in an attempt to help them to regain their dignity, but John only

accuses her of bringing trouble to Sola. Rachel replies that she only wants "the people of Sola as my friends". John's reply is not promising:

As friends ... how can that be?  
When one woman works against another  
and man aims to despoil man.

Rachel is forced to recognise that the paranoia inherent in oppressive societies has spread even to Sola:

Is it then here as elsewhere?  
And difference but a foolish hope.

Van Zyl's Sola is a community divided against itself, and characterised by suspicion. It views the possibility of freedom with distrust, preferring to embrace oppressive structures that are familiar, much as South African society of the 1960s refused to entertain the ideas of race and gender liberation, and silenced all who spoke out on such matters. In such a society, victims of oppression often fail to see their common oppression, and work against those who would change the status quo in an effort to bring freedom.

John then reveals to Rachel that in Sola they have heard of her because of her abilities as a "word-weaver":

They say your tongue like a python  
wraps round words and people to persuade  
them to do what they would not do;  
nor of themselves would have wit or courage  
to speak. They are bewitched  
and declaim with bitter tongues where wiser  
ones consider, Rachel, and are silent.

John likens Rachel's tongue to a python, thus linking her with the ancient Greek oracle priestesses who were accompanied by pythons. In using this allusion, Van Zyl suggests that Rachel's words are divinely inspired, like those of an oracle. The python is also a symbol of feminine spiritual wisdom, owing to its association with the Greek oracle priestesses, and Van Zyl links Rachel, in her role as poet or "word-weaver", with this ancient feminine wisdom. Her words, because of their power, cause others to also take up the cause of freedom, while the so-called "wiser ones" are silent. This allusion to ancient spiritual wisdom is also to be found in the names that Van Zyl gives to her



characters, with their biblical resonances. Rachel's name refers to the story of Jacob's extra seven years of labour in order to be able to marry Rachel, after he had been tricked into marriage with her sister Leah. Rachel thus represents a woman who has to wait for a period in the wilderness, before she can attain her recognised legal status. In the poem, Van Zyl's Rachel is also a woman alone, who must wait for her husband, but her goal is to work for the freedom of her people while she waits. In this she is a type of female Messiah figure, and John is the somewhat ironic "voice crying out in the wilderness" who must prepare the way for her. John fails to recognise her as the bringer of freedom and truth, seeing her rather as a subversive and dangerous figure. Rachel accepts his reprimands as a compliment: she links her ability with words to that of her ancestors who wove the magic of nature into their "earth songs":

Do they say that, those wise ones  
 unmoving as bards on a hill? Unspeaking  
 though knee-crushed. Hope was with me  
 that words soared free here, as the word  
 of our forefathers and mothers,  
 strongly fledged with untrimmed wings,  
 made earth songs to maize, hill, gourds  
 to gold acacia trees, to sun and cloud.

Rachel argues that those who live close to the earth, those designated "primitive fools" by patriarchal society, often have great wisdom. It is the feminine wisdom derived from a knowledge of how to live in co-operation with the cycles of the natural world. In a society such as South Africa, it was women and black people who were associated with the "anarchic" forces of nature, represented in emotion and intuition, in opposition to the rationality of the "wise ones". Rachel argues in favour of the "fools" in her society:

Fools sometimes are wiser than we  
 and read in the movement of clay,  
 a pot's shape, the nature of wood,  
 the hidden form that is to be.  
 As clay or carved wood are many fashioned,  
 with a century's voice or hand.

Of course, as her words reveal, it is also artists and poets who are included among those who function within the parameters of intuitive feminine wisdom. The truth of her words is refused by John as dangerous:

Have a care, woman, trouble's seed  
 ripens on your tongue, while misfortune  
 with night-wing fans your broken hearth.  
 Even here you bring what you are.

The consciousness-raising function of the poet and artist is seen as the danger, bringing with it the "seeds" of trouble that will flourish in the community if not rooted out. Rachel assures John that she has not come with the express purpose of causing dissent:

I have come to work, rest, and wait  
 in these hills for time to wear out  
 differences that part ...

Satisfied that she represents no immediate danger, John invites Rachel to meet with the women of Sola. This is effectively an invitation for her to join the community – if the women of Sola accept her.

Part II of the poem commences with a council of the women of Sola considering whether to accept the exiled women into their midst. Their words reveal that they are intensely aware that she is very different from them:

She comes a lone woman, treading  
 the goat browsed grass, who meets her?  
 She is not man-held but dog-driven here.  
 Word-weaver and spinner takes the common  
 good word and breaks it into new parts.  
 Woman cast here as a clinging burr,  
 we must welcome your hardness.  
 Your strength is double our strength,  
 our weakness knows the thorns of that harshness.  
 Our men are afraid of what speaks  
 with your courage. Here is a woman  
 to use, tooled for and against us.  
 Oh woman of trouble, we are simple;  
 Labour close to fire, earth and our kin.  
 Dance not as a dust-wheel to drag down our roof.

Despite their claims to labour "close to fire, earth and ...kin", the women of Sola fail to recognise the liberatory promise that Rachel represents. These are women who have accepted the patriarchal definitions of their society, and are thus equally alienated from nature and from the wisdom of their ancestors that Rachel evokes. Rachel is an independent woman, not "man-held"; in a patriarchal society such a woman is



threatening to those women who prefer to be "man-held". A woman who is given only the name of "Woman of Fear" expresses the hostility that such patriarchally-conditioned women feel towards women such as Rachel:

Lost woman as the chanting jackal  
 would you deceive us? Will you frighten  
 us with waiting and clamour? Who holds  
 you, neither children nor husband?  
 Should you not sweep the mud-floor, stir  
 or grind maize, serve or till the ground  
 before words of anger heat the pot?  
 Who are you to find words when men dare not speak?

"Woman of Fear" would have Rachel find her role in society within the sanctioned patriarchal roles of wife, mother, and one who serves. She rebukes her for speaking out, when "men dare not speak". Both as a woman, and as a poet or "word-weaver", Rachel stands condemned by such women for daring to operate outside of the accepted and traditional parameters of female behaviour. A woman called "Small Woman" responds with an argument in Rachel's favour. However, her name suggests that she does not have much stature in the community:

Our men are silent, heavy as potatoes  
 or as clay ... they wait ... for what?  
 When a voice as a lark bounces upward  
 calling and singing, and is a cry  
 from a woman, let us be proud that the one  
 spurned has more strength than the firm-seated.  
 The wind and waters break over her  
 still she is firm. Truth will sing  
 for her rather than in high places.

"Small Woman" recognises Rachel's courage and achievement, and urges the other women to feel a sense of common pride in Rachel's determination to sing truth on their behalf. Another woman, one called "Mother", and who represents the woman who defines herself only in terms of her role as mother, expresses the fear that Rachel will bring disruption and change to their stable community:

Truth? Yes, her truth but not ours?  
 Let it sing, but what fruit or plant  
 does she bring us? Will she injure  
 with sharp or poisoned words, or take  
 our children from the village and fields,  
 so that they are lost to us and must  
 travel where farm finds them? Is there  
 not emptiness and loss in her hands?  
 Does not misfortune burden her shoulders?

The traditional "mother" within a community fears change, preferring to raise her family within the safety of known social and economic structures. The voice of "Small Woman" again intervenes, arguing that as women they should show compassion to one in need:

Let us understand this woman and child  
 need a refuge. We are stone, mud and thatch  
 to raise a refuge for her. To repulse  
 a seeker is to cast out warm place  
 from our hearth and leave cold where  
 no one can be warmed. It is we then  
 who will be poor. Everywhere Rachel  
 finds an enemy and that enemy wakes  
 and sleeps in us too. We ask but fear  
 what they want and see, they are small.  
 Envy and anger belong to narrow ways,  
 small place and the closure of walls.

"Small Woman's" plea for charity, based on their common gender identity, is successful. The women agree to aid Rachel, for as women they feel a duty to heed the voice of nature which urges such behaviour from them:

We are a small people and must heed  
 as herds and shepherds what the ant,  
 the bee and the mountain cockroaches say.  
 The rain-speaking trees, red grasses,  
 the writing of fire and cloud voices  
 teach us their truth. For us there is  
 beauty and danger in the bronze cobra's  
 dance, where man's knife seeks the root  
 he finds hate. On many tongues are balanced  
 words of friendship that sprout and leaf  
 from an enemy's heart. We will not drive  
 Rachel from the stream nor set her  
 on the north road. We will offer her  
 our maize and water. Let her stay.

In a repetition of the snake image, the women recognise that just as there is "beauty and danger in the bronze cobra's dance", likewise there is beauty as well as danger in what Rachel represents. Therefore, they accept Rachel, but with the proviso that they are suspicious of her, and that her words of friendship may in fact "sprout and leaf from

an enemy's heart". Encouraged by their recourse to the natural world for assistance in their decision making, Rachel urges a closer alliance between herself and the women of Sola if they are to share the wisdom that is their inheritance as women:

My word is not your word, your life's shape  
is different, your ways cross mine,  
to meet we must stand closer. Can that be?

This appeal for an alliance based on an acceptance of common aims but different lifestyles does not meet with understanding or approval. The reply of "Small Woman", who has been Rachel's closest ally to this point, indicates their rejection of such a politically-charged alliance. The women offer her, instead, a place within their society where she may use her gifts and abilities without disrupting that community:

.....  
You are bird-travelled and wise  
while we seed close to the root.  
Your knowledge is more than Miriam and Jacob's  
will you not teach our children?

If Rachel were to accept this offer she would be accepting integration into an arid and oppressive society. This she refuses, preferring to remain an outsider and an exile:

...Let me live here  
and be as I am, something that makes me  
not a wife or a mother ...

Rachel, as a "word-weaver", poet, prophet, single mother and exile, refuses to assume an acceptable gender role within the community of Sola. The women of Sola thus feel confirmed in their earlier suspicions of her. They find her threatening, and so they reject her as fitting for social interaction with them:

..... This woman  
so clever and full of need what will she  
do here? The void will not let her go!

At the village store, by the well,  
funeral, dance and wedding, at church  
and school meetings, she will stand apart.

"Small Woman" criticises them for this attitude:

Cruel, cruel are the women to reproach,  
 and weigh so loudly and roughly  
 their all against another's loss.  
 So do they admit their wanting and need.  
 As a grey heron seeks the river's  
 grassed curve and the largeness  
 of a man-empty land, Rachel stands  
 till her life's wing bears her further.

Continuing the bird metaphor with which she had referred to Rachel earlier, "Small Woman" sees Rachel in a period of hiatus between two periods of her life as a woman. She has failed to understand the real nature of Rachel's life. Rachel rebukes her gently, for she is not waiting for her life to resume within the sanctioned framework of marriage and family; she accepts with pride what she is – alone and different, a "word-weaver", an exile:

I stand as nothing and wait to take  
 the least that is. In the palms  
 of my two hands I hold your gifts and kindness  
 that like water it does not spill away.

The events in Part III of the poem occur a while later. Because of her "otherness", Rachel has become ostracised by the community of Sola, and even the women of Sola have turned against her:

.... Where are past hours  
 when women worked with women and held one mind?  
 All are against me here their fields  
 and turning paths hold them too well.  
 Birds shun and harsh voiced crows abuse me.  
 Men avoid the way I take.

Even nature seems oppressive in this community, as "harsh-voiced crows" abuse the exiled woman. Once again Rachel has become an exile, she exists within a community that fails to recognise her because of her subversive words. As Rachel sits in the late evening considering the harshness of her life, she is approached by Amos, who is "John the teacher's son". As a young man of education and intelligence, Amos, like Rachel, is not afraid to ally himself with the exiled and oppressed. He brings Rachel a message that her husband, Samuel, awaits her at the "frontier". Rachel can only be reunited with her masculine counterpart outside the parameters of Sola society, at the "frontier" of social interaction. Amos offers to show her the way:

As a bird you cannot follow those rough paths,  
 alone and unaided over bird dancing grass,  
 or forest ways tracked by buck and wild pig.  
 I have known and remembered streams  
 in hill groins, rock bridged the cries  
 of monkeys and hornbills as west ever west  
 the sun one follows. Before the moon  
 rises to draw in black the raven clawed thorn  
 we will meet tonight at Crow River bridge  
 to be at dawn on the mountain summit.

Amos, like the guardian in "The Sorcerer's Dilemma", represents the male who learns to understand and respect feminine ways of knowing. He knows the landscape well, and he can guide Rachel to her destination. His imagery, with its natural allusions, reveals him to be one who lives and thinks in harmony with nature. Yet Rachel refuses his offer:

Will you not draw on yourself blame  
 and danger, if from here you lead one  
 who is shunned and doubly exiled  
 by all? Must I allow that shadow  
 to haunt and mark you so early?

Amos persists, declaring a sense of spiritual affinity with Rachel. He recognises her for the shower of truth that she is:

... Yet close do I  
 feel to you Rachel, for as a granite cliff  
 you stand above women. Invulnerable  
 and hard your words strike truth, small ways  
 are not yours. I have dared, turned  
 and shaped a thought to approach and question  
 you. For the clefts and cracks  
 you have shown us, and how the steep tongued  
 precipice is avoided, and where  
 the cavern hearted accusers breed  
 cold hate and utter songs of madness.

Again Rachel attempts to dissuade him:

it is foolish and rash to call  
 invulnerable a lone woman broken  
 as a rock or deny the buzzard's  
 knife beak pierces her heart. She is  
 as a beast shut in the field to die.  
 Her words, windbrushed, scatter as withered leaves.

Amos listens to Rachel's description of her place in society, but he knows that the reality is different. He has faith in her abilities and in her wisdom. He chooses to accept and follow that feminine wisdom:

Your words have the greenness of fire  
that banks in the heart and glows  
in the mind and does not die down.

...

I too as a migrant feel the autumn's  
wing-beat and hear an inaudible  
wintered tread. Time as a woven basket  
contemplates her shape for us here.  
We shall meet before moonrise at the bridge.

Amos chooses to ally himself with Rachel. He accepts her view of the world. Since the poem is an allegory of "word-weaving", Amos represents the creative consciousness that refuses patriarchal definitions and accepts the wisdom of feminine modes of thinking and acting. Poets are "word-weavers", inspired individuals who function as speakers of truth within their communities. In a community such as Sola, or South Africa, such truth is unacceptable, and those who speak it are ostracised, exiled and silenced. Yet the poem ends on a note of optimism, for Amos and Rachel begin a journey that seems to hold great potential, expressed in the metaphor of a rich landscape that surges before them like a sea of infinite possibility:

Then before us plain on plain as a sea  
will surge with a million grasses.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tania van Zyl's "passionate involvement with nature" is more than just "a symbol of human fulfillment".<sup>32</sup> It also reflects her passionate conviction that women are at their best – as human beings and as writers – when they work in harmony with the natural world, when they respect its forces and do not allow themselves to be dominated by these forces. Her feminine realm of co-existence and "earth song" is sharply contrasted with the arid patriarchal realm of aggression, fear and acquisitiveness. But Van Zyl also recognises that nature can be women's enemy, if they allow themselves to become enslaved to the patriarchal definition of woman-as-nature and see themselves only as wives and mothers. If they see beyond this narrow

definition, their sensitivity to the natural world will enable them to cultivate gardens of feminine wisdom and weave words of freedom.

Van Zyl recognises that not all women will make this choice. It is the women of Sola who reject Rachel and choose to continue their subjection to the oppressive order. Likewise, it is Amos who chooses to recognise and follow the feminine path. Van Zyl is here concerned not so much with individual male or female actions, as with the harmonious balance of masculine and feminine that has been upset by patriarchy. Where patriarchy equates women with the feminine and reduces them to marginality or exile, Van Zyl attempts to elevate the feminine, and women, to a loftier position. Only when all in a society achieve an inner unity of masculine and feminine, symbolised for women by the quest of Ulyssa, and for men by the positive roles of men such as the Guardian and Amos, will humankind be able to co-exist in harmony with nature.

In contemporary South African English poetry, Tania van Zyl is the first poet to express this particular view of the poet's relationship with nature. In place of the domination and aggression of so many South African poets, she suggests rather the way of feminine wisdom: co-operation, nurturing and respect. She suggests too, that only by adopting these qualities will the South African psyche be able to liberate itself from its pattern of oppression and violence, which includes violence against nature and the slow destruction of the environment.

(iv) **Adèle Naudé: Time, Process and the Feminine Consciousness**

Pity the spring that yet unknowing bears  
The seeds of autumn's rotting fruit within  
Her youthful self...

Adèle Naudé (1910-1981) was born in Pretoria, and educated at Rustenburg Girls High School in Cape Town and the University of Cape Town. She worked as a translator, a secretary and a magazine editor. In 1935 she married Hugo Naudé, an architect. She travelled extensively in the Middle East, America and Europe. Her first volume of poetry, *Pity the Spring* (1953), was published when she was forty-three years old. This was followed by *No Longer at Ease* (1956), *Only a Setting Forth* (1965) and *Time and Memory* (1974).

Naudé's poetic career was contemporary with those of Tania van Zyl and Ruth Miller (whose work will be studied in the next chapter). Van Zyl and Miller both experimented with the new poetic styles associated with modernism, while Naudé preferred a formally conservative style of writing. Her choice of a more traditional style led one reviewer to term her work "slight" in comparison with that of Ruth Miller.<sup>33</sup> Yet although Naudé's work lacks the experimental boldness of Miller and Van Zyl, it remains of interest since, like Tania van Zyl, she writes about nature and the life of the woman writer or poet. A reviewer, Ernest Pereira, identifies this interest: "...the changing perspectives of youth and age, spring and autumn, and the recollection or evocation of the past ... are themes to be found throughout her work."<sup>34</sup> Naudé's view of nature is not that of her masculine contemporaries; she is not the hunter/explorer who dominates, nor the anxious settler who hopes to civilise, rather she represents the feminine poetic consciousness that presents an oppositional viewpoint.

As argued in the previous chapter, the nature of a woman's life and socialisation predispose her to a different mode of thinking to men. Because women often focus on repetitive tasks such as housework, and because their working careers may be interrupted by childbearing, their lives do not follow the linear pattern of men whose careers are generally uninterrupted. As a result women tend to be more aware of the way in which life may be read as a series of cycles rather than as linear progression. Secondly, what was defined as "maternal thinking" in the previous chapter, a respect for the processes of life and a realisation that control over these is limited, produces a



reading of nature that sees the cycles of life and death as part of a process which must be accepted rather than rebelled against in a desire for immortality. Adèle Naudé's poetry may be interpreted in these terms; she is intensely aware of the oppositions in nature – life and death, joy and suffering – but she integrates these within a framework of time and process. In this brief discussion of her work I will concentrate on this aspect, although I will also examine the poems that reflect Naudé's sense of herself as a poet.

Her first volume of poetry, *Pity the Spring*, initiates Naudé's exploration of the processes of nature. The title poem speaks of spring – or youth – as bearing within itself the seeds of autumn, old age and eventual death:

Pity the spring that yet unknowing bears  
 The seeds of autumn's rotting fruit within  
 Her youthful self and bravely, proudly wears  
 Her vulnerable draperies on thin,  
 Young body, raw from winter's chastening.

...

For she will lose what she has found  
 When autumn's fruit is given to the worms  
 Or lies, uneaten, rotting on the ground.  
 Pity the spring, her gauche, sweet arrogance,  
 But leave her savouring her ignorance.

Youth and age are linked by the poet as parts of the mutable process of life. The poem contains echoes of the views expressed by Keats in his Odes: Keats explores the tensions between life and death which he finally resolves in the "Ode to Autumn" where he sees life in terms of the seasons – spring leading into summer, autumn and then the winter that precedes death. This is the view that Naudé adopts, an essentially feminine view that sees life and death not as opposites in tension, but as opposites that are two ends of a continuum: the one cannot exist without the other. For both poets, what links life and death is time and the process of the individual through time. In "The Canyon" she emphasises how time is the engine that drives the changing seasons. The poem is constructed as three stanzas of eight lines; each stanza is formed of six lines that have an internal rhyme pattern (abcbac) and a concluding couplet that is unrhymed. The pattern of regularity that is built up in each stanza reflects the regularity of the changing seasons:

Today another spring has drifted on  
 Beyond our reach.  
 The stranded knot that binds  
 The seasons, each  
 To each, has been again undone  
 And unravelled out by rushing winds  
 Of time that tear and wear their way  
 Along the years.

First summer brooded down upon the day.  
 Then autumn smiling,  
 Giaconda-lipped,  
 Secretly her time away  
 Until the winter came who whipped  
 And lashed relentlessly a passage  
 Through the year,

Emerging then into a breathless spring.  
 Now summer strewn  
 Anew upon the course  
 The wind has hewn,  
 Is yet again contributing  
 Towards the unrelenting force  
 Of time that cleaves a canyon out  
 Among the years.

Life itself follows the course of the "canyon" that time "cleaves/out among the years".

The movement from season to season , and the inevitable forces of time and process may be part of the pattern of nature, but Adèle Naudé is aware that this pattern contains both light and dark. Like Tennyson, she is aware that nature is "red in tooth and claw". This darker side of nature is the realm of suffering and pain. In "The Feast", she describes how the "silence" of the "quiet earth" masks this suffering, which is linked to both birth and death:

...

The old pear tree has not forgotten how,  
 When sloughing off the winter's drab each year,  
 Its ancient limbs are torn that it might bear  
 A tiny bud upon a brittle bough.

...

The garden feels so much it cannot speak.  
 It knows the agony of bitten shoots,  
 Of mole-scarred bulbs, the pain of nibbled roots.  
 It sees the bird, a goldfish in its beak.

And then the cat that stalks the bird among  
 The reeds. And here where water lilies sleep  
 Upon the lap of noon, in dark and deep  
 Recesses, fish are eating up their young.

This silence then that hedges in the square,  
 Is but the dumbness of a being, muted  
 By the suffering which lies there rooted  
 Far too deep to sound upon the air.

Naudé makes the reader aware of the opposites in nature; the beauty of the garden, and the suffering that is part of that beauty. She feels through empathy the "suffering which lies there rooted". Her poem shares some of the sensitivity to the dark side of nature that Ted Hughes explores in his poems such as "The Pike". But Naudé sees this not as a part of the plan of a semi-malevolent deity, as Hughes might, but merely as an integral part of the processes of time and nature. In her poem, the regular rhythm set up by the rhyming quatrains reflects the regularity of the flow of time through nature that is part of the meaning of the poem.

The pain that Naudé perceives at the root of nature is also seen to be part of the pain of human life in several of the poems from her second collection, *No Longer at Ease* (1956). "Memling's Virgin with Apple" describes the pain inherent in motherhood through a contemplation of Memling's depiction of the Virgin. Here Naudé examines the way in which a male painter has depicted Mary, and is struck by the fact that this particular man has departed from tradition by allowing Mary a degree of autonomy:

She is a person here in her own right.  
 This one forgets when the Child, the three wise men,  
 holy angels and shepherds share the light  
 with her. So often she's but a part of the composition,  
 part of the scene.

But here she's the centrepiece.

Memling's focus on Mary as the "centrepiece" allows Naudé as poet to embark on a meditation on the centrality of Mary's experience as a mother. Naudé notes the detached separation in the portrayal:

But there's a detachment and a strange withdrawal,  
 an aloneness in her serenity  
 taking her far away from us. It's unusual,  
 for mothers holding their children are not easily  
 disentangled...

Naudé suggests that the artist allows Mary to know at an early stage what all mothers come to know eventually, the pain of separation as the child moves beyond her to find its own life in the process of moving from childhood to adulthood:

....She was engaged before  
 with his hourly needs and the unfolding wonder  
 of motherhood. But here He is wanting more,  
 for He's older, wanting the shining object beyond her

Once the child has moved on to grasp the "shining object", the mother is often left to cope with the resulting loss and loneliness and, like the Virgin, is often surrounded by those who cannot understand this particular pain:

From now onwards her state will be a lonely one  
 all through her life and when the chapter ends  
 in darkness, she'll stand with the other Marys, alone  
 and weeping in a wilderness of friends.

Although not all mothers suffer the same tragedy as Mary, all mothers are aware that the passage of time that produces the joys of seeing a child grow and become a capable human being also produces the sorrow of that same child leaving its mother's care to assume its own independent life.

The emotional pain of separation and loss that is the subject of "Memling's Virgin with Apple" is contrasted with the horror of physical pain and death that can occur in an instant of time, in a poem inspired by Naudé's European travels, "Pompeii":

Being given life, we accept the end of life,  
 but O, not like this, in violence and strife!  
 Physical pain is always hard to see,  
 the body writhing like an olive tree,  
 and the closer to one the more moving.  
 That is why Pompeii was my undoing.

Naudé compares these hapless victims of violent and sudden death with herself, for life is always tenuous and always contains within itself its opposite – death:

They were heedless too, like us, of a warning,  
 so that day began as any August morning,  
 with the head too webbed with heat for reckoning,  
 the limbs relaxed. Bathing might relieve the sting  
 of the buzzing sun. Work some would have shelved  
 as you and I have often done ourselves.

So it was hard to see how they had died  
 in agony, for having identified  
 myself with them, the writhing dog became  
 my dog, constricted by his cords of pain  
 and there, crouching with hands before the eyes  
 was I, shutting out not what I could recognise,  
 (the burning lava and the smothering ash,  
 the holocaust laid at Vesuvio's feet),  
 but in that inward, all-revealing flash,  
 myself, facing the eternal, and no retreat.

Since life and death are opposites on the continuum of time, all humans face the possibility of violent and inescapable death. In "Feast" she identified this pattern as part of the processes of nature, in "Pompeii" she examines how this pattern applies to human life as well.

The poems in Adèle Naudé's third collection, *Only a Setting Forth* (1965), focus on the topics of age and death, and the pain associated with these processes. In the eloquent and moving poem "Hands" she writes of a woman, once capable and efficient, who is now incapacitated by age and disease. Her hands become a metaphor for the destructive processes of aging:

*Hands*

She keeps them out of sight now  
 Those hands that once held  
 Compelling the reins

Of a runaway household.  
 Cool and always expressive,  
 Blue-ribboned with delicate veins,

And saying so much with incisive  
 Gesture. The tidy fingers  
 Could release a train

Of phrases easily translated  
 To desires and requests.  
 Now she hides them, feigning

Cold beneath the Kashmir's  
 Graceful folds. Crumpled and silent,  
 Never to speak again,

Yet speechless they cry aloud  
 For release, being angrily  
 Corded up with hot pain.

The poem is composed of six tercets, and the third line of each tercet rhymes with the third line of the tercet that follows. In this way Naudé establishes a continuity between the tercets that reflect the continuity of life that eventually brings age and decay. A further examination of the processes of decay and death is found in "For a Neighbour", where the poet contrasts the ending of life with the vibrant beauty of a summer day, echoing the complex opposites of life and death that she introduced in her first collection:

On a day like this it is hard to believe that you are dying.  
 Lying pale and frail, already touched with shadow;  
 Hard to believe when the eaves outside are flowing sunlight  
 And the returning swallows, day by day arriving,  
 Skim the widening pool of light submerging winter.

All outside is fresh in the new translucent greens  
 You cannot see; first faint sheen on the young willow  
 Weaving ceaselessly in the unrest of the season;  
 White camelia bursting from its varnished leaves  
 And every dawn enunciating at your window.

While the woman sinks into death, nature is renewing itself for another year. Death and life are part of the complex whole, they exist simultaneously since every living thing has its own individual passage through time towards its own end. The poem concludes with the poet considering how faith in an afterlife, an effective rebirth or renewal onto another plane of existence, eases the process of death:

With such faith in your rebirth, does earth still have a meaning?  
 The spring flowers I bring will have dropped by tomorrow;  
 Your hands hold them lightly, but I know your wide vision  
 Embraces more than these or all of my seeing –  
 Your fields of unchanging green, fields never stubbled.

With such faith in your rebirth, does earth still have a meaning?  
 The spring flowers I bring will have dropped by tomorrow;  
 Your hands hold them lightly, but I know your wide vision  
 Embraces more than these or all of my seeing –  
 Your fields of unchanging green, fields never stubbled.

The dying person has already moved on emotionally to another plane, where the cycles of life and death do not apply, for here the fields are eternally green. The implication is that while the material world is subject to time and process, there may be an afterlife where these laws do not apply. The poet herself does not comment on this belief, but the poem suggests that she holds it as a possibility.

The concept of separation and parting is used differently in one of the most delicate poems of *Only a Setting Forth*. "The Day of her Departure" is ambiguous, for it could be a poem about death, since the loved one is transformed into a winged angelic creature. On the other hand, the winged creature may be merely a metaphor for the bright presence of the one who has left. This seems more likely, since the poem is situated between two poems written by Naudé for her daughter, "Snapshot" and "Long-Distance Call":

*The Day of her Departure*

She is gone but the sky is still bright  
 With her wings. Air moves, singing  
 The echoes of her voice, of her being,  
 All is deep-etched with her light.

To-day still spins and scintillates  
 With the facets of a jewel-blaze  
 Set dancing by her presence, her ways  
 Of enhancing time with deep loves, quick hates.  
 Glint and flash and the bright air quivering,  
 Gleam of flint, clash, anger and laughter  
 Dull emollience of habit for me later,  
 Concealing the depth of the severing.

Eyes smart but it's only the light that stings  
 And slashes, laying hidden nerves bare.  
 Grief after, but now I am merely aware  
 of the sky still blade-bright with her wings.

The poem is constructed from sixteen lines arranged in the form of a quatrain, an octave, and a quatrain. The rhyme scheme is regular, and is made of units of four lines that rhyme according to the pattern abba. This neat regularity and symmetry contains

the images that suggest the joy that the beloved "she" brings to the life of the poet, and the sorrow that her departure produces. The symmetrical and regular arrangement of the lines suggests both the combination of opposites and the flow of time between these opposites or from one to the other.

Naudé's last collection, *Time and Memory* (1974), was published when she was sixty-four. As the title suggests, it is a contemplation of the passage of time in her own life and the memories that time produces. Several of the poems look back on the poet's childhood. "Queen of Koeberg" was written on the occasion of the funeral of "Aunt Lettie". At this ritual for the close of one life, the poet suddenly remembers the beginning of her own life:

...  
 But I, not hearing the words  
 Of the dominee, nor seeing  
 The black, the mauve, the unaccustomed hats,  
 The patchwork quilt of flowers,  
 Her covering for the night,  
 Find I'm aware of the hours spent  
 Mothering lambs, herding the cattle  
 Feeding poultry  
 (Shivering small below feathers  
 As birthdays approached!)  
 I think of Scotch carts, wagons and coaches,  
 The Cape cart, ostrich tall,  
 With the same swinging and swaying gait.  
 I hear the milk cans, clinking – singing,  
 On the way to the railway siding;  
 I'm hiding again in huge haystack houses,  
 Helping with rations in the pakhuis  
 Garlanded with bakkems  
 And barrelled with salted haarders  
 Harvested from the summer seas of Blouberg.  
 I'm slicing coarse bread on the machine  
 And doling out lard for the volk.  
 Farm days of old, blue gums and peppercorn trees,  
 Pig lilies at the stream  
 And dolosse foretelling the future.

In this poem, Naudé does not use rhyme, but allows the poem to flow through the device of free verse. In this way the train of images suggest the free flow of thought as she returns to her childhood and considers what her life has been through the passage



of time. The poem "Bloubergstrand" continues this journey back to personal beginnings, but here Naudé uses the simplicity of the rhymed quatrain form to suggest the simplicity of childhood experiences. The images in the poem also suggest the vivid perceptions and imaginative adventures of a child:

Revisiting childhood in my mind  
I've found anew that seaweed pool  
Where anemones ringed their mauve-pink fringes  
And klipvissies wreathed in a graceful school.

Clear water wherein I, conjuring saw  
With a child's lively mind the palaces  
Of Atlantis gleaming with coral and pearl  
Between grass fronds on the ocean floor.

...

But perhaps the most revealing of these childhood memory poems is "Ouma", where the poet recounts how a childhood encounter with death scarred her psychologically. Here a person at the beginning of her life is confronted with someone whose life has followed its natural process to completion in death:

It was custom, I know, that even I,  
Small serge-clad child, should see her lie  
So coffin-cold in the narcissi.  
How could they know her death would slice  
Forever on my sapling life  
The memory of that touch of ice?

Unharméd her face, unlined, unworn,  
Yet I, the young child, was so torn  
That although the growing years have ceased  
I know I bear the cicatrice.

What separates the growing child from the body that was her grandmother is only the passage of time. It is perhaps in this incident that the seeds of an awareness were planted that were eventually to produce Adèle Naudé's poems on time, process and the combination of opposites in the complexity of birth, growth, decay and death.

When I waken at dawn  
 And darkness invades me  
 I pray that Apollo may come.

Another of the consistent themes in Adèle Naudé's work is a concern with the process of making poetry. She is the most self-reflexive of the poets studied so far, in that she examines her own activities as the maker of poetic artefacts. In her first collection, *Pity the Spring*, she included a sonnet called "The Potter", in which she describes how the creation of poetry, like life, involves pain. Her poem may be compared with Ruth Miller's poem "The Spider" (discussed in the following chapter), where Miller contrasts her stumbling efforts with the fluent and elegant manner in which a spider spins a web. In her poem, Naudé uses the octave to reflect on the oppositions inherent in an artefact, the beauty of the completed object, and the pain and suffering that is part of the processes of its creation:

No product of the artist's hand is wrought  
 With ease. From anguished rock there slowly rise,  
 By hammer blows and torturing device,  
 The sculptor's dreams. A statue's road is fraught  
 With stony tears. The beauty that is caught  
 In filigree of goldsmith's merchandise  
 Is smelted first in crucible and cries  
 With pain. Beauty is not lightly bought.

In the sestet, Naudé asserts that this pain is a necessary refining process for both the artist and her material:

And even as the statues twist and turn  
 In agony and molten metal rears  
 Above the cruel smelting pot, so they,  
 Creators, writhe as in their flame they burn.  
 The hammer blows and cries and pains and tears  
 Refine alike the potter and his clay.

Despite a dedication to her art and a determination to develop her technical skills that equalled that of any male "potter", Naudé realises that to be a woman poet is not easy in a cultural climate dominated by men and patriarchal masculine modes of thinking. In her second collection, *No Longer at Ease*, she includes two long poems on the topic of the tensions and competition between poets: "Parnassian Parade: A Fable" and "Lament". "Parnassian Parade" is a humorous poem in which the god Zeus

summons his poets, "each a Pegasus", to the "Parnassian Horse Parade". Each has to account for him or herself. Among the winged equines is a female:

...  
 A third, a filly, flecked with foaming cloud,  
 Comes racing in upon her wings new-born.  
 A little coltish, but she'd settle down  
 To join the cohorts of his bannered dawn.  
 ...

Naudé compares her poets to mythical winged horses, a metaphor that suggests a combination of base animal qualities, such as aggressive competitiveness, with the ability to soar above the common herd on poetic wings. She describes the woman poet as a "filly" rather than a mare, a term which suggests that she is still relatively "young", a newcomer to the poetic fray. Her "coltish" behaviour is attributed to her immaturity. This comparison can also be read as ironic and self-deprecatory, for Adèle Naudé is, in reality, describing herself, a mature woman, in terms which suggest an acknowledgement of poetic immaturity within an androcentric literary milieu. The woman poet or filly does not fare well among her aggressive male fellows:

...  
 The Pegasi are jostling for position,  
 Back-biting, stamping for the inner rail.  
 The little filly's ousted from her place  
 ...

The poem ends with all the horses being chastised for bad behaviour, and being chided by Zeus:

It's right that you should go upon the scales,  
 It's right that you should slowly pace the ring  
 Assess each other, tell each where he fails,  
 But must there be this kicking on the wing?

Zeus reproves them for their aggressive behaviour:

I'll ground the lot, I'll put you out to grass,  
 I'll clip your wings or tether you to earth.  
 ...  
 Be off with you, my stable's in disgrace,  
 For punishment you'll plough a stretch of sky.  
 ...

The Pegasi, now saddled with a curse,  
 Dejectedly in single file troop out,  
 Since when they plough the acred universe  
 And nibble at their reams and reams of cloud.

All the poets share the same fate, but Naudé is aware of the special difficulties of the newly-arrived "little filly". In "Lament", she elaborates on the problem, for she herself is the "filly" who must jostle for position in a field aggressively dominated by men. The poem is light and humorous, but expresses what is a serious concern. The form emphasises the irony of the poem, since Naudé uses a simple quatrain form that rhymes abab, as in traditional ballads and songs, hardly a form likely to qualify as new or exciting in the world of poetic creation:

How easy it was once to be  
 A poet when the pool was new.  
 I dive for pearls of imagery  
 But often lift a half-soled shoe  
 ...  
 Only a genius or an ass  
 Would write today of daffodils -  
 "Keep off the green Wordsworthian grass"  
 Is rainbowed over all the hills.

...  
 MacNiece has handled hours like glass,  
 I finger moments in my soul;  
 Think you this image still can pass?  
 There's no attempt to crack his bowl.  
 ...  
 Since Campbell's cantered down the gamut  
 Of the dictionary's course  
 I must needs trot when I would gallop  
 Even when I've found a horse.

...  
 So if like Uys, I stand accused  
 Of theft from Heinde en van verre  
 I would not be at all amused  
 For if I've done it, its in error

And if my spring dries on the shelf,  
 Choked with the dust of uneasiness,  
 It is because I find myself  
 A dumb, wordsworthless poetess.

Naudé characterises herself as a "poetess" among the male poets, but also "dumb" and without words. The ironic humour of the poem and its jaunty rhythm are at odds with the implicit recognition that men have created the language of poetry, and that women must struggle to express themselves within the parameters of their discourse.) What is of special interest here is that Naudé situates herself within a South African tradition that is recognisably masculine and that is closely allied with a British line of male poets. She does not attempt to evaluate herself against a line of woman poets, which suggests that her definition of poetic excellence was derived largely from within the parameters of this masculine tradition. This would explain the self-deprecatory and apologetic tone of both "Parnassian Parade" and "Lament".

In her third collection, *Only a Setting Forth*, she includes a poem called "In Self-Defence", which was written in support of a group of Cape Town poets known as the "Clifton contingent". Here she argues for poets to be recognised as craftsmen:

They say that poets rest on clouds,  
 Pink eiderdowns for preference,  
 Receiving easy messages  
 Transmitted by inheritance;  
 ...  
 We see ourselves quite differently  
 And know we're workmen of precision;  
 No lazy, unreliable lot  
 Could probe, dissect the airy vision.  
 ...  
 They say we laze on Clifton Beach  
 But fishermen work on summer days,  
 Often trawling vast Atlantics  
 To net one shining, fishy phrase.

Again, the jaunty rhythms of the rhymed quatrains give an ironic edge to the poem. What reads so easily and fluently often requires careful and meticulous composition.

But there is also a progression of ideas here, for whereas in "Lament" Naudé situated herself within a tradition of male poets, both British and South African, in this poem she shifts her sense of group identity to the "Clifton contingent", a group of writers that included women poets such as Tania Van Zyl and Ingrid Jonker. Although she does not mention these women by name, it appears that Naudé's sense of what constituted poetic excellence was subtly shifting to include all acknowledgement of women's contribution.

In poetry written by men, it is not uncommon to find poets appealing for assistance in their poetic creativity to the muses. The muses are mythical female beings who assist creative artists, and the bond between them is psycho-sexual in nature. Because this is a sexual bond between male creator or poet and female muse, it is not that common to find a woman poet appealing for a similar union with a muse. However, in "Invocation to Apollo", from her last collection *Time and Memory*, Adèle Naudé appeals to Apollo, the sun god, for aid in her work. Apollo was also the god of poetry, and Naudé's plea to Apollo is a feminine plea for erotic and creative union:

When I waken at dawn  
And darkness invades me  
I pray Apollo may come.

Sun god of my longing  
Touch as a lyre  
The cords tautly thronging  
My limbs with their pain  
For word music would lessen  
The hiss of the rain  
Warm rays would engender  
The splendour of summer  
Turn June to December  
And trembling I'd sing  
Though rain-cold be the heart  
And pain be the string.

In this poem Naudé links her two major poetic interests, the passage of time through the seasons, and the writing of poetry. She knows that making poetry is a painful process, but one that brings its opposite, joy and beauty as a reward. Through the act of creation one can turn winter, or sorrow, into summer and joy and beauty. It is Apollo, or poetic inspiration, that allows this transmutation to occur. In "Rivers Running Inwardly", Naudé develops these ideas further, for the flow of emotions through time is not always transmuted into art, sometimes the flow is turned inward and produces only alienation. In the poem, the river is a metaphor for both emotion and creativity, and in this context the poem may be read as a metaphor for the suppressed creativity of the woman poet who cannot always find the right language to express her particular concerns:

Rivers running inwardly  
 Slipping, dripping to the cave,  
 Flowing slowly through the ages  
 To petrify in wave on wave.

Slipping slowly to the cavern  
 Of the hollow heart inside,  
 Rivers flowing through a lifetime  
 Turn to stone and never rise.

The tone of despondency on the subject of poetry that is evident in the poems from *Time and Memory* suggests that Naudé felt that in her poetry she had not achieved her full potential. She may have treated the subject with irony and humour at times, but at times there was also despair. As a woman poet, she developed a feminine perspective on the seasonal and cyclic nature of life and the relationship between time and process. Yet she was never able to develop this feminine consciousness into feminist awareness and analysis. Like Mary Morison Webster, she remains at the point of questioning and despair. Nevertheless, her work poses a quiet challenge to the dominant discourse of the hunter/explorer in South African poetry in English, for she sees time and nature not as aspects of life to be dominated and controlled, but as part of an inevitable and inexorable process that must be accepted to be fully understood.

### Notes

1. Michael Chapman, *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*. Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1984.
2. Doreen Levin, "Mary Morison Webster", *Rand Daily Mail*, 15 October 1980, p.10.
3. Doreen Levin, "They hoist sails, the dying, they weigh anchor, they go out on a little breath, they do not care...", *Sunday Times*, 13 January 1980, p.13.
4. Charlotte's novel *Expiring Frog* (1946), a criticism of the Anglican church in South Africa, gave rise to much polemic when it was first published.
5. Quoted in Doreen Levin, "They hoist sails ...".
6. See Doreen Levin, "Mary Morison Webster".

7. Ibid.
8. Herbert Palmer, *Post-Victorian Poetry*. London: Dent, 1938.
9. Ibid.
10. See introduction to *A Litter of Leaves*.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Malvern van Wyk Smith, *Grounds of Contest: A Survey of South African English Literature*. Cape Town: Juta, 1990. p.43.
15. See Doreen Levin, "Mary Morison Webster", p.10.
16. Ibid.
17. D.J. Opperman, *Digters van Dertig*. Cape Town: Nasou, 1979, p.351. All the translations from Afrikaans into English are my own.
18. Ibid, p.366.
19. Ibid, p.365.
20. See Adrienne Rich, "When we Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision", in *On Lies, Secrets and Silences*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1979, and Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking", *Feminist Studies* 6, Summer 1980.
21. D.J. Opperman, *Digters van Dertig*, p.376.
22. Herman Charles Bosman, "The Poetry of Elisabeth Eybers", *Trek*, Johannesburg, March 1949, pp.26-7.



23. D.J. Opperman, *Digters van Dertig*, p.376.
24. See Michael Chapman (ed), *A Century of South African Poetry*, p.35, p.134, and p.19
25. J.C., "Poetry and Reality", *Contrast* 5(3), November 1968, p.98.
26. Ibid, p.98.
27. Ibid, p.99.
28. Ibid. p.99.
29. "The Willing Victim" appeared in *Contrast* 1(3) Winter 1961 and "Return from the Country" in *Contrast* 2(3), Summer 1963-4.
30. *Contrast* 9(3), December 1974, pp.48-58.
31. *Contrast* 3(3), March 1965, pp.20-31.
32. J.C., "Poetry and Reality", p.100.
33. P.A.K., "Differing Visions of Three S.A. Poets", *The Pretoria News*, November 17, 1965.
34. Ernest Pereira, "Time, Memory, and Adèle Naudé", *Unisa English Studies*, 12 (2), 1974, p.23.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE STRANGERS IN OUR MIDST

2.

In this chapter I will examine the work of Ruth Miller, Ingrid Jonker and Eva Bezwoda. They published their work in the 1960s in the case of Miller and Jonker, and the 1970s in the case of Bezwoda. There is much in their lives and their poetry that links them as products of their time. They were writing in the period in which the anger and alienation that fuelled the Women's Movement in Europe and America was being channelled into writing and protest. Although none of them openly identified with the ideas of the movement, their work does reflect anger at their oppression and their "otherness" as women and as poets, suggesting that all three were influenced to a lesser or greater extent by the ideas of Feminism. In addition, all three women poets died in tragic circumstances: Ruth Miller died of cancer, while Ingrid Jonker and Eva Bezwoda took their own lives. All three women chose to use poetry as a means of exploring their alienation and anger.

In formal terms, there is also a similarity in the work of the three women poets. They all use the styles of Modernism, which best reflect the alienation and anguish that is centrally the subject matter of their work. There is an emphasis on the image – whether as metaphor or as symbol – to convey meaning, and free verse is their favoured format. Miller mostly uses the image as Ezra Pound recommended, as the bearer of a complex of emotional and intellectual associations, but Bezwoda and Jonker take their imagery into the realm of Freud and Jung, allowing it to function as symbolism which conveys complex subconscious and gender-related meanings. Since the work of all three poets expresses alienation and anger, and since they rely so heavily on imagery to carry these emotions, this chapter will also draw on the techniques and discourse of psychoanalytic criticism.

(i) **Daughter of the Pale Mother: Ruth Miller as Woman Poet**

I am the child who is born  
 Of stony father, pale mother  
 My voice whether proud or forlorn  
 They created. And smother.

Ruth Miller, as she is known to South African readers of poetry, is the creation of masculine critics working within the parameters of their tradition. They have produced her as a poet in their own image and according to their own patriarchally determined perceptions of the woman poet. The critic who has done the most to "create" Ruth Miller's voice in recent years is Lionel Abrahams, who spent many years gathering Miller's work and attempting to find a publisher for the volume that eventually appeared in 1990 as *Ruth Miller: Poems, Prose, Plays*. Unfortunately, Abrahams is also the critical 'parent' who has done the most to distort and "smother" the feminine aspects of Ruth Miller's work. It will be the aim of this brief study of her work to suggest that critics such as Abrahams, and later Michael Chapman, have formulated a distorted picture of Ruth Miller as a patriarchally determined "woman" poet, emphasising the traditional traits of women – emotion, sensitivity – while underplaying the gender-specific anger, the alienation, and the sheer struggle of her life and career as a woman and a woman poet. This study will attempt to foreground the "pale mother" that is also a part of the voice that is Ruth Miller.

Ruth Miller was born in 1919 in Uitenhage, and began publishing poetry soon after the Second World War. She published two collections, *Floating Island* (1965), and *Selected Poems* (1968), which appeared shortly before her death in 1969. As a poet she consciously strove to perfect her technical skills within her chosen style of Modernism. She followed the example of poets such as T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden. A central feature of such poetry is impersonality, following Eliot's injunction that the poet's personality should be banished from his art. Ruth Miller worked to reach this level of impersonality, and to remove the anguish from her very personal poetry. She transmuted her suffering into finely crafted imagery. Yet just as it is possible to trace Eliot, the man, in his so-called "impersonal" poetry, so it is possible to find Miller, the woman, beneath the assumed mask of impersonality.

The specifically feminine aspect of Ruth Miller's work is, however, in danger of being suppressed by the Romantic myth of Ruth Miller as poet that Lionel Abrahams constructs in his introduction to *Ruth Miller: Poems, Prose, Plays*. Abrahams, while

clearly an admirer of Miller's work (he claims to have been a "literary protégé"), finds it almost impossible to reconcile Ruth Miller, the woman that he knew, with Ruth Miller, the poet. His introduction highlights the psychological tensions in Ruth Miller's life, tensions that occur in women who must function both as a woman in a patriarchal society and as a poet within an androcentric culture. Abrahams describes her public and private personas:

At home Ruth was a forceful presence with much to say for herself, but it was characteristic of her to have been silent and well-nigh invisible in even a slightly public situation.<sup>1</sup>

Abrahams is attempting to understand the mystery of an intelligent woman who would not assert herself in public. What was inexplicable to Abrahams may be understood by a gendered reading of her life. He is describing any woman of her time who was trained to be a "lady", to be silent and defer to the opinions of men in public. If Lionel Abrahams is right in his claim that her short story "Perspectives" is autobiographical, then it is clear that Ruth Miller was brought up to know what was expected of a "young lady": "the homage paid to adults, the standing up, the standing back, the sitting with one's ankle's, never one's knees, crossed, the Please and Thank-You."<sup>2</sup> In colonial society, the emphasis on behaving like a "lady" was pronounced, since masculine and feminine roles are more sharply defined in an environment where masochistic masculinity predominates. This early training produces women who defer to men and are often afraid to speak their minds in public.

Abrahams goes on to criticise Miller for her inability to discourse on intellectual topics when he suggests that the tension between woman and poet was something that surprised him:

For me there was always a certain surprising contrast between Ruth Miller as one knew her personally and Ruth Miller as she was expressed in her work. Her conversation came under the pressure of her anxieties and distresses, her sometimes eccentric habit of riding tangents long after they had lost their modicum of interest – and thus it displayed little of the wit, economy, elegance, perceptiveness, sensitivity and sheer cleverness that characterised much of her poetry. The contrast constituted a phenomenon one has to ponder. Where did such penetratingly articulate poetry spring from?<sup>3</sup>

The woman who coped with a home, a job, a husband, two children, financial difficulties, (and later the death of a child, a divorce and a terminal illness), and the

burden of being trained to be a "lady", as well as her craft as a poet, was understandably unable to produce the scintillating conversation of men who carried half her burden and were formally educated beyond her level. This battle to cope with the role of "woman of letters" in a male world for which she was under-prepared was also a part of the problem that Ingrid Jonker was to face in her struggle for poethood, as will be argued in the next section.

Lionel Abrahams does not include gender in his reading of Ruth Miller's life and work, and so attempts to explain this apparent mystery by removing poetic agency from the rather dull Johannesburg housewife to (an)other poet, some subconscious agency that was not "woman": "For all its intellectual strengths, [her poetry] certainly did not originate in her conscious head."<sup>4</sup> In this patronising removal of poetic agency from Miller's "conscious" world to her subconscious, Abrahams demands Miller's collusion:

[Her poetry] came rather from the realm of her forgotten' memories, instincts, dreams. She told me as much: that she sometimes woke in the morning to find the draft of a poem she had written down during the night with no memory of having done so, her consciousness having been hooded by the effects of the soporifics and analgesics she depended on for rest as her health gave way."<sup>5</sup>

The creative process which Abrahams describes here may have been true of her later years which were spent in the battle against cancer, but it is absurd to suggest that Miller spent her entire twenty-year writing career producing "automatic" poems. Paradoxically, Abrahams goes on to praise the "created" and "formed" nature of Miller's poems:

But even when Ruth Miller's poems are obscure they are thoroughly "created", thoroughly "formed", they belong to art ... Those midnight somnambulistic inspirations imply that the creative impulse at times spontaneously invaded the poet's life. Or rather that it spontaneously crystallised the poetry out of the wholeness of the poet's history, including regions below and beyond her consciousness. Thus after many years of fastidious cultivation, she had absorbed the pursuit of poetry into her inner nature ... her own poetry-making – the impulse to give aesthetic form to the stuff of her inner life – no longer depended on her will.<sup>6</sup>

Miller's conscious striving for technique and control over her medium is trivialised, and Abrahams tries to portray a woman in the grip of subconscious forces beyond her rational will, as if "she" were somehow merely the medium for the products of

(an)other (the inner, gender-neutral poet that Abrahams desires to create of Ruth Miller). The depiction of the poet as inspired by forces beyond his or her control derives from Romanticism, and is not particularly complementary to a poet, male or female, who followed the practices of Modernism and believed in the careful cultivation of poetic skill and technique. As if to acknowledge the contradiction in his argument, Abrahams pays tribute to Miller as craftswoman, but again relegates this ability to "instinct", rather than skill or perception:

Even in the secondary phase of her writing, when the effort consisted in criticism and revision, her procedure, with the work of others as well as her own, was still guided more by instinct than by logic... this was not a matter for reasoned debate: she had no patience for analytical criticism.<sup>7</sup>

Unable to account for the tension between "woman" and "poet", Abrahams refers back to the conventional patriarchal construct of the poetess – one who functions under the impetus of emotion, sensitivity and the promptings of the irrational.

The second "father" who has helped to "create" Ruth Miller as poet is Michael Chapman, who included a chapter on Miller in his book *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*. Chapman's admiration for Miller's work was based originally on much the same foundations as Abrahams': an appreciation of her formal competence. Like Abrahams, Chapman acknowledges the personal element in Miller's work, her concern with the private inner world rather than with the world of public affairs. This he attributes to the fact that "psychology has left its mark on twentieth-century experience", rather than because, as a woman, the private or domestic was largely the material of Ruth Miller's life. He characterises her work as follows:

For Ruth Miller the value of self-affirmation and the inner quest becomes a modern article of faith. It is, I think, this stress on ruthless self-consciousness, concerned with the truth of its own nature rather than with social and moral evaluation, that partly accounts for the relative critical neglect which this Johannesburg poet's work has suffered.<sup>8</sup>

Chapman, like Abrahams, does not admit gender into his argument, and does not accept at this stage that such discrimination may have contributed to the "relative critical neglect". In his critical academic study, Chapman focuses primarily on Miller's formal abilities and her skill in deploying the complexities of poetic Modernism:

In her later poetry she becomes even more self-assertively modernist, regarding the act of writing not so much as mimetic procedure, but (like Livingstone) as an act of discovery inherent in fiction-making.<sup>9</sup>

His conclusion, according to this critical paradigm is that

Ruth Miller achieves poetry which is a distinctive blend of the unusual and the commonplace. Traditional symbols are revitalised and made pertinent to an exploring sensibility, and the craftsmanship of the modernist serves situations deeply human in their implications ... Her outstanding quality is her sense of the appropriate, which gives a great and serious firmness to her essentially tragic vision.<sup>10</sup>

Despite his sympathetic approach to Miller's work, Chapman's focus on technique and on Miller's impersonality or "sense of the appropriate" also elides, as it ignores, the fact that Miller was also a woman, and an angry one at that. In a more recent piece, entitled "Ruth Miller: Breaking Silences?" (1990) – an oblique reference to my work – Chapman admits that recent gender criticism has led him to re-evaluate his approach to Miller's poetry:

I now feel dissatisfied with several aspects of my earlier response, and find it increasingly difficult to separate Miller's poems from biographical, social and literary contexts. As a result I suppose I am less inclined today than ✓ Abrahams to continue reading Miller centrally as a humanist, universalist poet, who is only peripherally a white South African woman of the 1960s...<sup>11</sup>

✓ Although he now offers a more problematised reading of Miller's work, Chapman still responds to her poetry primarily in aesthetic terms – admiring her "precise intelligence" and "daring irony" – inscribed within the parameters of the critical discourses of postmarxist and poststructuralist criticism. It is the contribution of the "pale mother" to Miller's work that will be of primary interest here, rather than those aspects of interpretation and reading that have intrigued her "fathers".

\* \* \* \* \*

I was myself before you touched me. I.

A concern with gender is not obvious or overt in Ruth Miller's poetry, and can often be most clearly traced in poems and writing that has been marginalised by her critical "fathers". It can be discerned in the gender-specific anger that sometimes manifests as part of the existential anguish that pervades Miller's work. It can also be discerned in the specific images and allusions that Miller uses to express her anguish and alienation. Like several other women poets of her period, she seems to have been fascinated by



✓ the myth of Galatea.<sup>12</sup> There are two poems of this title, one in each of her collections. For the woman poet, the motif functions as a metaphor of the way in which patriarchal society "produces" women to fulfill masculine desire. The focus in both poems is on the response of the "created" woman. The first Galatea poem, from *Floating Island*, takes as its starting point a quotation from Virgil: "Come here my Galatea/What is there to amuse you in the sea?/Come here, and let the wild waves hammer on the beach." Although in Virgil's poem Galatea is a nymph and not the figure from Hellenistic myth, Miller uses the quotation to develop her own sense of the mythical Galatea's frustration with her life. Pygmalion's is unable to understand her yearning for things beyond himself; he is the man who demands that women focus their attention on his desires, that they "amuse" themselves in the satisfaction of male needs rather than in intellectual or creative pursuits. The "wild waves" which hammer on the beach suggest the activity of the poet who "hammers" out rhythms in his or her poetry, and this fascinates Galatea, potential woman poet. In the closing stanza of the poem, the imagery that Miller uses suggests the imprisonment of Galatea's psyche within the mould of patriarchal femininity, symbolised by the "earth" from which she is fashioned to be a sexual companion for the male who "produces" her:

O Galatea, let the wild waves hammer  
 On the beach. You are bound, enclosed  
 ✓ In the wide cup of earth from which you were fashioned  
 And from which you are, despite my sea-green love,  
 Frozen in marmoreal regret.

✓ The poet, through Pygmalion's words, records her recognition of the woman, potential poet, as "bound" to the earth, symbol of sexuality and reproduction. Despite her idolisation by her male creator, she remains ironically frozen in stony regret – a creature unable to voice her deep yearning for a more emotionally creative life. This conception of being "frozen" by the constraints placed on women is also the subject of the second Galatea poem from *Selected Poems*:

Glacial Galatea knows  
 Nothing unless she knows  
 She was herself before Pygmalion's bold  
 Stare broke truth from her in a truth as cold.

Though brittle, breaks not.  
 Though eaten, wastes not.  
 Though thirsting, slakes not.  
 ✓ I was myself before you touched me. I.

In this poem Miller focuses on the results of Galatea's transformation and the psychic wounding it produces. The arrangement of the words in each quatrain throws the emphasis on the last word of each line. In the first quatrain, the repetition of "knows" emphasises that the poem is concerned with knowledge, that which is available to Galatea, and that which is not: she knows "nothing" according to her creator, but she "knows" the circumstances of her life. The rhyming of "bold" and "cold" further highlights the power play involved, Pygmalion has control over her, it is his boldness that brings her into being, but her powerlessness is the cold truth that she has to face. In the second stanza, Miller plays with the ideas of Galatea's qualities as a non-mortal construct, she can never age and decay. By placing the emphasis on the last word of the first three lines, which is the word "not" repeated three times, Miller emphasises the negative aspects of Galatea's life, cut off from the normal processes of creation and destruction. In the face of this, the last line serves as an angry accusation in which Galatea affirms that before she was "made" she had an identity that she merely qualifies as "I". However, since the single pronoun "I" falls at the end of the last line of the poem, and since it is a single word sentence, it functions to carry the entire weight of Galatea's desire for an autonomous identity.

The confinement and distortion of the psyche is also the subject of Miller's poem "The Spoon", where she describes the spoon as "a tool/for use. It cannot help being beautiful...". Miller is fascinated by the way in which the concave surface of the spoon, archetypal symbol of the womb or the feminine, distorts the world that it reflects, even as a woman's view of the world is distorted by her inscription into patriarchal patterns of femininity:

Nothing is ever right in the spoon's bright mirror  
 Nothing but is converted to gross error.  
 The silver bowl has no need to reflect  
 That which mirrors perform quite adequately -  
 But even *their* left is right. Perhaps it is best  
 To accept distortion, to remain sane seldom and secretly.

The last line reflects the poet's acceptance that psychological "distortion" is a part of life. The smooth, flat mirror reflects the world "adequately", but even then there is a transformation of left to right. The spoon's distortions are even greater, and the poem implies that a woman can only remain sane "seldom and secretly" in this distorted world. There is, in Ruth Miller's poetry, a fundamental recognition that masculine and feminine perceptions of the world are different. This is clearly expressed in "Legend":

✓ in this poem a woman who is condemned to death donates an eye to a man who is going blind. This literal act of transplantation also allows for a psychological transplantation, for the man begins to "see" life from the woman's point of view:

How strange is vision! For here was a savage mystery  
 He could not fathom; he only knew it there  
 Because his one eye lied.  
 But which of the inverted windows plunging to his brain  
 Through dark perceptive corridors, played him false -  
 His, or the one that died?  
 For his own eye saw never with the dead woman's sight.

The reader comes to realise that the man perceived the world quite differently from the woman, and that the woman was unable to make the easy moral judgements that often characterise patriarchal assessments of women's lives and actions. Miller suggests that as a result of her inability to conform to such social codes, the woman is the victim of a horrible death:

...  
 One cold morning – it is always cold when one dies-  
 She was hanged in a yard.  
 Gritty and tearing the rope strangling her breath in terror,  
 Her eyes stared out of her soon-to-be-skull.  
 Dying is never easy, and she died hard.

Despite the cool and detached tone of the poem, it reflects the poet's disenchantment with patriarchal moral values.

✓ This same disenchantment is inherent in one of Miller's most enigmatic and revealing poems, "Submarine". The title is a reference, perhaps, not only to the craft, but also to the subconscious element in the poem as meaning is constructed through the accumulation of images and allusions:

Icarus swaggered into his dandelion death  
 Knowing his wings were strong, being his seed-maker's.  
 When he plunged, the crumpled sea was deathless.  
  
 But within depths so dense even fishes  
 Abandon the domelid pressure to slow, dark  
 Lumpish things, or reeling threads  
 Lamped with a million moons in the seasonless weather-  
 Atom on atom, fathom on fathom, the lords  
 Of the earth and sky in their sleek phallus ram  
 Through forests of throttled night and rubber weed,  
 Packed with steel on steel, to hang there driftless.

The sea humps, thick and crammed.  
 Itself upon itself pressed in coiled weight;  
 Gathers a muscled push, one huge Laocoon heave.  
 Rivets melt like motes, bulwarks sway gelid,  
 The steel is mothed and butterflied. There are no more men.  
 The swaying list in the impacting solid  
 Thins, miles high, onto the white beach  
 Where Heaven is always Up.

While the persistent tides  
 Wait secretly to smash  
 Those whom dark hells in privacy corrupt.

The poem, read in psychoanalytical terms, is dense with sexual imagery: the allusion to Greek myth refers to the death of Icarus who attempted to fly – a Freudian metaphor for erection – and the death of a legendary Greek priest and his family who were throttled to death by snakes, also phallic symbols. These mythical allusions are linked with the power of the sea, an archetypal feminine symbol. In the second stanza, the submarine, a craft serving, like the wings of Icarus, as a metaphor for the quest to plumb the unknown depths of the human psyche, is destroyed by the sea. The sea rejects the invasion with a "muscled push" and destroys the phallic intruder – "There are no more men". The poem may refer to the desire of man to explore the depths of human creativity by means of analytical science, an endeavour that is doomed to failure since the subconscious is powerful enough to resist such invasions; its "persistent tides" capable of destruction of those who seek to invade its secret territories. However, read on a purely gendered level, the poem uses metaphors to condense emotion and anger, but the sexual metaphors also function as metonymies or displacements. The anger that the poet feels toward patriarchal dominance is displaced into this aquatic scenario, which like a dream, plays out the poet's repressed frustrations and desires. So compelling is this anger that she allows the "lords of the earth and sky" no escape, for whether they fall from the sky or are crushed under the sea, they cannot escape. If they reach the "white beach" they will be smashed. The final meaning of the poem is ambiguous and remains obscure – it seems to defer meaning in a series of dreamlike metaphors. But the meaning may lie in the metaphors themselves which reveal repressed anger.

"Submarine" can also be read in the light of an episode from her autobiographical short story, "Perspectives". The protagonist, a young girl called Kay, is given painting

lessons because "a young 'gel' learns to paint" according to her aunt. Miller relates how this gender-defined activity shapes the girl's perceptions in relation to her male cousin:

...Boys don't paint. How excellent then, despite the mad ways of perspective, to be a girl twice a week. When John lifted his little pale dangle and aimed a shining heavy-looking arc into the sky (I'm wee-ing on God!) – or made patterns on the dry sand with the last few drops, then it was a boy's world, and no amount of water-colour lessons could make up for that wide-legged stance, that sure ability to be shocking or creative whenever the urge was heavy.<sup>13</sup>

The girl may have the paint-brush, but the boy has the penis, symbol of masculine creativity and power. Kay reacts violently to this assertion of power, although the recognition of her powerlessness seems to occur on the subconscious level. During a painting lesson she expresses her anger against the confinements of this "woman's world":

...Aunt Bee licks the thinnest paintbrush into a spiderleg point for her. There is the distant sound of bees humming. A midge light as air, the colour and size of a comma spreads its minute eagle wings on a wet patch of paint. The brush flattens but does not remove it. It dies unobtrusively, a spreading pinhead in the middle of the wet square-edged shadow of a wall. With a sudden hard delight she squashes in into a broken amputated mess. Aunt Bee is busy twisting the soft frothy white curls on her forehead; she does not see the gratuitous little murder.<sup>14</sup>

Miller links this expression of violent anger with another, directed against the owner of the penis, or masculine power:

Was it the same subterranean delight that had thrust her hand in an outrage of sudden temper - the scissors grabbed from John who was taunting her – I won't let you, you can't they're mine, it's *my* turn. The sharp point of the blades, as she grabbed them from him, driven beyond wiles, endurance, tears, stabbing him glancingly so near the eye that when the blood gushed she was convinced she had blinded him.<sup>15</sup>

Kay grabs a pair of scissors to attack her tormentor. Rather than attempting the futile effort to acquire the thing she lacks, she attempts to render John like herself by means of a gesture of symbolic castration. This gesture is directed towards the eyes, for as psychoanalysis suggests, it is the faculty of vision that confirms the female as lacking a penis. Miller has already argued, in "The Spoon" and "Legend", and now in this story called "Perspectives", that it is a matter of how one perceives the world that determines

social codes of behaviour. Kay rebels against the "mad ways of perspective" that seek to disempower her by reducing her to "wiles" and "tears" as a means of satisfying her needs and desires. It is as if Kay aims to eliminate difference by eliminating the faculty that produces difference. By wounding John and producing blood she symbolically feminises him. But Kay comes to learn that John's power is invested in social structures, of which the penis is merely a symbol. John delights in the effects of her attack, for he is still in control and Kay is still the victim:

She flashed a brief look at John triumphant in his elastoplast; glinting at her with the blade of a scissors in his pure pale glance. She choked on her own tears then, of pity for herself, and sobbed a wild "Sorry" that was mistaken for the abandonment of grief and remorse. John smiled. The lesson continued.

This incident reflects the same repressed anger and desire to castrate that one encounters in "Submarine". Beneath her well-mannered and quiet public exterior, Ruth Miller repressed an anger that sometimes found expression in the metaphors and images of her poetry and prose. She continued to question a world in which perception and perspective distorted the psychological development of women, whether as young girls being educated for disempowerment, or as women being silenced for different opinions and beliefs.

\* \* \* \* \*

Each death is cataclysmic  
To those who die.

One of the common features of Modernist poetry, such as that written by Eliot, Auden and their followers, was the expression of the writer's existential alienation from his or her society. Miller wrote in the period after Eliot and Auden, and in the era that was familiar with texts such as Sartre's *Nausea* and Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. For Ruth Miller, her alienation had a gender dimension, as seen in the poems in the previous section, but she also expressed her sense of dislocation and "otherness" in her animal poems. Like her contemporary, Ted Hughes, Miller found the animal poem to be a suitable vehicle for critical comment on her society and its values. What Lionel Abrahams describes as "her tenderness towards creatures of the earth" may be better identified as a horror at the suffering that animals are subject to at the hands of humans.<sup>16</sup> In this she shares a concern for human abuse of animals with Mary Morison Webster, and for human abuse of the environment with Tania van Zyl.



Michael Chapman characterises the horror she expresses in her animal poems as a repulsion for "an apparent illogicality at the heart of things".<sup>17</sup> This comment describes the sense of distorted moral values that Miller perceives to operate in twentieth-century life. In her ironically titled poem "Sea Idyll", she writes of a chance encounter on a beach that illustrates the "illogicality", and even the malevolence of life:

...  
 On the long beach I shook to see  
 Such friendly malignant horror  
 When on the sand I saw a sleeve  
 Of splashed-in-the-sunset feathers.

The oxymoron of "friendly malignant horror" prepares the reader for the banality and the shock of the next quatrain:

A smashed seagull, one headlong half  
 In a dull spray, the other  
 Spreading in the speechless dark  
 Of its day blood, a shudder

Of wind lifting the clenched white fan  
 Toward flight. O, I was riven then  
 Whelmed by the stricken will  
 Of blind dog, and dead seagull.

The incident increases in horror for the poet, since she has just passed a half-blind dog stumbling across the beach. The accumulation of absurd horror – blindness and then violent death – in a tranquil setting, impresses on the poet the arbitrary nature of violence and suffering. The use of half-rhyme within the quatrains further emphasises the nature of a reality where things are never quite as perfect or idyllic as we would like them to be. It is often the innocent who are the victims of arbitrary but inevitable processes such as disease, suffering and death.

Ruth Miller recognised that suffering in the animal world, as in the human world, was often a result of natural causes and processes. Where Adèle Naudé could accept suffering as part of a process that included its opposite, joy and creativity, Miller saw suffering in the animal world as a metaphor for inexplicable human suffering. Hers is a dark psychological landscape, populated by victims of a malign universe, whether human or animal. She identifies, within this world, two opposing forces: aggression and compassion. Aggression is associated with patriarchal masculinity, and

compassion with the world of feminine nurturing. In a poem significantly, and again ironically, titled "The Affirmation", Miller places these two forces in tension within an everyday incident involving two children and a young bird:

The child with brown eyes found it:  
A bird, a young fledgling, brown and white,  
Its stick-legs clawing with a clammy grip  
Its frantic eyes halfmooned by milky lids.

Holding the starved bird-baby in cupped hands  
She ran to the adult world for urgent aids,  
Crooning her love, stifling her ancient fear,  
Busy with the dainty preparation of white crumbs.

Love lent her fingers deftness, and  
The bird lay still within her palms and rested there.  
The small eyes brightened in their feathered knoll,  
Until it hopped upon its angled legs.

Until it tucked its legs away and flew  
Borne on the unseen roadways of the air.  
The hands of the child felt empty as a room  
In the locked house where no-one ever treads.

That same afternoon, another child,  
Catapulting his stone into a tree -  
Sick-triumphant, saw the small crushed head.  
In an instant the bird was dead.

The "innocence" of childhood has two faces; a feminine face that loves and nurtures, and an aggressive face that destroys and kills. The thematic comment of the poem lies in the tension between the subject matter of the poem and the title, for the "affirmation" is only a confirmation that life is tenuous and fragile, and that violent and sudden death waits. The horror of the bird's end is emphasised by the fact that it escapes death, is nurtured back to life, and then is violently killed for sport. This cosmic bad joke reflects the indifference to both compassion and suffering that Miller perceives in life, and it is this negative perception that is affirmed in the poem.

Ruth Miller's most extended treatment of the way in which twentieth-century society allows its aggressive and destructive impulses to destroy fragile ecosystems is found in "The Finches", a verse play for radio. The topic of the drama is the spraying of finches with poison by farmers who regard them as "pestilence, a scourge" and



"vermin", a practice that continues to this day. Again, it is a delicate bird that is caught up in the aggressive destructiveness of human behaviour. Miller's poem allows the feminine aspect of compassion to feature in the poem, for she gives voice to the birds, who cannot speak for themselves, and so helps the reader to identify imaginatively with the suffering and pain that is visited on them and which they cannot explain. Miller's treatment of this topic is not sentimentalised, she realises that at the heart of the matter is a conflict between men and birds for resources. She allows a farmer to articulate his point of view:

You eat, don't you? Where do you think you'd be  
if we let vermin kill the living food?  
An earthworm is not "pretty" but its a good servant;  
but the sunset-coloured blobs you call a finch  
are a scourge...

The farmer represents the traditional patriarchal view that the natural world is there to be controlled by man, and so living creatures are categorised according to their usefulness: the earthworm is a "servant", but the finch is "vermin", and vermin must be destroyed. This attitude is counterpoised against the "voice of a bird (a simple clear voice):

I am one of God's creatures, I  
was one of God's creatures, I  
shall no longer fly  
in the acres of pasturing sky..

As in "Galatea", discussed earlier, Miller places the emphasis on the pronoun "I", which she locates at the end of the line. In so doing she gives the finch an identity, a selfhood, which is affirmed twice. The finch is also one of "God's creatures" and has an equal claim to life in God's world. The image of the "pasturing sky" suggests that the sky is the finch's natural habitat, and the horror and finality of death is brought home when the finch affirms that it will "no longer fly" in its natural element.

Ruth Miller goes on to equate the desire to "eradicate vermin" with the desire to dominate and control nature. This is reflected in the anguished words of Tom, who is the "sprayer on the plane":

...

It's true enough  
that men like me set Darwin by the heels  
and Mendel would approve; so would those  
who believe wars settle all accounts.

But why  
why is it that birds  
with one exception, do not eat each other.

The rational science of the twentieth century that has developed from the theories of Darwin (survival of the fittest) and Mendel (the control of genetic inheritance), seeks to assert human survival and control over nature. In this framework, the spraying of finches allows humans to secure their food resources and so survive, while the finch population is drastically reduced in a "war" in which humans are the victors. But Tom suspects that this view of life as "war" is not inherent in nature, for as he points out, "with one exception", birds do not prey on each other. Tom's doubts suggest that co-existence may, in fact, be the rule of nature, and not aggressive domination.

The anguish of Tom is juxtaposed with the voice of a bird offering yet another perspective:

Dying ... it's a dying all about us;  
limp, soft, inert; petal feet curled  
in the last grip which finds nothing.  
Feathers flat in the wind which keeps blowing  
fumes over the land; the whole green world  
a planting, reaping sowing -  
but when we hunger for the good rich seed  
we hear the engines, humming, thrumming, and the bird  
greater than any we have ever seen  
casts its flat shadow on the flying ground.  
We fly. We fly – but something in our throats  
is linked with that terrible sound  
and we fall like seeds on the land – even the road  
is splashed with the harvest Somebody has gleaned.

The bird is described as a delicate, fragile creature whose feet curl like a petal as it dies. Its words reflect the ironic cycle of life and death: the birds have a right to participate in the natural wealth of the earth, yet when they attempt to do this they become part of the harvest of death, they "fall like seeds on the land". The birds have no comprehension of the reasons for their death, they find themselves at the mercy of some malevolent power, "the bird/greater than any we have ever seen".

Ruth Miller asserts that there is a moral dimension to this gratuitous extermination of living creatures. She juxtaposes two human perceptions of the slaughter. The first occurs in an exchange between a man and a woman, in which the woman expresses compassion and empathy which the man counters with practicality:

FEMALE VOICE:

Look! There's a bird falling. Oh, it's dead.  
There's another! And another – Oh  
so small; such a -there's another!  
Such a wonderful pure colour.  
I wonder, does it hurt to fall – and does it hurt  
to die?

MALE VOICE:

You over-sentimentalise.  
If they were ugly  
you wouldn't mind so much.

FEMALE VOICE:

But – Oh look! There's another – and another-  
and another ...

The woman's comments reflect the sheer scale of the slaughter, and her observations on the beauty and the innocence of the small victims. The man dismisses her words as over-sentimentality. Yet this explanation has a hollow ring when juxtaposed against an exchange between George, the pilot, and the anguished Tom, in which Tom recognises that there is very little difference between slaughtering people and slaughtering other living creatures – both acts involve moral compromise:

Your farmer friend worries, never fear.  
He's paying good money – he expects service.  
If he can't clean up ten thousand bodies there'll be talk.  
Tell me this -  
Was the air at Monte Cassino clean?  
A pity we can't deliver a bomb or two – try  
To blow our farmer friends into this pure sky.

Tom's words reflect a continuing circle of aggression and destruction in which he himself participates, and which he ironically wishes to end with a further act of aggression.

The play ends with the crop-spraying plane crashing to the ground. Both George and Tom escape with minor injuries, although the metal "bird" is "a total wreck". The scene closes with an exchange overheard in a bar, in which a customer notes that "some men have the devil's own luck". Miller ironically indicates that those who destroy "God's creatures" are protected by their own malevolent deity. The closing lines are given to the bird, and they express the poet's own conviction that all life is sacred and that death is always horrifying – even the death of a bird:

Each death is cataclysmic  
To those who die.

The tension between forces of aggression and compassion that has been discussed so far is reflected in many of Ruth Miller's animal poems. Like Ted Hughes, she finds metaphors in the animal world to reflect the dark contours of her own psychological landscape. In "Fox", for example, she depicts a female fox who possesses great beauty in her own natural environment:

Fox had a silken brush when  
She was hole-hidden, fen -  
Favoured under the quiet boughs.  
Regard her now.

The fox becomes a victim of the aggression of the human world, manifest in the blood-lust of the sport of fox-hunting:

In her tongue-heavy accursed  
Mouth the slit of thirst,  
Pain in her urgent bones  
Dust in her lungs.

Fear presses down her breath  
In a grey gasp, and death  
Commences on her skin;  
But then the wind

Such a message it sends of cold  
Near clear water that one bold  
Start and slither brings her round  
Nose to ground.

...

Shuddering with empty breath.  
 Wind and water have few words:  
 Fox mis-hears, impelled toward  
 The scent of death.

Miller employs a format wherein two lines of each quatrain rhyme, and two do not, with the exception of the fourth stanza. The form thus reflects the dilemma of the fox, desperately trying to follow her instincts in the battle for survival, yet pointed in the wrong direction by her exhaustion and her inability to make a completely coherent picture of the information that she picks up. In "Penguin on the Beach", Miller again depicts an animal at the mercy of humans: this time the penguin has become a victim of man's destruction of its natural environment. Miller describes him as a "sea-casualty":

Stranger in his own element,  
 Sea-casualty, the castaway manikin  
 Waddles in his tailored coat-tails. Oil

Has spread a deep commercial stain  
 Over his downy shirt front. Sleazy, grey,  
 It clogs the sleekness ...

The penguin goes through the painful process of coming to a knowledge of the destructive control exercised by man over the natural world. His is the archetypal journey from innocence to experience:

...  
 Once he knew sunlit, leaping smoothness,  
 But close within his head's small knoll, and dark

He retains the image: Oil on sea,  
 Green slicks, black lassos of sludge  
 Sleeving the breakers in a stain-spread scarf.

He shudders now from the clean flinching wave,  
 Turns and plods back up the yellow sand,  
 Ineffably weary, triumphantly sad.

He is immensely wise, he trusts nobody. His senses  
 Are clogged with experience. He eats  
 Fish from his Saviour's hands, and it tastes black.

Even the compassionate action of the "saviour" cannot compensate for the loss of the freedom, and the innocence, that the penguin experienced before it was trapped in the "black lassos of sludge" that man spreads across the oceans.

In the poems discussed in this section, it is apparent that Ruth Miller's "tenderness" for the "creatures of the earth" was motivated by her perception of the way in which such creatures become victims of destructive forces, whether they be natural forces, as in "Sea Idyll", or the aggressive and destructive forces of human society, as in "The Finches", "Fox" and "Penguin on the Beach". Clearly Miller was fascinated by the way in which innocence and beauty become the victims of dark and destructive forces. The suffering of the innocent at the hands of inexplicable and destructive elements impinged itself on the consciousness of the woman poet who felt a sympathy with those who have little control of their own destiny.

\* \* \* \* \*

To eat pain like bread is a condition,  
A part of living  
Which is a condition of dying.

The immediate reasons for Ruth Miller's awareness of pain and suffering may be traced to the circumstances of her own private life, her problems with her marriage, the loss of a child, and her terminal illness. But she also lived through the Second World War, and must have been equally horrified at the large scale loss of life involved in that war. Although her poetry indicates that she had no particular religious convictions, she was of Jewish descent, and must have felt the horror of the holocaust in a personal way. She also lived through the period after 1948 in South Africa, when the Nationalist government began implementing its policies of racial "apartheid", resulting in suffering for millions of black South Africans.

The psychological angst of Miller's poems, such as the poems discussed above, reveals that she perceived herself to be living in an environment much like that described by T.S. Eliot in "The Waste Land". Just as Eliot felt his waste land to be devoid of spirituality, Ruth Miller describes her own psychological waste land, using her sharp sense of irony to question the traditional western concept of "God". In "Credo", an ironic statement of belief, she suggests the absurdity that underlies the Christian doctrine of original sin. The poem is prefaced by a quotation from Browning's "Childe Roland": "He must be wicked to deserve such pain":

We must be wicked to deserve such pain.  
 In the dark towers of grief we scratch the walls.  
 Choked in a cloth we cry for help, but fall  
 Toward the hell where nothing is made plain,

Which he knew best who showed it clung with frost,  
 Gaunt with skeletons of ice, and dry  
 As dark that strikes when no help is nigh,  
 And only a waste of nothing answers: Lost

Who lives in wilderness must expect no rain.  
 We must be wicked  
 To deserve  
 Such pain.

In the first two stanzas, Miller elaborates on the nature of life in which humans are imprisoned in "dark towers of grief" from which there is no escape. The inner "hell" into which they fall is a landscape of frozen darkness, a "waste of nothing". The two stanzas both use the quatrain form, and rhyme internally according to the scheme abba. The third stanza commences in a similar way to the two previous stanzas, but the second, third and fourth lines are much shorter, suggesting the diminishment of response in the poet. Miller affirms that those who live in a wilderness "must expect no rain". Life is an existential waste land or desert, and so one cannot expect relief for one's suffering. In this context, the last three lines "We must be wicked/To deserve/Such pain", seem to read as an ironic and mocking refrain that explains nothing.

Ruth Miller accepts that suffering is a condition of life, and that disease and death are a part of this process. Adèle Naudé wrote of a similar perception of this paradox, but Naudé's poems reveal an acceptance of this as natural process. Miller resists the idea of process, seeing decay and disease rather as dehumanising and degrading factors in human life. In her poem "Voicebox", she examines the nature of life, from birth to death, expressing her horror at the way in which life ends. The poem concerns a woman who appears to be dying of throat cancer. The poet recalls this woman in her role as life-giver:

I have known her since I was a child.  
 I recall her in the suffusion of one morning  
 With her first born in the incredible bed,  
 Its white horizon steppes stretching flatly  
 Past the headlands of the two fat pillows,

Furrowed with grooves of valley legs and loins;  
 Biblical birthing of the dark damp fur,  
 The cracked egg of the baby's skull repeating  
 "In, out breath; save me from harm  
 I am egg thin, have mercy on me Lord."

I remember her as ineffable,  
 I who gawked in my teene at the useless father  
 Occasionally hovering, shamed as an old bull.  
 Beatitudes filled each crevice of the air,  
 We were afloat, she and I, on revealed meanings.  
 Even the purse of the baby could spill nothing further.

The poet suggests the wide expanses of the feminine world of birth and procreation in the landscape imagery she uses to describe the maternal scene, the "white horizon steppes", the "headlands" and the "valley". It is a landscape that belongs to women, for the father is seen as "useless" in this context. Miller also suggests a religious or spiritual dimension, for the birth is termed "biblical", and the air filled with "beatitudes". The psychological richness of the scenes is suggested by the "revealed meanings" that the poet and her friend share, and also by the metaphor of the baby as a "purse" that could "spill nothing further". However, the delicate and tenuous nature of life is delineated in the image of the baby's skull as a "cracked egg", and the mantra it repeats affirming that it is "egg thin" and needs to be protected from harm. Images of the joyful and mysterious beginning of life are juxtaposed against the tragic and painful ending of life:

Last week this woman walked into exile.  
 She is on her way to a defined Siberia.  
 The membrane that giddily gauds the delicate throat  
 Is dying or dead – the distinction belongs to time.  
 ...  
 The drunkard curses unintelligibly in the dark.  
 But she who is as gentle as milk  
 Must lie in the ward like a baby and beat out breath  
 Against the obdurate granite of our voices.

Tomorrow we'll order the bacon, remember the eggs.  
 Cracking the skull of the egg into the pan  
 We'll watch the pure globe grow out of God's hand  
 And praise him for all his mercies.

The woman who once gave life to baby must now lie in a hospital ward "like a baby" in her struggle to hold onto life. Miller describes her as an "exile" in a "defined Siberia",



since the loss of the power of speech means that she can no longer communicate with people, and so is exiled from normal human interaction. The references to the eggs, and "cracking the skull of the egg into the pan", function as an allusion to the earlier image in which the egg was used as a metaphor for the baby: "the cracked egg of the baby's skull". Here a fragile human life is about to end, the egg, symbol of life, cracked open. Since the breaking of the egg represents death, the poet's statement that they will "praise [God] for all his mercies" is ironic and has an undertone of bitterness. The poem concludes with a series of images that describe what the woman has been reduced to by her illness:

Perhaps she will learn to nod, to nod her head  
 Like a circus horse tossing; perhaps she will learn the patience  
 To wipe with a damp cloth the fear from our mouths  
 Before we kiss her on her breaking lips.

The woman is compared to a "circus horse" which must learn tricks in order to communicate with others. The poet responds with fear and alienation, for she recognises that disease and death can claim anyone, including herself. The final image of the woman's "breaking lips" suggests the decay and disintegration of a personality who can no longer function as a human being capable of articulating her needs and desires. The original wonder at the "beatitude" of the gift of life is finally undermined by the horror of the end of life, and the poet's implicit criticism of a God who includes such suffering in his "mercies".

Ruth Miller's ambivalence towards the essentially creative experience of motherhood, expressed in "Voicebox", may also derive from her own experience. She had to suffer the pain of losing her son, David, who was electrocuted at home at the age of fourteen. The grief of this loss was expressed in poetry, but the poems defer anguish and grief into carefully constructed images. In "Cycle" she sees death in the context of nature and the cycles of nature. She compares herself to a tree, and her son to a leaf that falls from the tree:

Does a leaf spurn the tree when the leaf dies?  
 Can trees forget to grow because the cold  
 Slides along the arrows of each one.

Does sap itself not learn the leaf-shape mould  
 From form of nothing, so the empty sky  
 In a grey sorrow, grows a leaf-shaped sun.

These two tercets reveal the emotions Miller must have felt, the sense of betrayal expressed in the concept of the leaf spurning the tree, and the sense of numbness suggested by the tree forgetting to grow. The overwhelming nature of her grief is portrayed in the image of the "leaf-shaped sun", since everything in her life is shaped by the nature of her loss. Later in the poem, she again uses the metaphor of the fallen leaf to express the intensity of her pain:

The dropped leaf  
Held the colour of flame  
When the trees stirred.

Now lips cannot shape -  
Such winter is grief -  
The encompassing word.

The flat seconds pass  
In a listless drought,  
Unblessed by rain.

And poverty of my mouth  
Struggles to form the vast  
Two syllables of your name.

The poet here describes how the immensity of her emotional response renders her unable to express herself, or even to speak the name of the child she has lost. This grief is like "winter", "a listless drought" of the spirit that produces a "poverty of [her] mouth". The only way she can explain this great loss and the pain that it brings is to accept that pain and suffering are an inevitable part of life from which no one is exempt:

To eat pain like bread is a condition,  
A part of living  
Which is the condition of dying;  
But how slowly. The delicate tissue  
Fails where it is fronded; how slowly.

Bread is the "staff of life", and to eat pain like bread is to see pain as the staple of life, a necessary "part of living". In Miller's eyes, living like this is in reality, "the condition of dying", and so death is always present in life. The horror, for Miller, is that this is a long slow process, each day filled with more pain and more suffering, as the "delicate tissue/fails where it is fronded; how slowly".

The death of a loved child was not the only personal tragedy Ruth Miller had to face, she also had to suffer the anguish of slowly dying from cancer. Even this subject became the occasion for meticulously crafted imagery. In "Blue-mantled Mary", she employs the biblical story of the annunciation as an ironic metaphor for her own experience:

Now I remember  
 The months ago annunciation -  
 First feathery thrust of the angel  
 Nine months ago, this December.  
 The tall touch of the stranger  
 On my breast, on my skin,  
 His insupportable maculate breath  
 Breathing as I did, out and in,  
 Out and in  
 Waiting for the time of birth.

Charles Eglington suggests that in this poem Miller uses the idea of the foetus "as a metaphor for a cancerous growth".<sup>18</sup> This seems correct, for the touch of the angel plants a seed that will come to term as death:

And I remember  
 Unhallowed, un-Mary'd, this seed must grow  
 Slowly toward its day – though each day is holy-  
 Toward the windowless  
 Breathless lusty breath  
 Of a full term Death.

Again Miller uses biblical allusion with irony, for where Mary's annunciation heralded a saviour, and thus life, Miller's own angel brings the annunciation of her death. But Miller identifies with Mary, seeing them both as victims of an unfeeling deity who has no concern for the pain that these women suffer:

Untouched by man, blue-mantled Mary ran  
 Ran on her pencilled feet into the light  
 Of the cathedral window, serene as snow.  
 How was she then to know  
 What would be done? Whose will it was she knew.

Suffering and death are the "will" of God, according to Christian belief. Miller perceives this doctrine as evidence of the indifference of "God" or deity to human

suffering, of which she knew so much. Her own imminent death made her aware of how she too was subject to this cosmic indifference. In "Rat" she sees herself as "a mouse in a field" awaiting the final blow of the scythe:

I am become a mouse in a field  
Waiting the shear of the blade  
In the sticky sun with the grass  
Yielding under my thimble weight.

I am become a long whisker  
Twitching, a face  
Like a cut stone, a single muscle  
Stiffening, awaiting the worst

Which is coming, surely,  
Down the field of my days  
Humming in the mouth of the wild  
Buzzing in the clean swathe

When you hold me in your hand  
Tenderly, for an instant, before  
I am flung on the stubbled ground -  
I shall receive no comfort, Lord.

In the last quatrain, Miller issues a defiant challenge to the deity, for the biblical promise of comfort, being held in God's hand, is revealed to be a momentary ploy before the individual is "flung" away from God and dashed to the ground. In such a situation, and with such knowledge, there can be no comfort.

It was not only disease and death that caused pain in Ruth Miller's life, the failure of her marriage was equally painful. As a Modernist poet who rejected the concept of a "God" who provides meaning in life, Miller tended to look to human relationships and human interaction to provide transcendent meaning. In her poem "It is Better to Be Together", she expresses her belief in the importance of relationship:

It is better to be  
Together. Tossed together  
In a white wave, than to see  
The ocean like an eagle.

It is better to lie  
In the stormy seething  
Than to judge the weather  
In an eagle's eye.

Cold is the bird  
 Who flies too far  
 In the clear vision  
 Which saint and eagle share:  
 Their faraway eyes are bitter  
 With darkened prayer.

O, it is better to try  
 With the white wave, together  
 To overturn the sky.

The poem rejects solitude, even when that solitude produces the strength and insight of the saint, which she likens to the sharpened visual perceptions of the eagle who can soar above the land. This solitude produces only negativities – the eagle is "cold" and the saint's "eyes are bitter/With darkened prayer". Real strength, she argues, comes from a joint effort of two people who try, together, to reach the level of transcendence that will enable them to "overturn the sky". Yet Ruth Miller is aware that this harmonious partnership is not easily achieved. In "Trapeze" she describes the difficulty of maintaining a relationship: this she compares to a circus act, where all eyes are on the two performers whose lives depend on their co-operation. However, the entire circus scenario is contained within the relationship, for the lovers are both audience and performers:

We two make a multitude,  
 A teem of faces,  
 A ripple and a flood  
 Of voices.  
 Secrets are soft, but laughter  
 Rings the bright circus.  
 The bread and wine come after:

After we have made our peace  
 With the multifold, raucous  
 Audience of ourselves, who watch  
 Our dangerous swinging leaps  
 Above the mesh.

The tension in the relationship is suggested by the comparison between the "soft" secrets and the brittle "laughter" that "rings the bright circus". It is only once they are able to reconcile these opposites that the transcendent moment of the "bread and

wine", or the symbolic transmutation of love into significance may be achieved. But even then, the security of the relationship is always in doubt:

Will the net hold if we slip?  
But at the last,  
Our hands touch, grip.

High above us, tented  
In rope, the hot lights trace  
In parable, the slanted  
Whiteness of our hundred faces.

They stir. They hold their breath.  
But we two glitter  
On the little platform. Safe  
Above the whispers  
Of our death.

The tension in the relationship is again obvious, for the lovers are both the audience who whisper of the "death" of the relationship, and the trapeze artists who must rely on each other so that they do not fall to their deaths. There is a distinct psychological split between the desire to be together and to be "safe", and the desire to see the relationship "slip". In her poem "Across", she further elaborates on the psychological tensions that occur between two people when a relationship falters. In this poem she sees an invisible chalk line that separates the two people into two distinct areas:

Across the chalk line  
Sketched down the centre of the cluttered room  
Across this line they dare not tread  
But carefully, may look  
Look at each other in the clotted gloom  
May speak. Speak? Yes, if they turn  
A deaf ear in a blind eye, may find  
What otherwise they could not seek.

The irony of the situation is that only by turning "a deaf ear in a blind eye" may these two people communicate again. Their personal feelings and emotions are what have created the chalk line that now separates them from each other. Miller emphasises that this alienation was not always the case, and that it may be removed if the two people concerned are able to cross the line:

Those lips which once so rapturously  
 Kissed those breasts  
 Wait for the moment. Wait ...  
 The chalk in a gritty puff may one day be erased.  
 Then palm to palm, mouth to mouth, they'll meet  
 At last, their shameless clothes at their naked shameless feet.

The image of physical nakedness in the last two lines functions as a metaphor of the psychological "nakedness" and shamelessness that is required for these two people to find the meaning that was once a part of their relationship. The image of the lovers "palm to palm, mouth to mouth", recalls the exchange between Romeo and Juliet and suggests that transcendent passion can be achieved again by these two people.

If the pain and loss of death and disease were to lead Miller to a questioning of the concepts of "God" and "Mercy", she never lost faith in the value of human relationships and sexual love as the producers of transcendent meaning. But even here she is constantly aware of irony. In "Aspects of Love", she writes of the essential paradox that she finds in love, its determination to grow and "put forth greenness on outlandish stone". She goes on to speak of her ambivalence towards love:

...  
 Love? We should smother it  
 And push it up the chimney -  
 He said, half meaning it.  
 We know now what he intended  
 For finding love at their door  
 On a cold night, people – if they are wise-  
 Will push it up the chimney into the smoke before  
 It wails at them with such clenched desire  
 As will bring into the quiet house  
 The significant ecstatic loss.

Love is portrayed here as an innocent abandoned child, found on a doorstep on a cold night. Those who are "wise" will dispose of this unsolicited impulse before it takes over their lives. The image of love, like a child, wailing with "clenched desire", suggests the tensions that can be let loose once the desire is accepted. Yet, Miller argues, if one allows love to enter into the "quiet house" of the soul, the result will be a "significant ecstatic loss". Here oxymoron is employed to suggest the tensions and conflicts in love, it is significant and ecstatic, but it also produces loss – loss of individuality and loss of the peace signified by the "quiet house". While Ruth Miller may turn to relationships for significance and meaning, even here she is aware that pain and loss are involved.

Yet her final judgement on relationships may be summed up in the last two lines of "Dear Enemy, to whom I Call Truce":

It is better to be together seldom and late  
Than to have all the time in the world, afraid, alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

### "The Other Poet"

Ruth Miller, like Adèle Naudé, also wrote in self-reflexive ways about her function and role as a poet. In line with the Modernist "fathers" such as T.S.Eliot, she conceived of poetry writing primarily as the making or creating of artefacts. The significance of the poem or artefact was largely derived from the maker's act of creation, and the meaning that was generated from within the poem by the maker's skillful use of imagery. Ruth Miller's sensitivity to the beauty of "God's creatures", demonstrated in "The Finches", led her to draw metaphors from the natural world, showing how such creatures are nature's artificers. In "Spider", she draws comparisons between her own efforts and those of the humble spider:

No spider struggles to create  
The beautiful. His tensile arc  
Knows mathematics in the dark;  
A Michael Angelo of air  
Who weaves a theory that states  
Ultimatums on a hair.

The spider is nature's artist, a "Michael Angelo of air", but also nature's mathematician and nature's philosopher who can "weave a theory that states/Ultimatums on a hair". But more than this, Miller notes that these abilities are naturally given:

Born to the purple of his need  
He has no unsolved problems. He  
Suffers no dichotomy,  
But wakes to work and works to kill;  
Beauty empiric in his greed,  
Perfection in a villian's skill.

The spider "suffers no dichotomy" about his role as creator: it is part of the fabric of his life. Miller examines the paradox of the spider's creation, it "wakes to work and works



to kill". The destructive urges of the "villian" manifest in "beauty" and "skill". Miller then compares her own abilities as a "word-weaver", to quote Tania van Zyl, with those of the spider:

Rag blown summit of the ooze  
Of soft warm mud that split and stirred  
I hold within my skull the word  
Sealed and socketed; yet my hands  
Fashion with artifice and ruse  
Not wily web, but witless strands.

As a human being, Miller could see herself as the pinnacle of creation. However, she refers to her self rather as the "rag blown summit of the ooze/Of soft warm mud that split and stirred". This is the evolutionist's point of view, where man evolves from the "mud" to be the "summit" of the process of evolution. But even from this position, Miller finds she cannot match the skill of the spider, for she produces "not wily web, but witless strands". The ideas are held "within her skull", yet she is unable to give them an intricate form comparable to the spider's web. In the final stanza she laments her failure:

But when the poor cold corpse of words  
Is laid upon its candled bier,  
I, vindicate, will shed the tear  
That falls like wax, and creep unheard  
To weave in silence, grave and bowed,  
The pure necessity – a shroud.

Here Miller reintroduces the idea of death. Her ideas are reduced to "a poor cold corpse of words" which is laid upon a bier. Yet the poet has a transcendent or religious purpose, she has to weave the shroud. The shroud is described as "the pure necessity". The poet may be unable to produce the beauty of a spider's web, but she can weave a shroud for her "corpse". Ultimately, the shroud she weaves is the poem itself, which is wrapped around her ideas, as a shroud is wrapped around a corpse. The skill of Miller as weaver can be observed in the careful weaving of the sestets from which the poem is constructed, each sestet following the rhyme scheme abbcac. Equally, the dominant metaphor of the spider and the web is extended into the metaphor of the corpse and the shroud. The two metaphors are linked, for the spider uses its web to capture its prey, while the poet uses her web to capture and fix her prey, her ideas.

This same admiration for the poetry of nature, and envy of the skill of nature's artificers, is to be found in "The Scribe". Here Miller compares an aquatic snail to an Egyptian scribe who creates "hieroglyphics":

...

But once, upon an open beach intent  
I found a pale ribbed shell poised to discover  
In lurching slime, the ecstasy of space.

It moved in slow gyrations, turned and doubled  
Upon its tracks, moved east, then plunged to west,  
Heaving, awkward and directionless.

Beneath its bony cusp it slowly cast  
A flight of singing hieroglyphics, that travelled  
In ever wider lariats and arcs.

Obdurate, who must believe in signs  
I stood breath still, until the sliding shell  
Entrapped me in its maculate design.

The snail's art is concerned with movement through time and space. Its seemingly "directionless" movements produce the pattern that Miller terms "a flight of singing hieroglyphics". The reference to hieroglyphics, which were originally the sacred symbols used by Egyptian scribes and priests in their temples, adds a spiritual dimension to the "art" of the snail. Miller herself, as human poet, is left in awe of the pattern that the creature produces, which traps her "in its maculate design", suggesting that the pattern which the snail creates reflects a part of the greater cosmic design or pattern of the universe. Her admiration for this natural ability, and her own inability in comparison, sometimes produced despair. In "The Other Poet", Miller records her recognition that she cannot match the powerful poetry of nature:

This the free, the untortured intellect:  
A bird with gaunt wingspan, cleaving fiendish arcs,  
Brittle and muscular, in an impending dark.

Veering and sweeping, his flight is smooth; he lunges,  
Levels, dips a sculptured wing, and plunges

Down, down, down, into the crumpled sea,  
Up in a blinding swathe, a pealing rise.  
My swinging nets lie empty. Behold in his cold  
mouth the silvery prize.

The poem may be read as a metaphor for the poet's plunge into the unconscious in search of imagery. Whereas the bird returns from its downward plunge with "the silvery prize", Miller's own "nets lie empty".

Her sense of inadequacy led her to perceive the art of poetry writing as associated with pain and suffering. She again emphasises the aspect of death and destruction that is involved in the process in "Lament for Poets", where she uses the metaphor of the carpenter:

...He is a lover  
Who hefts the wood's pale body, length by length,  
In reasoned syllables, which must proceed  
Toward the secrecy of assignments.

We cannot see the forest in a table:  
The roughest knot-hole yields, but leaves a pox;  
And cuffed and tangled in a withering love  
We suffer for the worm within the wood.

The process of creation is, for Miller, ultimately a part of life's pain. It involves suffering and psychological "death" – symbolised by the "worm within the wood" in this poem, or the "poor cold corpse of words" in "Spider", or the fish in "The Other Poet". Yet whereas Miller's contemporary, Adèle Naudé, could celebrate this process for its production of beauty and joy, Miller remains trapped in her bleak view of her creativity. In "To Private Forests where tigers were never bright", Miller examines what she considers to be her own failure as a poet. She does this by challenging the poetic visions of men such as William Blake and W.B. Yeats:

To private forests where tigers were never bright  
We stumble because we know the claws that rake.  
Being wise during the event, we recognise  
Entrails which, though smaller in the lamb  
Are identical to the tiger's sheen and gut.  
The forest hums with a green growl. It knows  
A terrible beauty cannot be endured.  
Where toothless tigers lap the furtive air  
And white bones creep away from melting rot  
This is the place to which we are compelled  
Being children in grown flesh and much afraid.

How the black trees yell their fat derision  
 As vultures and hyenas wait their turn  
 Crouching, to lick lick lick out lamb-pure bones.

The poem begins with the poet retreating to "private forests", which are metaphors for the subconscious. In her subconscious, Miller finds that tigers are "never bright". In the place of Blake's tiger who "burns" bright, Miller's tigers are "toothless". The forest itself is a place of decay and death, where one stumbles over "entrails" and "melting rot". Ironically, while containing this horror, the forest "hums with a green growl", suggesting that there is a life force in the forest, although it is an aggressive force that "growls". This knowledge of the violence and horror that lurks in the subconscious is for Miller "a terrible beauty". But whereas Yeats could celebrate the "terrible beauty" of violence and death in Ireland in his poem "Easter 1916", Miller feels that this "cannot be endured" in her world. And yet she is "compelled" towards this knowledge, for like children, adults are fascinated by that which terrifies them. In the last three lines she records her perception that within this subconscious forest there are malevolent forces that await her destruction. These forces, like beasts of prey, wait to strip her to her essence of "lamb-pure bones", for only in death may innocence and purity be achieved. Life is filled with the horror of "melting rot". The poem may also be read as a metaphor for the process of creating a poem, and the failure of the poet to produce work that may take its place in a tradition of bright tigers and terrible beauty. This rebellion against the poetic vision of others may also be read in the form, for the poem is composed of fourteen lines, the traditional format for the sonnet, but the poem itself is not a sonnet. The reader's expectations are deflected, just as the expectations associated with the poetic transmutations of Blake and Yeats are deflected. The poem stands as a declaration of despair, yet it also records the poet attempting to confront her own personal demons in the black forest of her own creativity.

The despair that characterised Ruth Miller's life finally also impinged upon her poetic career. In "A handful of words, a witch's throw", she uses the throwing of the bones by the traditional "witch" as a metaphor for her own activity as a "word witch" or poet:

...

Nobody can hear, no-one knows  
 The meaning of the silly witchcraft bones  
 That rattle in the patched gourd of my heart  
 And make no music, give no answers, analyse no great  
 Exacting sums; make totals out of noughts  
 And leave me empty-handed on the white stone floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

The aim of this brief consideration of Ruth Miller's work has been to offer an alternative or feminine perspective on her poetry. The focus has been primarily on the record of despair and anguish that she left in her poetry, an anguish that was, to a large extent, gender specific. Her alienation, her rejection of spiritual or religious meaning, and her sense of poetic failure, can all be read through the perspective of gender: the woman poet who struggled to "fit" into an androcentric literary culture, the mother who lost her son in a tragic accident, the wife whose marriage broke down, and the woman whose life ended in the suffering of terminal cancer. These life events were recorded by Ruth Miller in poems in which the images she created conveyed the power of her emotions. Her poetry is Modernist in its retreat into "impersonal" images, but these images themselves reveal the nature of the pain that suffused the life of this woman poet.

(ii) **The Look of Nothingness: Ingrid Jonker and the Poetry of Alienation**

To hide away  
 in the violence of a simple recollection  
 in your drowned hands  
 to hide myself away in my word  
 .....

My death beats behind my eyeballs like the moon  
 I hear it surge behind the thunder of the rollers  
 I measure its pace in the slime-tract of a snail  
 The days fall into the earth like sparrows  
 and every word has the look of Nothingness.

Ingrid Jonker was born on the 19th September 1933, in Douglas in the Cape Province. On 19 July 1965, she committed suicide by drowning herself off Sea Point, Cape Town. She died four years before Ruth Miller, but whereas Miller was fifty when her life was ended by her illness, Ingrid Jonker was only thirty-two years old and seemed to be at the beginning of a promising literary career as a poet. She left behind a fairly small output of work in Afrikaans, some of which was translated into English in 1968 by Jack Cope and William Plomer, but based on her own translations of her work.

The quality of this work, with its vibrant and surreal imagery, and the tragic way in which her life ended, has transformed Ingrid Jonker into a literary legend in South Africa. She is the archetypal tragic poet of Romantic myth: gifted, yet tormented and doomed to die young. However, in recent years, a new generation of readers has discovered her poetry, and has begun to see the specifically gendered nature of her life and work. Singer/songwriter Jennifer Ferguson has set Jonker's "Bitterbessie Dagbreek" to music, and a group of singers in Johannesburg recently performed a series of Jonker's poems as a performance.<sup>19</sup>

Ingrid Jonker's life has been fairly extensively documented, and it is apparent that she was an angry young woman. She spent most of her life either repressing or playing out that anger. Those who knew her describe her as a rebel;<sup>20</sup> when she was still at school, she records her headmistress saying that although gifted, she was "undisciplined and disobedient".<sup>21</sup> The anger and rebellion that permeated Jonker's life can be explained in the circumstances of her life, as recorded by herself, by her friends, and by her poetry.

Ingrid Jonker chose to use her poetry as a means of expressing the tensions in her life: the deep sense of betrayal that was to emerge in her poetry can be traced to origins in her early years. Her parent's marriage broke up when she was only three years old, and her father departed, leaving Ingrid and her elder sister Anna in the care of her mother. They went to live at Durbanville, near Cape Town, with her maternal grandparents. After the death of her grandfather, the family suffered economic hardship, supported only by her grandmother's old-age pension and a small allowance from her father, Abraham Jonker, who had remarried. Together with her grandmother, her mother, and her sister, she lived in her early years "an almost nomadic life under a burden of debt and privation."<sup>22</sup> When she was eight, Jonker's mother became ill and died, leaving the two young girls in the care of their grandmother. But two years later her grandmother died, of old age, on her knees in a church.<sup>23</sup> Ingrid, then ten years old, and Anna, then twelve, were placed in an orphanage. Although they were later removed from the orphanage by their father and taken into his home, to the ten year old child her life must have seemed constituted of a series of betrayals. First, at the age of three, her father had left her; then her grandfather, then at age eight, her mother, and at ten, her grandmother.

Despite a traumatic childhood characterised by deprivation, poverty and emotional loss, what emerges clearly from her description of these years is Jonker's memories of the women who cared for her – her mother and her grandmother. These are mostly joyous and beautiful memories, but they also reveal the conflicting emotions that must have torn the child who was to become the poet. In her adult years she wrote the poem "Ladybird" for her mother:

Gleam ochre  
and a light breaks  
out of the sea  
In the backyard  
somewhere among the washing  
and a tree full of pomegranates  
your laugh and the morning  
sudden and small  
like a ladybird  
fallen on my hand.

The poem is typical of Jonker's style, a short free verse lyric that relies on the power of its imagery. The images themselves are presented in a disconnected sequence, much

like a dream, and indeed, Jonker's poetic images often carry the psychological significance of dreams. She recalls that this particular poem was based on the children's nursery rhyme: "Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home; your house is on fire, your children are gone".<sup>24</sup> This association reveals the poet's ambivalence towards her mother: the mother deserts her, by dying; the child, later the woman and poet, displaces the negative emotions into a nursery rhyme that combines the bright warm qualities of the ladybird/mother with a scenario of violent loss. The poet inverts the rhyme, for it is not the child that is "gone", but the mother, so destroying the family home – "your house is on fire". Yet Ingrid Jonker wrote the poem not as an accusation, but as a vibrant metaphor of the woman who was her mother: "My moeder, sterwend, was so sonnig soos 'n liewenheersbesie, so vol geheime, so verassend, so teer ..." (My mother, dying, was as sunny as a ladybird, so full of secrets, so surprising, so gentle..)<sup>25</sup> Towards her grandmother she also notes ambivalent, but essentially appreciative emotions; "...Langbeen het ek voor my vriende begin skaam as my ouma se *eik* vir *egg* in Engels; of as sy die Apostoliese Kerk besoek – volgens haar was hulle so lewenslustig en so *jolly*... Maar vandag is sy weer en sterker vir my 'n besielende krag al is sy jare gelede dood – op haar kniee, van ouderdom, in die Kerk." ("...as an adolescent I was ashamed of my grandmother if she said *eik* for *egg* in English; or when she visited the Apostolic church – according to her they were so lively and jolly ... But today she is again, and in a stronger way, an inspiring force, even though she died years ago, on her knees, of old age, in the Church.")<sup>26</sup>

Ingrid Jonker attended high school in Cape Town, an English medium school, Wynberg Girls High. Her creative life had commenced earlier, for as a child she wrote hymns that her grandmother took to her prayer meetings for the congregation to sing. During her school years in Cape Town her poems appeared in the school magazine and in *Die Jongspan*. At the age of sixteen, she submitted a collection of poems entitled *Na die Somer* to a publisher. The collection was rejected for publication, but the reader, Dr D.J. Opperman (who had responded so positively to the work of Elisabeth Eybers), was so impressed with her ability that he asked to meet her. This was her introduction to the world of South African letters, for she was subsequently introduced to poets and artists in Cape Town who thought she was gifted and deserved to be encouraged.

It was during this period of her formative years that she was dealt another severe blow that was to affect her adult career as a poet. Despite her expressed desire to study at a University, Abraham Jonker sent his daughter to a business college to learn



typing. It is not known what lay behind his decision to deny his gifted daughter the education she desired. Perhaps the reasons were purely economic, perhaps he could not afford to support her through a university education, but perhaps it was also his view that a woman had no need of a university education. Perhaps it was a combination of both financial necessity and gender discrimination on the part of a conservative Afrikaner parent. Whatever the reason, Ingrid Jonker was destined to spend most of her productive life in a series of mundane jobs: typist, proofreader, translator. Although being bound to banal desk jobs in order to support herself, and later her child, must have been frustrating, it was not the most serious consequence of the denial of education. She was left with a sense of intellectual inadequacy; this may not have been evident to those close to her, but was manifest in the plaintive cry from the heart that was made during a psychological breakdown that she suffered after the resounding success of her second collection, *Rook en Oker*: "I cannot do better than *Rook en Oker*." She felt that she had, at that point, reached the limits of her intellectual and creative resources, and she did not have the education to fall back on to enable her to renew her poetic vision.

Before *Rook en Oker* (1963), Jonker had published *Ontvlugting* (1956), which she had dedicated to her father. She was only twenty-two when *Ontvlugting* appeared. In 1957 she married Pieter Venter, and later that year their daughter, Simone, was born. The marriage failed, and the couple parted. Jonker's personal life was not a success, despite the fact that she had a wide acquaintance among writers and poets in Cape Town. These included Uys Krige, Richard Rive, and the writers associated with the bilingual journal *Contrast*, among whom were Jack Cope and Adèle Naudé, the "Clifton contingent" that Naudé had defended in her poetry. She had close and difficult friendships with Andre Brink and Jack Cope. Her poetry reveals that she considered her intimate life to be a failure. It is difficult to account for the failed relationships, for Jonker's poems also reveal her to have been sensual and generous. One can only assume that, like many other woman poets, she found it difficult to cope with the dichotomy of "woman" and "poet" that constituted her life.

The comments made about her after her death shed further light on this tension in Ingrid Jonker's life. Jack Cope's obituary, for example, expresses much the same kind of wonder at the discrepancy between "woman" and "poet" that Lionel Abrahams was to express years later in his tribute to Ruth Miller. Jack Cope explains this tension as the distinction between "life" and "art":

Life and art are not the same thing nor ever can finally meet. Life is forever beyond reach of final knowledge and intuition. So then the two are looked at apart, plain, distinct – as also poet and poetry ...<sup>27</sup>

A gendered reading of Ingrid Jonker's life and work allows one to understand why Cope separates the woman from the poetry. He cannot understand how the woman – whom he describes as "childlike" and "no intellectual", could produce the poetry that she wrote: "Where does this gift arise, from what natural spring welling up in the banal suburbs of Cape Town".<sup>28</sup> Like Abrahams, Jack Cope seems reluctant to attribute skill and ability to this woman, a woman who had been writing poetry since the age of five, but who had not had the traditional university education of her male contemporaries. He too removes agency from the woman, suggesting that the poems "sprang from her" as if "she" were merely the medium for some other voice:

She was no self-conscious writer and was in a way dazed, bemused by the voice in her, and what sources, what anguish, what exaltation of spirit sang through her she seemed not to know with any assurance ... the poems sprang from her like birth with the same force and incomprehension and joy, and with the same sense of despair. No act that she could induce or reach at will ... Scholarly, professional diligence she had none. To wear away at the set task, sit with a notebook and compose lines, stanzas, verses out of a well-heaped source, a squirrel's granary of thought and images and influences; this was not her way...<sup>29</sup>

Like Lionel Abrahams, Jack Cope resorts to the traditional patriarchal concept of the "poetess" to explain the enigma of Ingrid Jonker's creativity. He denies her "scholarly professional diligence", asserting rather that the poems "sprang from her" without any conscious effort of will; Cope depicts Ingrid Jonker as a poet at the mercy of her emotions and her instincts. Ingrid Jonker herself refutes this image in her prose piece "The Child that Died at Nyanga", where she speaks of writing the poem as a product of her technique as a poet: "...it grew out of my poetic technique which I have slowly developed like any workman who improves his skill by hard work."<sup>30</sup> In his piece "Ingrid Jonker comes to Stratford", David Lytton records a conversation between them on *Rook en Oker*, where Jonker says: "...But I worked hard on those poems. You should have seen me work", and Lytton replies: "I did ... And I recorded you reading some. You worked hard at that too."<sup>31</sup>

Jonker's reputation as a poet has suffered on two accounts. Firstly because of her use of the Surrealist technique of free association in her work, and her preference for short lyric poems written in free verse which seem to be spontaneous rather than

crafted. Jonker's poems rely on the vibrancy of their imagery rather than the metrical arrangement of lines, a point that Jack Cope noted and attributed to her lack of "scholarly professional diligence". But whereas Cope was writing from within a conservative tradition of South African English poetry, Jonker was experimenting with the new avant garde techniques and styles of European Modernism, most notably Surrealism with its emphasis on the imagery of the subconscious and of dreams and its use of free association to create meaning. Jonker's is a radical and innovative voice within South African poetry in English, since she introduces a style and technique that relies on the mechanisms of the subconscious and that draws on the work of Freud, mediated by the spokesman for Surrealism, French poet André Breton. (This poetic style was also used by her contemporary, an underrated South African English poet called Vincent Swart who died in 1962, but whose *Collected Poems* was only published in 1981.)<sup>32</sup> Surrealism's contempt for bourgeois values may also have played a part in Ingrid Jonker's rejection of the oppressive and racist society in which she lived, and her decision to embrace an "alternative" lifestyle to that of her conservative family in the latter part of her life. However, the style of Surrealism, with its emphasis on the subconscious and psychological processes of creativity, can be read as a "feminine" style of writing, since it rejects the traditional rational discourse of poetry in favour of the apparent irrationality of free association. But if the creative process is highlighted at the expense of ratiocination in Jonker's poetry, the poems themselves still reveal the carefully crafted imagery that one expects from a skilled poet.

The second reason that Jonker's reputation as a poet has suffered is that the sometimes naive simplicity of her poetry is correlated with a perceived immaturity in the way in which she conducted her life. The Afrikaner critic T.T. Cloete uses the term "kinderlikheid" and speaks of her "kinderlike afhanklikheidsgevoel" (childish dependence).<sup>33</sup> Perhaps she was immature, most people in their twenties are not fully mature. However the appellation "childlike" probably relates to her work, for she had the innocent clarity of vision of a child, and she liked to employ simple forms like the nursery rhyme both as inspiration, as in "Ladybird", and as form, often in the poems she wrote for her daughter Simone. She never lost touch with the wonder of childhood, until the very end of her life, possibly because she was little more than a child herself when Simone was born. However, she shared this childlike vision with the poets that she admired, notably Paul Eluard, the French Surrealists, and Dylan Thomas. As a poet, Dylan Thomas was equally mercurial and self-destructive, yet his lifestyle has not affected the appreciation of his poetry. It is difficult to establish whether Ingrid Jonker deliberately cultivated the persona of temperamental and radical poet in order to hide

her lack of education in a colonial cultural milieu that considered the writing of poetry to be "an educated man's affair". There can be no doubt that there were extreme tensions in her life, tensions that led to years of depression and culminated in her suicide. Perhaps her suicide can be partly attributed to her inability to maintain the persona that she had created out of her gifts and her inadequacies.

On the subject of gender, Ingrid Jonker never consciously wrote "as a woman", yet her poetry, with its strong autobiographical element, focuses on the life of a woman. It records a woman's impression of a childhood spent among women, love, pregnancy, motherhood, and later despair and anguish. In terms of her role as a poet, it does seem that she was conscious that her gender was a factor in her work. Jack Cope noted that

...her contempt flared up for distinctions against women on the grounds of femininity, especially in art and the attitudes of life. In the view of Lemaitre, O'Faolin and others, women's writing is a kind of sensitive decoration – they weave, elaborate; a shell of life but not its essence. Her lip would curl at this opinion.<sup>34</sup>

When she was told that she wrote "like a man", that is "experience, feeling, vision going through in a flood, the lines and images pure and bold and direct. And the words edgeless, luminous like new found diamonds. Poet, not poetess", she replied: "Yes, people have told me I write like a man. But do you want to forget that I'm a woman?"<sup>35</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

Ingrid Jonker published three collections of poetry: *Ontvlugting* (1956), *Rook en Oker* (1963), and *Kantelson* (1966), which was published posthumously. In 1975 a *Versamelde Werke* (Collected Works) was published which included autobiographical writings and short stories. A collection of English translations of her work, *Selected Poems*, based largely on her own translations and edited by Jack Cope and William Plomer, appeared in 1968. *Selected Poems* contains a representative sample of her work, but it cannot be regarded as complete. It omits those poems that Adèle Naudé described as "...untranslatable – those which are strictly rhymed and patterned, the magical lullabies, and others of so Afrikaans a fabric that English could provide no equivalent."<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, an essential part of Ingrid Jonker as poet is to be found in these "magical lullabies", and this is lost to English readers. Equally, Jonker's command of the natural rhythms of the Afrikaans language is also not apparent in

translations. Yet whatever its shortcomings, *Selected Poems* does allow the English reader access to the mind and craft of the poet. It also allows Ingrid Jonker to make a distinctive contribution to the tradition of South African women's poetry in English.

*Selected Poems* opens with three poems from her first collection *Ontvlugting*; these poems express concerns that were to dominate her later work. They are also written with an attention to rhyme and metre that is not a feature of her later work. The first is called "Escape", and it speaks of the poet's desire to escape from the pain of adult life into vivid images of childhood innocence:

From this barred Valkenberg I had to fly  
and think myself once more in Gordon's Bay

I play again with tadpoles in the brooks  
and carve luck symbols on trees and rocks

I am the dog that trots along the strand  
and barks alone against the blowing sand

I am the starving sea-bird hung on air  
who dishes up the dead nights for my fare

The god in pain who made you out of wind  
to see in you the wholeness I'd not find

My body lies washed up in grass and wrack  
wherever memory should call us back.

The poet sees her essence as inhabiting the scenes of her childhood, and sharing in the innocent activities of playing with tadpoles and carving "luck symbols on trees and rocks". The poem is written in decasyllables and rhymed couplets. Its form demonstrates the poet's desire to impose order and structure on the material of her life.

The second poem from *Ontvlugting* is called "Double Game", and it describes the power game played within a relationship:

Our double game diverted me  
the playful tricks, the repartee.

In my room one looking-glass  
was clear, the other cracked across.

You think, man-god, you've fathomed me;  
I shall so confuse you and so dismay

You'll run from glass to glass and pother:  
if this is she, God, who is the other ...?

Jonker refers to the lover as a "man-god", a title that carries resonances of the Galatea motif used by Ruth Miller and Eva Bezwoda (whose work will be studied in the next section). The man claims to have come to a knowledge of the woman, to have "fathomed" her psyche, but the poet refuses this. She offers the metaphor of two looking glasses – one is clear and one is cracked, representing two facets of the writer. Perhaps Jonker merely meant to suggest that she was not as easily "fathomed" as the lover assumed, but the metaphor also suggests the tension between woman and poet. The clear mirror can be seen to represent the woman, accessible to men, while the cracked mirror represents the poet – multifaceted, fragmented and doomed, like Tennyson's Lady of Shalott. The poem uses the same formal pattern as "Escape", and this suggests the same desire to order chaotic and inexplicable experience. "Double Game" can be usefully read in conjunction with another poem that appears in *Ontvlugting*, but which was not translated into English, "Lied van die Lappop" (Song of the Ragdoll). In this poem the Galatea motif is also suggested, for the poet likens herself to a ragdoll that has no life other than that given to her by the lover:

Ek is die lappop wat nie praat  
ek maak net op jou liefde staat

Saans lê ek blind en stil en doof  
en lig nie meer my semelhoof

My hande roer nie en my lyf  
word met jou weggaan koud en styf

Sonder jou hulp kan ek nie loop:  
jy het my sommer so gekoop

en sal my nog een Guy Fawkes-nag  
goedsmoeds verbrand en daaroor lag

Ek is die lappop sonder gees  
My pyn jou luid gevierde fees.

(I am the ragdoll that does not speak, and relies on your love. At night I lie blind and quiet and deaf, I do not lift my head. My hands do not move and my body becomes cold and stiff when you leave. Without your help I cannot walk: you just bought me, and one Guy Fawkes night you will just burn me and laugh. I am the ragdoll without spirit, my pain your noisy celebration.)

This poem is written in octosyllables, and makes use of rhyming couplets to suggest the flowing simplicity of a nursery rhyme. The poet's form suggests the childhood world of nursery rhymes and ragdolls, but ironically it is the poet herself who feels like a ragdoll that is about to be cruelly abandoned by her owner. The egocentric cruelty of the lover is suggested in the comparison with a child who buys a doll and then grows tired of it, finally destroying it in an extravagant gesture of indifference. Once again, Jonker returns to her childhood to find images, and a form, to express her emotions. In both "Double Game" and *Lied van die Lappop*, relationships are seen as games in which the participants are engaged in power struggles that produce anguish and pain. The complex tensions of the adult world are reduced to the seemingly simple responses of childhood, which Jonker seems to argue, as would Freud, also underlie the responses of the adult. In the child the desires of the id are given free expression, but in the adult these desires must be mediated through the ego which masks the often primitive nature of adult sexuality. Thus Ingrid Jonker's choice of style and subject matter in poems such as *"Lied van die Lappop"* reflect not so much "childish dependence" as an adult acknowledgement of the very nature of the urges and impulses that dictate social interaction when viewed from a psychological standpoint.

The third poem from *Ontvlugting* is "At the Goodwood Agricultural Show", which reveals another feature of Jonker's work, her sympathetic compassion for the suffering of animals, a feature that she shares with Ruth Miller and Mary Morison Webster:

They picked me from the others to enthrone  
me in this prison where I stand alone

While they, still free, come ambling by  
and fail to understand my speechless cry

A First Prize hangs around my neck  
but after dark, half mad, I long to trek.

...

The compassion for the animal reflected in this poem was extended in Jonker's work into a compassion for all living beings, whether animal or human. Living in apartheid

South Africa of the 1950s and 60s, Jonker was deeply aware of the cruelties visited on fellow humans, and many of her later poems would express her dismay at the horrors that existed in her society. Jack Cope noted how her compassion and empathy for others sometimes lead her to gestures of assertive protest:

It was more than her own happiness that mattered to her for she could not bear to think of the sorrow of others. Cruelty and wrong aroused in her a stupified wildness; each insult was an affront to her tenderness, every hurt towards others tormented her too. Her reactions were not of the kind of the pained but impotent conscience, they were instant and spontaneous. Flying to the aid of a coloured passenger being pushed off a bus, she grasped and held back the conductor's arm. He resented her interference, jerked back and flung a coarse word in her face. With all her puny strength she struck him. She was knocked down in the scuffle that followed and other passengers raised her. Such fire may be put out easily and forgotten, or it can start an endless burning.<sup>37</sup>

In Ingrid Jonker's second collection, *Rook en Oker* (1963), she moves away from the couplet form of *Ontvlugting*. Her poems are now written in free verse and begin to make use of the Surrealist technique of free association. One of the most interesting poems in the collection, in terms of this study, is "Pregnant Woman", for it reveals the poet's ambivalent responses to the experience of pregnancy. In the first stanza she suggests that the world is like a sewer, and she is in the world just as her unborn child is in her:

I lie under the crust of night singing,  
curled up in the sewer, singing,  
and my bloodchild lies in the water.

It is difficult to see the significance of the imagery in the English version. In the Afrikaans "Swanger Vrou", she uses the word "riool" which effectively means "sewerage water" rather than sewer, and so makes the comparison more valid. The poet curled up in the regressive and defensive foetal position in the sewerage flow that is life, and the foetus within her curled up in the flow of her blood. The metaphor expresses the horror Jonker feels for life, which is compared to a sewer which is covered by the dark "crust" of night. Jonker's metaphor is similar to the "melting rot" that Ruth Miller identified, and like Miller, Ingrid Jonker responds to the sordid nature of life by "singing" or transmuting her emotions into intense imagery. She must have found the physical experience of pregnancy taxing, for in the second stanza of the poem she expresses the familiar wish to escape back into the world of childhood desire where the foetus in her body is associated with a tadpole swimming "in the slime in the stream":



I play that I'm a child:  
 gooseberries, gooseberries and heather  
 kukumakrankas and anise  
 and the tadpole glides  
 in the slime in the stream  
 in my body  
 my foam-white reflection;  
 but sewer oh sewer  
 my bloodchild lies in the water.

It is only by escaping into yesterday that she is able to cope with today:

Still singing fleshrose our bloodsong  
 I and my yesterday,  
 my yesterday hangs under my heart  
 my red gladiolus my cradling world  
 and my heart that sings like a cicada  
 my cicada-heart sings like a cicada;  
 but sewer oh sewer,  
 my bloodchild lies in the water.

In this poem Jonker originates the comparison between her child and a flower that she was to use in later poems for Simone. Here she calls her "fleshrose", associating the "flower" of her flesh with the rose, and with the "gladiolus". But more importantly, she realises that "my yesterday hangs under my heart"; she is no longer a child, she is about to become the mother of a child. The actual process of giving birth is described with the same ambivalence, and the poet escapes once again into the imaginative world of childhood play in order to cope with the pain:

I play that I'm happy:  
 look where firefly sparkles!  
 the moon-disc, a wet snout that quivers -  
 but with the morning, the limping midwife,  
 grey and shivering on the sliding hills,  
 I push you out through the crust into daylight,  
 oh sorrowing owl, great owl of the daylight,  
 free from my womb but besmeared,  
 with my tears all smeared  
 and tainted with sadness.

The child is compared to an "owl" that makes the passage from the night world through the "crust" into "daylight". But the mother cannot respond with joy to the arrival of the

child, rather she sees her offspring as doomed to live in the same sorrowful world in which she lives. In the last stanza she suggests that her "bloodchild" has emerged from the "water" of her body only to be drowned in the waters of the "riool", the sewer of life itself:

Sewer oh sewer  
I lie trembling, singing  
how else but trembling  
with my bloodchild under your water...?

While Ingrid Jonker's daughter, Simone, was a source of joy in her life, the poet perceived pregnancy and childbirth as complex and difficult passages in her life as a woman. Unlike Elisabeth Eybers, her poetry reveals that she finds little to celebrate in the perpetuation of life into what she saw as a cruel and sordid world. Her short story "Die Bok" (1961) also catalogues the psychological responses of a woman to her pregnancy, and sheds light on Jonker's own emotional responses. In "Die Bok" (The Goat), the protagonist, Susan, is a pregnant woman. The story relates how she conceives an intense hatred for a goat that insists on coming into her garden and eating her roses. Read in psychoanalytical terms, the goat represents male sexuality, a metaphor for her husband, Hein. This is emphasised by the words of the servant, Jager, who notes "...hy lyk net soos die oubaas" (he looks like the boss). The despoilation of the garden and the roses are thus metaphors for sexual conquest. The woman resents her husband for what he has done to her, and she transfers this anger and resentment to the goat. She decides to kill the goat, and there is an amusing episode that foregrounds the idea that Susan's desire to kill the goat is a displaced desire to castrate her husband. As she goes to a drawer to get a knife to dispatch the goat her husband sees her and asks her what she wants to do with the knife. Since she does not want to admit to her plan to kill the goat, she claims that she only wants to sharpen it. Later that night, when her husband is asleep, she pulls the blanket off him and places her hand on his stomach. The poor man leaps upright and shouts "Moenie" (No), but the writer reveals that the cry has taken place in his sleep, it emanates from his subconscious, where he is aware of his wife's desire to castrate him. The woman then covers him up and goes outside to kill the goat, a symbolic act of transferred anger. Before she can commit the act, she is interrupted by Jager, who asks her what she is doing and points out to her the physical resemblance of the goat to her husband. At this point she understands the source of her anger against the animal:

Die sterk horing ruk in haar greep, wat reeds verslap het. Die hare onder haar hand is syng en golwend soos die van Hein in sy fleur. Sy sien hom ineens soos op 'n ou foto, op 'n vergete more, op sy graaf geleun in die roostuin, in die sagte lig, met 'n soet, geheime glimlag, sy blik reguit, rustig, onveranderlik.<sup>38</sup>

(The strong horn pulled in her grasp, which was already weakening. The hair under her hand was soft and wavy, like Hein's in his prime. She saw him at once as in an old photo, on a forgotten morning, leaning on his spade in the rose garden, in the soft light, with a sweet, secret smile, his gaze direct, peaceful, unchanging.)

She allows the goat to go free, but she knows that the despoilation of the garden will continue and that the relationship with the husband cannot be saved: "Volgende somer sal daar geen rose wees nie." (Next year there will be no roses").<sup>39</sup>

If Jonker's attitude towards pregnancy was ambivalent, her bond with her daughter was strong. Her poetry reveals that it was constituted of a complex of intense emotions. As a mother she had a great love for her child. In her autobiographical sketch she notes that: "...one of my great experiences was to become a mother...Before her birth and ever since I have written many poems for and about [Simone]."<sup>40</sup> Many of these poems express her love and her delight in her daughter, as in "Begin Summer":

Begin summer and the sea  
a cracked-open quince  
the sky like a child's  
balloon  
far above the water

Under the umbrellas  
like stripy sugarsticks  
ants of people  
and the gay laughter of the bay  
has golden teeth

Child with the yellow beach-bucket  
and the forgotten pigtail  
your mouth surely is a little bell  
tiny grape-tongue for a clapper  
You play the sun all day  
like a ukelele

The poem is composed of a series of bright colourful images that are characteristic of the surrealist technique of free association. The sea is compared to a "cracked-open quince" and the sky to "a child's balloon". The strange metaphor of the "gay laugh of the bay" with its "yellow teeth" captures the carefree essence of the day at the beach. Ingrid Jonker also spoke of her work as being influenced by "ou weeklanke uit die Bybel waarmee ek as kind groot geword het ..." ("old resonances/echoes from the Bible that I grew up with as a child...")<sup>41</sup> The first three lines of the third stanza resonate with the rhythms of Biblical poetry: "Child with the yellow beach-bucket/and with the forgotten pigtail/your mouth surely is a little bell". The mingling of an allusion to the Bible with the description of her daughter suggests the psychological correlation between the wonder of producing a child and deep spiritual experience. Yet this deep maternal love was tinged by the fear first hinted at in "Pregnant Woman", that as a mother she could not protect her beloved child from the cruelty of life. She makes this plain when she speaks of how she came to write "The Child that Died at Nyanga". The poem was based on an incident that took place during political disturbances in 1960, "when blood flowed in this land".<sup>42</sup> An African mother was on her way to take her baby to a doctor when the car in which she was travelling was fired on by soldiers at a military cordon. The baby was killed. Ingrid Jonker saw in this incident a reflection of the irrationality of violence, and her own inability to protect her own daughter from violence and pain:

...I saw the mother as every mother in the world. I saw her as myself. *I saw Simone as the baby*. I could not sleep. I thought of what the child might have been had he been allowed to live. I thought what could be reached, what could be gained by death? The child wanted no part in the circumstances in which our country is grasped. He only wanted to play in the sun at Nyanga.<sup>43</sup>

Jonker's identification with the mother of the dead child is the motivation for the poem, and the reason why she said: "It grew out of my own experiences and sense of bereavement. It rests on a foundation of all philosophy, a certain belief in 'life eternal', a belief that nothing is ever wholly lost."<sup>44</sup> The poem reflects her belief that the child is "not dead", but lives on as a symbol of hope in the struggle for a free society where children will not have to die, and where their parents can live with dignity:

The child is not dead  
the child lifts his fists against his mother  
who screams Africa shouts the scent  
of freedom and the veld  
in the location of the cordoned heart

The child lifts his fists against his father  
 in the march of the generations  
 who are shouting Africa shout the scent  
 of righteousness and blood  
 in the streets of his warrior pride

The child is not dead  
 not at Langa not at Nyanga  
 not at Orlando not at Sharpeville  
 not at the police station in Philippi  
 where he lies with a bullet through his brain

The child, representative of innocence violated, "lifts his fists" against his symbolic parents who engage in the violence that led to his death. Wherever there are political "incidents", that same spirit is part of the events. The first three stanzas of the poem are quintets, but the last part of the poem changes the form to a long stanza of seven lines and a single line conclusion. Jonker's use of repetition and parallelism also helps to build the poem towards the climax of the last line:

The child is the shadow of the soldiers  
 on guard with rifles, saracens and batons  
 the child is present at all gatherings and law-giving  
 the child peers through house windows and into the hearts of mothers,  
 the child who wanted just to play in the sun at Nyanga is everywhere.  
 The child grown to a man treks all over Africa  
 the child grown to a giant travels through the whole world

Without a pass.

In Jonker's vision of the future the child is liberated from the region of the "cordoned heart" and allowed to achieve adulthood in freedom, "without a pass". The spirit of innocence, that "wanted just to play in the sun at Nyanga" becomes dominant and "travels through the whole world". The poem thus advocates the rejection of violence in favour of the spirit of the child, who wants only to live in peace and play in the sun. It is a peace poem. Despite its political undertones in the context of apartheid South Africa, where it would have been read as "subversive" support for "agitators" by a white woman, Ingrid Jonker did not intend the poem to be a political statement in racial terms. In the original Afrikaans version, the poem is merely called "Die Kind" (The Child). Jonker herself noted: "I am surprised when people call it political."<sup>45</sup> Rather, the intention behind the poem was to highlight the tension between an aggressive and

violent society on the one hand, and the values of maternal love on the other. Using the metaphor of a flower, she ends her prose piece "The Child that Died at Nyanga" with the following words: "I would like to compare a poem with a child, and a child with a rose, and who would dare to have a 'war against the roses'?"<sup>46</sup> The poet expresses her opposition to a society in which essentially creative achievements – the making of poems (regarded by many in our patriarchal culture to be a "feminine" pursuit) and the bearing and raising of children – are considered to be marginal activities.

Jonker responded to issues of race in South Africa in personal, rather than intellectual terms. She saw the child at Nyanga as her own child and she felt its mother's pain as her own pain, as she felt also the pain of the oppressed people of her country and used her poetry to express this pain. In her beautiful and moving poem "Seen from the Wound in my Side", Jonker assumes the subjectivity of a black Christ figure and relates the sufferings of one who has been crucified on the cross of racial discrimination. She expresses her feelings in a series of images that evoke passages from the bible:

I looked down from the mountains and saw I was dead  
My shaped temples the two lambs at the slaughter-poles of gold  
and my hands the crops of doves broken with palms upwards.

The black "Christ" perceives his psychological death at the "slaughter-poles of gold", an image which suggests the oppression of black labour on the gold mines that produce the wealth of the country. The desire for peace, suggested by the "two lambs" and the "doves", is destroyed by violent means. Yet the black Christ identifies within his people the potential to achieve the desired state of peace. Jonker uses imagery of flowers and plants to suggest growth and potential:

...  
Because the waters of my death seek the olive branches  
of the sunshine  
and my people the open protea of the daybreak  
Over the machinery of gold the dignity of their shoulders  
in the door of their homesteads in the mouth of their horses  
green sunlight with feet that drag

...I believe that it will still happen  
 in the borderlands of the heart  
 the white nativity of the arum lilies  
 Because I saw how you, beloved John  
 laid your hand on the shoulder of the black man with the cross.

Jonker concludes *Rook en Oker* with the poem "L'art poetique", which may be read as a manifesto of her practice as a poet:

To hide myself away like a secret  
 in a sleep of lambs and vine-cuttings  
 To conceal myself  
 in the salute of a great ship  
 To hide away  
 in the violence of a simple recollection  
 in your drowned hands  
 to hide myself away in my word.

For Ingrid Jonker, the process of writing allows her to "hide" her own ego in the emotions of creativity. The "art" of poetry allows her to play with images of potential, suggested by the "sleep of lambs" and the "vine-cuttings". In this personal world of ideas and images, even a "simple recollection" can be full of violent emotion. Jonker's poetry, to this point, contains both the innocence of a "sleep of lambs" and the violence of "a simple recollection" in "drowned hands", an image that was to be prophetic of her later suicide.

Jonker's third collection, *Kantelson* (1966), was published after her death, and contains the work that she produced between the appearance of *Rook en Oker* in 1963 and her decision to take her life in 1965. It reflects the increasing sense of alienation and despair in Jonker's life, and her increasing inability to "connect" with other people. In such circumstances, her poetry became a retreat, a place where she could transmute her anguish into strange and surreal imagery that captured the dislocations of her psyche.

After the appearance of *Rook en Oker*, Jonker had achieved widespread recognition: she was awarded the APB literary prize and an overseas travel grant by the Anglo American corporation. She left for an extended study visit to Europe which was to last only three months and ended in a Paris hospital. The adulation and the pressure were too much: the "uneducated" woman office-worker from Cape Town felt

the stress of mingling with European literary figures who expected a level of accomplishment that she must have felt that she could not achieve. Hence the rather forlorn statement made in a letter to a friend that she felt that she could do no better than the work in *Rook en Oker*. However, despite her despair, the poems that appear in *Kantelson* show Jonker moving towards a higher level of achievement. The poems are darker, more morose and introspective at times, and yet some of them attain a luminosity and a level of technical competence not found in the previous collection. A gendered reading of the poems in *Kantelson* charts the nature of the despair that was filling the poet's life at this time. In "Conversation on a Hotel Terrace", she writes of an encounter with a friend that is distorted by her sense of her own alienation:

My death beats behind my eyeballs like the moon  
 I hear it surge behind the thunder of the rollers  
 I measure its pace in the slime-track of a snail  
 The days fall into the earth like sparrows  
 and every word has the look of Nothingness

Jonker's world is filled with the consciousness of death, her own death. This awareness is a result of her perception of the emptiness and futility of her life, expressed in the image of her "days" which "fall into the earth like sparrows". The image alludes to the words of Jesus in the bible, who claimed that God knew every time a sparrow died. Jonker's days die like sparrows, and yet her life remains empty of spiritual significance. The interaction that she experiences with others is characterised by words that have "the look of Nothingness", that echo the ontological void in her psyche. Her poetry at this stage is reminiscent of that produced by another woman poet who would take her own life in the 1960s, Sylvia Plath. Like Plath's, Ingrid Jonker's imagery becomes increasingly morose and bizarre as her psychological state deteriorates. At this stage, although she feels "death" behind her eyes, and beating in the pulse of her blood, Jonker still attempts to find meaning; the poem ends with her assertion that there are still things of value in life:

And if you ask what I always think of I shall answer  
 Child, a Rambler rose, or a glass of water.

The poet's responses are reduced to simple essentials which express, for her, the potential for beauty in life. Significantly, the items she chooses are all drawn from her life as a woman: the child to whom she is mother, the rose which represents for her the innocence of her child, her "fleshrose", and the purity of a "glass of water", which may also be read as an archetypal feminine womb symbol. But the last line also suggests a



growing obsession with these things, and her perception that she had failed in her life as a woman, because her relationships failed, and as a mother, because she could not protect her child from the violence and pain that inevitably accompany life.

Her daughter, Simone, was still the centre of her emotional life, and in "The Morning is You", a simple seven-line lyric, she again compares the child to a rose:

Roses perfume all the air  
 defenceless the roses  
 Defenceless your hands, eyes  
 rose of your mouth  
 the morning is you  
 Defenceless rose of the morning  
 wound of the roses

The poet emphasises the "defencelessness" of the rose/child, which she repeats three times. In the last line, Jonker calls her child a "wound of the roses", which is a strange image which emphasises the vulnerability of the child. But the last line can also be read as transferred anguish, for it is the mother, the woman who believed in feminine values such as love and nurturing, who found herself always at the mercy of a seemingly hostile world – fragile, defenceless, and deeply wounded. The extent of Ingrid Jonker's psychological "wounds" can be gauged from her poem "I am With Those", in which she writes of her understanding of the destructive ways in which people hide from their pain:

I am with those  
 who abuse sex  
 because the individual doesn't count  
 with those who get drunk  
 against the abyss of the brain  
 against the illusion that life  
 once was right or fair or significant  
 against the garden parties of falsehood  
 against the silence striking at the temples  
 ...

It is interesting to note that as Ingrid Jonker's poetry becomes more intensely personal and emotive, she makes increased use of the devices of repetition and parallelism to build tension:

...

with those who old and poor  
 strive with death and the atom bomb of the days  
 and in shacks count the last  
 flies on the walls  
 with those stupified in institutions  
 shocked with electric currents  
 through the cataracts of the senses  
 with those who have been deprived of their hearts  
 like the light out of the robots of security  
 with those coloured, African who are robbed  
 with those that murder  
 because every death confirms anew  
 the lie of life.

In this poem Ingrid Jonker further describes the "sewer" of life that she noted in "Pregnant Woman", but here she identifies both with those who suffer and those who cause suffering, because both are ways of coping with the "lie of life". The last short stanza reflects the bitterness that had permeated Ingrid Jonker's psyche:

And forget please  
 about justice it doesn't exist  
 about brotherhood its deceit  
 about love it has no right.

Living in an unjust society, such as apartheid South Africa of the 1960s, deeply affected Ingrid Jonker. But she also felt a keen sense of the injustices in her private life. The depth of her despair can be seen in "Mama", where she describes her own psychological state. At this stage in her life her identity is derived from her roles as mother and as lover, but neither of these roles fill the void:

Mama is not a person any more  
 just a a  
 she gets dressed  
 she goes to the hairdresser  
 she walks in the street  
 catches her heels  
 she consults the psychiatrist  
 like an ordinary being

she whispers words  
*mon cheri*  
 it goes without a sound  
 it's the white  
 whispering of a ghost  
 it has no colour  
 and it runs off

it giggles out of elevators  
 it peers through spectacles  
 slyly it wonders  
 it is disarmed  
 it is naked as an African  
 it wishes to believe in the man  
 who still tells of a God

In the first stanza the poet records her loss of a sense of identity. She may be a mother, but as a person she has no sense of herself other than as a "a". She goes through the motions of life "like an ordinary being", but in the second stanza she reveals that she feels as insubstantial as a ghost. Her desire to express love, suggested in the words "mon cheri", is negated, for her words are soundless, "the white/whispering of a ghost". In a bizarre series of images she relates how this desire for love is turned back on her, for her words "run off" and begin to mock her as they giggle, and peer and act "slyly". Her use of the pronoun "it" suggests also her sense of dislocation from emotional relationships, as though they have very little to do with her inner life or her need for meaning. Thus she ends the poem by expressing her need, also dislocated and distanced, for something to provide meaning, "a God" in whom she may believe.

In "I Drift in the Wind", a poem dedicated to her sister, Anna, Ingrid Jonker expresses her bitterness against those who had betrayed her and left her to "drift in the wind":

Free I have my own self-reliance  
 from graves and from deceptive friends  
 the hearth I have cherished glares now at me  
 My parents have broken themselves off from my death  
 the worms stir against my mother, my father  
 clenches his hand that brushes loose against the sky  
 free I believe my old friend has forsaken me  
 free I believe you have toppled the mountains in me  
 free my landscape reeks of bitter sun and blood

The stanza is based on the ironic counterpoint between the positive connotations of the word "free" and the negative connotations that the word has in the poet's life. The poet is free because she has no emotional bonds to tie her to another. The people whom she has loved have betrayed her, they went to "graves" or proved to be "deceptive friends". When she claims that her "parents have broken themselves off from my death", she accuses them of having no concern for her fate – her mother because she died and so "deserted" her daughter, and her father because at this stage he had disowned his rebellious daughter for her bohemian lifestyle and her liberal politics, a gesture symbolised by the clenched hand. To Ingrid Jonker the future looked terrifyingly bleak and lonely, for she seemed unable to establish lasting and durable relationships:

What will become of me  
 the cornerstones of my heart establish nothing  
 my landscape is hardened in me  
 brooding embittered but open  
 ...

Equally, because of her father's rejection of her lifestyle and her own rejection of Afrikaner nationalism and its policy of "apartheid", Ingrid Jonker also felt increasingly alienated from her identity as an Afrikaner:

My nation  
 follow my lonely fingers  
 people, clothe yourselves in warmheartedness  
 veiled in by the sun of the future

My black Africa  
 follow my lonely fingers  
 follow my absent image  
 lonely as an owl  
 and the foresaken finger of the world  
 alone like my sister  
 My people have rotted away from me  
 what will become of the rotten nation  
 a hand cannot pray alone

The poem ends ambiguously:

The sun will cover us  
 the sun in our eyes covered forever  
 with black crows

The sun is an image of life and vitality, but here the sun is "covered for ever/with black crows", symbols of death. It seems as though Jonker was aware of the darkness and evil that existed because of her people, and that this knowledge led to further alienation and anguish.

The poems from *Kantelson* discussed above indicate that Ingrid Jonker felt increasingly cut off from her society, whether on the intimate, family level or on the social level. This alienation was to lead to her decision to end her life. One of the most sombre poems in *Kantelson* is also one of the most revealing and, as it turned out, most prophetic. In "Dark River" the poet rejects life and all its pain and chooses rather the soothing "darkness":

Green river full of life  
 the sun looks into you  
 I can't speak with you because  
 you have too many secrets.  
 Shall I talk with the small tadpoles?  
 They are too shy.  
 They tell one they'll grow into big frogs  
 That's too uncertain.  
 Go weep because one vanishes  
 before his back-legs are out?  
 It's too unimportant.  
 River where the darkness  
 sees only the darkness  
 with you I can speak  
 I know you better

The poet rejects the river, "full of life", because she cannot fathom its secrets. The mystery of life's meaning is beyond her comprehension. She rejects also the "small tadpoles" because they, if they survive, will lose their innocent youth and become adult frogs. Jonker is aware always of death and violence, for one frog may vanish before it reaches maturity, and yet this death is "unimportant" in the larger scheme of things. This indifference to violence and pain that is part of the "green river full of life" horrifies the poet, and she turns rather to the dark part of the river, "where the darkness/sees only the darkness", because she understands the dark part of life, the inner darkness of the psyche and the outer darkness of man's cruelty and harshness. Ingrid Jonker's inability to make sense of the cycle of life – which includes loss and death – lead her to choose the darkness that represents death. Her poetry reveals that

she was never able to accept the flux of life with its opposites of life and death and change with the same equanimity as Adèle Naudé, Elisabeth Eybers, or even Ruth Miller. The reason for this, as mentioned at the outset of this piece, is probably to be found in a childhood marred by death and loss, and an adult life in which her poetic abilities led her into a circle of friends – artists and writers – who could not meet her overwhelming need for emotional stability. At the age of thirty-two Ingrid Jonker found herself alone, in doubt of both her poetic ability and her capacity for human relationships. And, as she herself noted in a poignant image:

A hand cannot pray alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

The impact made by Ingrid Jonker on the poetic consciousness of women poets in South Africa can be seen by the number of such poets who wrote tributes to her. For many her life became a symbol.

In her tribute, Ruth Miller considers the despair and unhappiness of the tormented poet, but also the nature of the loss of the woman and the poet:

No, the world cannot be made into a toy  
A round blue ball to cast at the world we make;  
Nor, Ingrid, could any voice sing you to sleep  
With a song as gentle and comforting as you  
Sang to a child whose soft wrists grew still.

You were too burdened with your Dark Man, and too  
Fragile the doll. Did we not let it break?  
Oh the dry mouth, the frightened hands, we weep  
For them now. But the singing voice  
Makes you inviolable.

Ruth Miller believes that Ingrid Jonker's poetry will live on, making her "inviolable". Another Johannesburg poet, Helen Segal, never wrote a direct tribute to Jonker, but the drowned poet appears as a motif in several poems. Where Ruth Miller speaks of Jonker's "Dark Man" or animus as the object of her life's search, Segal suggests that Jonker found her "male" complement (thanatos, not eros) in the sea that took her life:

The sea is all male  
 that is why some women  
 walk in it  
 till they drown in ecstasy.  
 No earthly man  
 could hold them  
 handle  
 rule them;  
 the secret depths  
 salt-song  
 reckless order of the sea  
 tosses aside imagination  
 because it is.

They seek heroic consummation;  
 brains and bones  
 blood and brawn  
 have baffled.

On the floor of the sea  
 ploughing the heavy waters  
 they strain to the limit  
 beyond their limit  
 crash, are crushed,  
 jet to surface for a breath;  
 have found a land-locked lover  
 foaming blind words;  
 whirled in cruel embrace  
 that peaks their world-wise shell  
 breaking brittle bonds,  
 they are,

On the surface  
 spent and placid

weedy hair  
 combing waves

Both Miller and Segal suggest that Jonker's despair was primarily psycho-sexual, and was motivated by her inability to establish a satisfying relationship. This may have been partly true, but Jonker's desire for "wholeness" was more than just a search for the Jungian animus, it was also a search for the lost mother/father who had deserted her in her childhood. Helen Segal's second Jonker poem, "Suicide", compares Ingrid Jonker with Sylvia Plath, another woman poet who committed suicide:

the thoughts that walk and talk and sleep  
 of those who take their life their own way,  
 walking through waves or saying no to the matches  
 (occupational hazards of women who work with words)  
 - I do not want them,  
 nervous of the thought thought last too late:  
 This is all a big mistake,  
 I didn't really mean this at all;

my choices change too quickly to hang a breath on  
 swing on a thread like milkteeth

but you -  
 think girl how we drop  
 when you let go

Ingrid Jonker's death is a loss for all women poets, for when she "lets go" of life, all "drop" because they all share the same "occupational hazards" as "women who work with words".

For the young black poet, Jennifer Davids, a sculptured bust of Ingrid Jonker becomes the object of her poem "From Deep In: Bronze Head: Ingrid Jonker". Davids contemplates the psychological wounding "from deep in" that characterised Ingrid Jonker's life:

from deep in  
 the sunlight sculpting over  
 ever  
     her head emerges  
         from bronze  
     shapes the light  
 whatever pain  
 lightens and darkens  
 with cloud and trees  
 and closer  
         vine's  
     random webbing  
 through layers of living  
         and dying  
 drown pure  
  
 centred here  
 in a corner of a room



Davids locates the essence of Ingrid Jonker's life in "pain" which emerges through "layers of living/and dying" and is captured in the sunlit bronze image, and concentrated "here/in a corner of a room". The woman poet, Jennifer Davids, is touched by the pain of a fellow woman poet because she understands the stresses of being a woman and a poet. However, the poet who shows the most sensitivity to Ingrid Jonker's life, and to her work, is Sally Bryer, in her moving and eloquent poem "Ingrid Jonker":

You walked straight into the water  
 like a hungry bird, your curly head  
 intent as a heron.  
 You walked into the waves  
 like Persephone herself,  
 your eyes dried seeds, your body a husk of light.  
 Your punishment was finding yourself  
 in a foreign element. You spoke  
 through interpreters. Your lips and fingers  
 betrayed you, turned away  
 from the darkness behind your eyes,  
 tried to sell themselves.  
 Your child dies, and lives on.  
 Your screams become seasonal.

We travel in packs, hunting and hunted  
 we carry nets and each of us captures  
 a relic of pain, stark as bone.  
 Those of us who never saw a likeness  
 learn to tell the seasons of madness  
 from the sea. In every fragment of glass and shell  
 I pass, your dark eyes encounter me.

\* \* \* \* \*

(iii) **The Journey Inwards: Eva Bezwoda and the Poetry of Psychological Process**

My journeys are growing ever more inwards, inwards  
 As though mind contained  
 An ur-city which it was necessary  
 to find

Eva Bezwoda was born in 1942, and died by her own hand in 1976 at the age of thirty-four. She was educated at the University of Natal, in Durban, where she completed an Honours degree in English. She married Robert Royston, and published her first collection under her married name of Eva Royston. Together with her husband and Lionel Abrahams, she helped to found Renoster Books which published the early work of Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali and Mongane Wally Serote, as well as her own collection. She published *One Hundred and Three Poems* in 1973, and *Leave-Taking* (1977), which was published privately after her death.

Not a great deal is known about Eva Bezwoda's life, or the reasons for her depression and later suicide. Her family have been reluctant to speak about her life. Because of this lack of biographical information, this discussion of Eva Bezwoda's work will focus primarily on what her poetry reveals of her inner world. A close reading of her work reveals that she was an angry young woman. The process of writing poetry was, for her, a means of recording the psychological "journey" of her breakdown and her attempts to regain her mental stability. She writes as a means of understanding the suffering and pain associated with her mental condition, and so transmutes the pain into meaningful form. The poems reveal that the anger that led to her severe depression was also gender specific in many instances. Her examination of her own psychological condition produced a heightened awareness of the kinds of gendered oppression that a woman may confront in her life. The bizarre extremes of response in Bezwoda's work serve to illuminate the role of such oppression in her psychological anguish.

Eva Bezwoda's poetry, with its emphasis on psychological process, relies on complex, powerful and often bizarre imagery for its impact. This imagery reflects the processes of the poet's mind, and so lends itself to psychoanalytical reading. Because her focus was on expressing her emotional life through her imagery, Bezwoda paid little attention to formal devices other than imagery. Her lyric poems are generally short, free verse pieces that are expressionistic and powerful as psychological

statements rather than as aesthetic artefacts. However, despite her lack of interest in the concept of the poem as artefact, she may still be classified as a Modernist poet since she uses the image to convey a complex of meaning, and she experiments with the ideas of Freudian symbolism in her work. Like Ingrid Jonker, she brings to South African women's poetry in English a focus on the possibility of the image as the conveyor of subconscious significance and meaning. Yet she differs from Jonker, for where Jonker used the surrealist technique of free association, Bezwoda was more self-conscious in her creation of imagery with psychoanalytical significance.

Eva Bezwoda was herself not unaware of the formal shortcomings of her poetry. In "Orpheus is a Dog" she likens her poems to "short sharp yelps":

Orpheus is a dog.  
 He scratches up the hard soil  
 Growling for something underground.  
 Perhaps it is a fleshy bone  
 Buried too deep.  
 He seems almost to mourn  
 This ring of earth.  
 Something from him has gone.  
 One could hardly call  
 His short sharp yelps  
 Musical.

The poet herself is Orpheus, the singer, but who is compared to a "dog" who searches for significance "underground" – a metaphor for Bezwoda's own process of searching for significance within her subconscious. But whereas Orpheus searched for Eurydice in the underworld, Bezwoda's Orpheus is merely in search of "something", which may be a "fleshy bone/Buried too deep". Whatever it is that the dog seeks, it may be too deeply buried in the subconscious to be retrieved, and this thought causes pain as he mourns "this ring of earth". As a result of the pain, the dog produces "short sharp yelps" which are hardly "musical". The entire poem is a metaphor for the nature of Eva Bezwoda's creative practice, and reflects an ironic acknowledgement of her limitations as a poet when measured against the standard expectations of an "Orpheus".

Critical reaction to the appearance of Eva Bezwoda's collection *One Hundred and Three Poems* was generally favourable, although most reviewers commented on her lack of attention to form. Robert Greig, as reviewer, is an interesting example of the kind of critical reception with which a woman poet may have to deal. Greig reviewed

her collection twice, once for *To the Point* in April 1973 and once for *Bolt* in June 1973. In the first review he speaks of her "impressive image-making powers", and describes the collection as

less an anthology than a drama of the process of coming into the world after psychological retreat ... The laconic ferocity of [the] poems recalls Sylvia Plath, but [Bezwoda's] introversion is saved from obscurity by clarity and a sumptuous imagination ....As one reads the anthology, the often narrow, poeticised thoughts and emotions engage with the outer world and thus gain force. The last 20 poems are particularly good, having ... control, perceptiveness and... eloquent power.<sup>47</sup>

The second review, published two months later, is far more negative:

...my quarrel with Eva [Bezwoda] is that she is not sufficiently outside of herself...and is too immersed in her suffering to write poetry. This self-immersed suffering seems to be characteristic of women's poetry ... Her 103 poems, as poems, are short and soggy... Not that the poems are incoherent, but they are acts, rather than poems, which serve, consciously or unconsciously, a specific psychological purpose.<sup>48</sup>

The difference in tone between the two reviews may be attributed to the fact that the first review appeared in a general readership magazine, *To the Point*, while the second review appeared in *Bolt*, which was a small literary magazine published in the English department of the University of Natal in Durban. The *Bolt* review reflects its writer's conscious attempt to display a knowledge of "good" poetry in the academic context; it also reflects the pervasive South African academic contempt for "women's poetry" in the era before Feminist criticism. In the eyes of patriarchal literary critics, Eva Bezwoda, like Sylvia Plath, used poetry as a means of expressing "self-immersed suffering", which was of no interest to readers of the tradition of tough masculine impersonality and carefully crafted lines.

A second contemporary reviewer is less self-conscious in his criticism, and thus more perceptive about the real value of Eva Bezwoda's work. He reviews the collection together with work by British poets Elizabeth Jennings and Alan Brownjohn, and comes to the conclusion that

Eva [Bezwoda's] *One Hundred and Three Poems* is the richest of the slim volumes reviewed here. This is not to assert that the poems are anything near perfect. On the contrary, it is easy to fault them for the occasional uncontrolled metaphor which promotes confusion rather than ambiguity,



and for the absence of any sense of sound in the poems. The former impedes the efficacy of the communication, and the latter suggests an incompleteness and ill-discipline which detracts from the book as a whole. Moreover, the imagery is often too "intellectual", that is, it is logical to the thought process, but fails to establish its own reality in the poem... Though there are weaknesses, flaws and crudities to be found in the collection, the poems do produce a sense of experience, and do convey some shattering insights. [Eva] Bezwoda works beyond old ideas of thought and technique – her experiments do not always work, but when they do, they more than justify the entire work.<sup>49</sup>

Fridjohn correctly identifies the experimental nature of Eva Bezwoda's poetry. She is attempting to make poetry a vehicle of her ideas and emotions, and in so doing she rejects the traditional emphasis on form and places her emphasis on the sheer power of imagery. She is the Modernist poet who understands the impact of Freud on the contemporary consciousness, but she is also a woman poet in search of a form that will adequately express her ideas.

The focus in this brief study of Eva Bezwoda's poetry will be on the element of gender in her work. Her rebellion against gender stereotyping can be traced in the strong pathological desire, running like a thread through her poetry, to destroy her female body, that which identifies her as "woman". Like Ruth Miller, Eva Bezwoda used the mythical Galatea to express her alienation from patriarchal social expectations:

She hugged her arms  
Still numb from the scalpel  
Her rounded thighs, broken out of stone,  
Ached still.  
Completed, she flamed into consciousness  
Which flew into her open-sesame head  
And burned like a phoenix inside.  
He said: "Now you are divine",  
But Galatea screamed for the stillness of stone.

The process of "transformation" from stone to statue is a painful process for Galatea, and is a metaphor of the transformation of women into socially acceptable images by masculine expectation. Galatea's consciousness is like a flame that burns inside her; despite her elevation to "divine" status by her creator, she longs for her former selfhood, the autonomy of the "stillness of stone". Like Ruth Miller, Bezwoda rejects

the masculine construct of "woman" as antithetical to a woman's consciousness and creativity.

Because Eva Bezwoda saw "woman", as represented by Galatea, not as her own person but as a creation of patriarchal society, she expresses a desire to destroy the constraining body. Fire becomes the symbol not only for consciousness, but also for an all-consuming and destructive anger in poem No 1 from *One Hundred and Three Poems*, entitled "Burning":

...  
 Now the fire wraps me round  
 In a shirt of torment  
 That I cannot tear off  
 With my ashen hands.  
 I will taste the bitter smell  
 Of roasting flesh forever.  
 My skin curls from me  
 In ribbons of black crepe.

The anger that permeates her life is like a "shirt of torment" that she cannot remove, and that destroys her. The bizarre image of the skin peeling from the body "in ribbons of black crepe" suggests funerals and death, as though the poet's own body provides the black crepe ribbons for her psychological "death". The image suggests that the fire of consciousness and anger threatens to destroy the woman within the body. A similar sense of physical constraint, and the need to escape, is expressed in poem No 9, where she constructs the image of a woman contained within a plaster cast that covers her entire body:

A woman lived in a house of plaster.  
 She was a big white chip.  
 I suppose she felt wounded all over.  
 Suddenly her fingers started to itch.  
 They felt the first blood pins in them again.  
 They wanted suddenly to do crazy things  
 Like curl, dance on the tops of tables  
 Stick together like pins  
 Then move away and be free;  
 ...

Till the woman sweated and baked  
 In her sticky plaster cast;  
 Till it began to melt off her  
 Slow as candle wax  
 Tormenting as dripping fat  
 And her burning fingers stirred  
 And her fiery head broke free.

Here fire is the means for allowing the woman to break free from the cast that covers her psychological wounding. In this poem, she again emphasises the mental suffering of the woman in images that suggest physical suffering, such as the process of the cast's being melted off "slow as candle wax/tormenting as dripping fat". The imagery in these two poems portrays a woman coming to consciousness of herself, and using this consciousness to break free from constraint. The process is not easy, and the images of physical pain suggest the psychological pain of this renewal.

Closely related to the poems in which she expresses her desire to destroy and break free from the constraints placed on her female body, are those in which she views her body, and those of others, as incomplete. In poem No 10 she invites a partner to join her in a gendered social ritual, dancing, for which they are both ill-equipped. In a surreal dream image she describes how they both "lack" the vital limbs that will enable them successfully to carry out the required movements:

It doesn't matter that I notice now  
 You have no feet  
 Come let's dance  
 You can dance on your hands  
 Take mine, I'll dance without my face  
 Which I have lost somewhere;  
 Only my eyes remain in the back  
 Of my head  
 But usually they are turned inwards  
 We'll weave the music yet  
 Despite what's missing.

The dance in the poem can be read as a metaphor for life and society's requirements that men and women form a partnership akin to a dancing couple. Bezwoda feels that somehow she and her partner "lack" the pieces/limbs to successfully join the dance. In this case the dismembered body is a metaphor for the lack of skills that enable one to function within a social context. The poem concludes with the poet's ironic

determination to succeed in this bizarre dance despite her obvious lacks and deficiencies.

If fire was Eva Bezwoda's symbol for anger, then snow was to be her symbol for its opposite, emotional numbness or freezing. In poem No 16, Bezwoda uses snow and ice imagery to suggest emotional alienation:

...  
 Icicles hang from your mouth  
 Fangs of silent reproaches  
 ...  
                     My heart is a tulip  
 Bleeding red on the snow  
 Will I dare to scratch  
 The ice off your snowman's face  
 Till I touch flesh at last?  
 Red on white is beautiful  
 Raping a house of marble.

The last two lines reveal the confluence of emotions in the poem. Red and white, symbols of anger and cold indifference respectively, are brought together in the statement "Red on white is beautiful". In the final line, the poet's anger is given a sexual dimension, since the combination of symbolic colours produces the image of the rape of "a house of marble". This expresses aggressive sexual anger directed against someone perceived to be cold and indifferent, a "snowman". In the next poem, No 17, Bezwoda locates the snow symbol within the context of the family:

Daddy, daddy are you lost in the snow?  
 Yes I know mother's a long hard snowfield  
 She makes you into white plaster.  
 Father you fool, don't go to sleep  
 In the snow;  
 Drag your drowsy body out of her  
 And hobble over the Alps  
 To Italy, Sicily, anywhere  
 Where the ice-flowers can't grow.

The poem is dense with metaphors and displacements. By locating her poetic drama within the Freudian family, Bezwoda is suggesting certain relationships with the mother and the father. It seems certain that the parental couple in the poem are to be read as metaphors for aspects of the poet's own psyche. The "mother" is the destroyer,



the one responsible for the emotional freezing of the snowfields. The destructive mother wishes to trap and kill the "father", or the animus or male within, by surrounding him with emotionally numbing "white plaster". Before this family murder can occur, Bezwoda urges the father to drag his body out of her – a sexual metaphor – and to escape to a place where he is safe from the "ice-flowers".

The "mother" within is seen as destructive by the poet. In Freudian psychology, the girl child comes to hate the mother because of the mother's relationship with the father, whom she desires to seduce. But the hatred for the mother is also a hatred for the self, for the daughter sees what she will become in the mother, and because patriarchal society disempowers women the girl sees her own disempowerment in the mother. This reading of the relationship between mother and daughter is expressed by Bezwoda in "Mother", one of the poems from *Leave-Taking*:

Your flesh has moulded mine  
 Even to the bite of my teeth  
 And a morning's constipation  
 Mother I am you in silhouette  
 I will always see you standing  
 Transparent in your nightie  
 By the bedroom door  
 I am you in silhouette  
 When I open my mouth  
 You say such surprising things  
 I see you in shop windows  
 Buying groceries, old and asthmatic,  
 Nightly I try to wipe you off with my cold cream  
 I take baths  
 To wash away your menstruation and lust  
 My eyebrows grow together like yours  
 Yes mother I am shaped like you  
 ...

This poem reflects the poet's acknowledgement that much in her life repeats the pattern of her mother's life. She attempts to prevent the process of "becoming the mother", but the tone of the poem suggests the futility of this desire, for in physical terms she is her mother. The rejection of the literal disempowered mother is symbolic, in Bezwoda's poetry, of the rejection of the disempowered feminine within. It is the "father" or the animus that is seen as the source of creativity, and it is this that Bezwoda wishes to protect from the cold destructiveness of the mother.

There are several poems in which Eva Bezwoda elaborates on the idea of the "animus" or the male within as the source of her poetic ability. In her poem No 75, "Man", Bezwoda again perceives the animus to be under threat:

Man of my bitter memories  
 I hear you moan softly in my hospital sleep  
 Tomorrow the surgeon  
 Will scrape you from me  
 In severed nerve threads  
 When my memory, the cancer, is swabbed  
 From my brain  
 O man of my bitter memories

The animus is seen as the part of Bezwoda's psyche that is most vital and creative, yet in order for her to be successfully rehabilitated into society that part of her must be removed by the "surgeon". Bezwoda obviously equated her psychological problems with the dominance in her life of the creative animus, and her deliberate decision to reject the anima, represented by the disempowered "mother". Yet the sheer power of her own animus is also frightening to the poet, for it is a power that she finds difficult to control:

Man of my fear  
 You were the one howl inside my head  
 That I could not stifle  
 Unrecognising I stared at my face  
 And the bright wall in the mirror  
 Till, like a werewolf,  
 You leaped through my sockets  
 And clawed and bit  
 My image to blood.

The image of the "werewolf" suggests that the animus has the power to take over the poet's psyche and transform her into a socially unacceptable being. In order for her to be restored to social acceptability, the "werewolf" must be removed by the psychiatrist or "surgeon":

Tomorrow the priest, the white surgeon,  
 Will sacrifice the werewolves  
 That yell and yell  
 Like babies at my breast.

It seems that for Eva Bezwoda her poetic creativity was closely linked to her mental "illness". The journey inwards, which produced such startling imagery for her poetry, also rendered her incapable of "normal" human interaction. In attempting to "cure" her, the doctors and surgeons, metaphors for psychiatrists and psychologists, were seen to be destroying the very sources of her creativity.

The "mother" in Eva Bezwoda's poetry may be read both as literal mother, the purveyor of gender norms for female behaviour, and as inner "mother", the anima or feminine part of the psyche. But the nurturing role of the mother also means that the symbolic "surgeons" who seek to remove the animus/werewolf may be equated with the mother, who seeks to destroy the father. In this reading, the psychiatrist functions as a displacement for the mother, since he also aims to "nurture" by destroying the animus. The psychiatrist/mother is thus also representative of certain gendered conceptions of what constitutes acceptable feminine behaviour. The anger that Bezwoda projects against the "mother", as against her doctors, may be read in this light. In poem no 26, Bezwoda rejects the way in which the "mother" has taken over her psyche and forced her to conform:

Mother I see you beside me,  
 Snipping me into the dress shape you want,  
 Knitting me into your fine woollen cloth.  
 Your face is the dial of an alarm clock  
 You always tick me the time.  
 Your hands have the suction of cleanliness.  
 They vacuum my rubbish away.  
 Your belly is an enormous washing machine  
 I peep through your naval and see my laundry  
 Swirling astonishingly this way, churning that way  
 To be made clean, clean  
 In your belly waters  
 You sort my drawers out, you scrubbing machine  
 ...

The poem, with its bizarre image of the "mother" as household appliances – vacuum cleaner, washing machine – may be read as a metaphor for the way in which the poet feels her self to have been forced into "feminine" social behaviour patterns by the "mother". The very nature of these patterns is suggested by the comparison of the mother with domestic appliances. The poet is further "snipped" into the "dress shape" that the mother desires, while the mother as metaphoric vacuum cleaner removes all the "rubbish" that is considered unnecessary in the daughter's life. In a strange image

in which the mother's belly is compared to a washing machine, the poet suggests the process of being washed clean and "born" into social conformity. However, the poem may also be read as a metaphor for the processes of the other "mother", the psychiatrist who seeks to "clean up" the patients psyche and so facilitate her "rebirth" into society. The poet rejects both "mothers" and their desire to change her:

Mother, you've been sitting on my tongue  
 Far too long.  
 My lips are exhausted  
 In service to you.  
 Too much I've talked  
 In pretty pictures  
 And formed your glib words  
 Clearly and smoothly  
 Like little pebbles  
 ...  
 Mother of tongues  
 Let me bleed poetry.

The poet clearly prefers to "bleed poetry", rather than to conform by talking "pretty pictures" and producing "glib words".

In another series of poems, Eva Bezwoda directs her anger specifically against the psychiatrist who attempts to "cure" her. In poem No 40 she describes the psychiatrist as a deaf male presence, whom she accuses of voyeurism:

Stonedead, he's made me his ear.  
 And I tell slanders, obscenities  
 Into that dead enamel jug of his.  
 I've become his keyhole  
 For conversations, whispers, intoned words  
 That he can't hear, and that I twist  
 Into buttocks and organs.  
 I tell him that I hear  
 Cockroach jaws nibbling  
 I describe spiders spinning lies  
 And silence  
 I talk of the adventures of sound  
 And, fool, he believes me  
 When all I hear  
 Is the even tread of boredom.

The poet insinuates that the analyst is "stonedeaf" to her real anguish, and prefers to listen to the standard Freudian pattern of "slanders" and "obscenities" which the poet obligingly provides. But she engages in this game with cynicism. She makes it quite clear that she knows how this game is played in her use of imagery: she likens the analyst's ear to an "enamel jug", and herself to a "keyhole", both female sexual symbols in Freudian psychoanalysis. She further provides him with "conversations, whispers, intoned words" which she twists into "buttocks and organs". She knows that Freudian psychoanalysis tends to read the analysand in terms of sexual drives, and so she provides the necessary sexual imagery for the analyst. She also provides him with dark imagery from her subconscious, "cockroach jaws" that nibble, and "spiders" that spin webs. The patient is clearly out of sympathy with her analyst, and she sees the Freudian psychoanalyst as one who listens to the intimate life of another without any real comprehension. The analysand knows the game, she provides what the analyst wants to hear, but for her the process is merely a recitation of boredom.

The same anger and frustration is given an even more violent expression in Poem No 43:

Come with me for the last time, psychiatrist.  
 I'll show you this lily whose throat  
 I'll cut.  
 See, the white lily is spotted, blemished;  
 I squeeze against the white chalice;  
 It becomes a goose's throat I'm pressing;  
 The animal tries to lift its bony white wings over us  
 Panic makes its eye run  
 The knife isn't strong enough  
 For the cords in its throat  
 Still the blood gushes out  
 And psychiatrist, watch, see how things die.

Here, in a bizarre dream sequence, Eva Bezwoda makes use of her symbols of anger – red and white – as she goes through symbolic acts of castration and self-murder which are expressions of her anger against patriarchal society and the Galatea-like self that is the product of such a society. The lily, symbol of female purity, is seen to be blemished and spotted, and so it must be plucked and removed. The lily is a metaphor for women, and the poet sees that the patriarchal image of "woman" is blemished and flawed and so must be removed. But in attempting to destroy this lily, she is also symbolically destroying herself or the self that society has attempted to make of her. The poet reaches out to pluck the lily, but as she does so it transforms into the neck of

a goose. The goose, like the lily, has female connotations, for example, mother goose, the goose that laid the golden egg, and so forth. But the goose image may also be read as a displacement of the literary motif of Leda and the swan, where the "deflowered" Leda is represented by the spotted and blemished lily. The poet is murdering the agent of Leda's, and her own, "deflowering". But she is not strong enough to kill or castrate, if one sees the goose's neck as a phallic symbol. She merely wounds, and blood pours out, red on white, an expression of her psychological anger and frustration.

The anger may be sexual and directed against patriarchal society in general, or it may be specifically directed towards the male psychiatrist whose psychic probing is compared to rape. It is his probing that reveals the patient/lily to be unhealthy, and reduces her, like Leda, to the status of devalued or "blemished" object. Again there is a remarkable confluence of metaphor and emotion in the poem: Bezwoda plays with concepts of sexual/mental purity, anger, rape, castration and murder, all respectable items in the Freudian psychoanalytical baggage, and yet she demands of the psychiatrist not that he interpret her images, but that he see her pain: "..watch, see how things die." The anger present in this encounter between psychiatrist and patient was probably a result of Eva Bezwoda's encounter with the misogynistic nature of Freudian/Jungian psychotherapy. Such therapy is based on the concept of women as "castrated" men, and aims to "heal" women by re-inserting them into a social order where they can function by accepting their domination by the owners of the phallus/penis. Such analysts do not "hear" the actual suffering of women, they hear only what they "see" in voyeuristic terms – the woman's body in relation to that of the man and the woman as castrated, lacking and envious. Such a response to a woman's psychological pain, which is often a direct result of her difficulties in submitting to this Freudian pattern, can only irritate and frustrate the patient, leading to greater anger and pain.

That Eva Bezwoda's "illness" and depression were related to her difficulties in coping with the gender-stereotyping of "woman", as a social ideal, can be deduced from several of her poems. In poem No 73 she writes of the ways in which society produces women to conform to its expectations:

The women sit in private cubicles  
Of their glazed thoughts, under hairdryers.  
The hairdryer buzzes like an aircraft  
Tilting, lifting, inside my ears.  
The hairdryer does ticklish things with my scalp.

The women are hatching  
 A completed woman stares incredulously at her reflection.  
 All wave and hair foam.  
 Our naked eyes meet in the adoring mirror.  
 She's real, manicured doll  
 Tilting towards the exit.  
 I'm not.

In another strange metaphor, Bezwoda sees the hairdressing salon as a place where women are "hatched". The "completed" woman, the "real" woman, is the one who submits to the process of transformation and allows this artificial self to become her "real" self. The poet, on the other hand, who is uneasy with the artifice of being "hatched" into conformity feels herself not to be "real". She thus ironically highlights the distortions inherent in patriarchal ideals of feminine beauty. Bezwoda goes on to criticise the construct of female sexuality that is elevated by the media in patriarchal society:

Her eyes are wide arcs  
 Paris-by-night, they lure men.  
 She's a walking talking Hollywood.  
 Her history's men and men.  
 How she blows smoke.  
 Break her open and she's glib as an egg.  
 Her bell's larder's stocked with sperm.  
 Her face is striptease,  
 Her head's sheer nylon.

Bezwoda here describes the movie goddess of male fantasy who defines herself only in relation to men and sex. She too is considered more real, a "real woman", in comparison with women who battle for identity in a world dominated by unrealistic and distorted images of women. In poem No 79, Bezwoda attacks another masculine image of "woman" and the men who create and subscribe to it:

These men with their yearning eyes  
 No, not yearning for flesh but  
 Baffling lust for something of woman,  
 How well I know them!  
 They nibble like piranha fish  
 At my soul, if only they knew  
 That woman's "soul" isn't a white cow  
 Full of blood and milk.  
 These men with their yearning eyes  
 And their busyness and their sadness  
 How well I know them.

These men yearn for something which is not sex, or "flesh", but for "something of woman" which they cannot define. These unrealistic expectations feed away at the poet's soul, and in anger she asserts that woman's "soul" or inner being is not a "white cow", something sacred to be idolised. The image of "blood and milk", based on the red and white symbols of Bezwoda's anger, also mingles connotations of sexuality and reproduction, woman as virgin and woman as mother, or ideally in terms of patriarchal values, woman as virgin mother, untouched, pure and maternal. It is this idealisation of woman, or woman's supposed essence, that Bezwoda rebels against. It corrodes the souls of ordinary women, who can never be "white cows" or virgin mothers.

The relations between men and women in a gendered society that propagates such unrealistic images of women must be fraught with tension and difficulty. Eva Bezwoda writes of this relationship in terms of a hunt, in which the woman is the prey of the man who attempts to trap her within his own definitions:

He lay with her  
 But she fled from his unfamiliar arms  
 To hide herself in shadow  
 So he became a shadow  
 She camouflaged herself with leaves  
 So he became a bird  
 She hurried into the meekness of a cow  
 So he became a roaring bull  
 She lay silent in a wheatfield  
 So he became the reaper  
 She slipped away from him  
 As water over stones  
 So he built an ark

She caught the night  
 So he shone on her like the moon.  
 She hastened into a girdle of bones  
 And a soft dress of flesh  
 So he became a man.

In each metamorphosis the male assumes a form that is stronger, and so he is able to dominate the female, until at last they take on the forms of man and woman. The imagery in the poem suggests the poet's sense of entrapment. Man is seen as a persecutor, a huntsman in pursuit of his prey. The sense of suffocation and entrapment



by male dominance manifests itself in Eva Bezwoda's poetry as a desire to escape, from the woman's body and also from the woman's role:

A woman's hands always hold something:  
A handbag, a vase, a child, a ring, an idea.  
My hands are tired of holding  
They simply want to fold themselves.

On a crowded bus, I watched a nun's empty hands  
Till I reminded myself that she clutched God.  
My hands are tired of holding  
I'd gladly let them go, and watch a pair of hands  
Run ownerless through the world,  
Scattering cooking pots and flowers and rings.

The rebellious hands are a metaphor for Bezwoda's own desire to cast off the bonds of gender and assert her freedom to be herself.

This brief discussion of Eva Bezwoda's work has aimed to show that as a poet she was angry, frustrated and in psychological pain. Her poems were a vehicle for her to express the nature of that pain and her sense of her own psychological processes. Much of her pain was a result of her struggle for self-definition in the South Africa of the 1960s and 70s, a society in which women's lives were largely defined by patriarchal gender stereotyping. She confronted this stereotyping both in media images that dictated social standards of feminine beauty, and in scholarly studies such as those of Freud and Jung that determined how women would be treated for psychological "illness". Poetry allowed Eva Bezwoda to express her anger and frustration in metaphors and symbols that condensed and displaced deep psychic trauma. But her poems were also prophetic, for the self-destructive urges expressed in Eva Bezwoda's poems, like those of Sylvia Plath, were to be realised in the ultimate self-destructive act – suicide. Yet if suicide can be read as a tragic expression of despair, it may also be read as the final expression of self-determination. The relationship between life, death, and poetry, as a means of determining one's being, is expressed by Eva Bezwoda in poem No 38:

I hymn the sky  
In stanzas of air, wind;  
I stop hymning; the sky collapses  
Like a draughty church, ransacked.

I murmur earth  
 in husky tunnels of soil  
 in dark bubbles of clay;  
 I stop murmuring, and earth is absent  
 Like a world blasted.  
 I shriek fire  
 In crackling tongues of red and burning  
 and fire springs up  
 Quick as a revolution.  
 I stop shrieking. Fire  
 Is snuffed out  
 As though by water.  
 I laugh man  
 in long smears of blood  
 and shining cells.  
 Man rises up,  
 In one hand lifting a knife to the sun  
 In the other clear red wine.  
 I stop laughing;  
 I scream man to dust.

### Notes

1. Lionel Abrahams, *Ruth Miller: Poems, Prose, Plays*, p.12.
2. Ibid, p.166.
3. Ibid, p.12.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Michael Chapman, *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*, p.125.
9. Ibid, p.131.
10. Ibid, p. 151.
11. Michael Chapman, "Ruth Miller: Breaking Silences?", *English Academy Review* 7, 1990, pp.13-14.

12. See, for example, Eva Bezwoda's "Galatea", Jessie Prisman's "Unlike Pygmalion" and "Doll" and Floss M. Jay's "On the Removal of a Sculpture from Pietermaritzburg to Johannesburg: July 1981", all in *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women's Poetry*.
13. Abrahams, *Ruth Miller: Poems, Prose, Plays*, p.158.
14. Ibid, p.159.
15. Ibid.
16. Abrahams, *Ruth Miller: Poems, Prose, Plays*, cover blurb.
17. *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*, p.129.
18. Ibid, p.147.
19. "Ingrid Jonker: In eie woorde" (Ingrid Jonker: In her own words), featuring Laurika Rauch and the National Symphony Orchestra, performed at Sanlam Auditorium, Rand Afrikaans University, 13 November 1993.
20. See for example, Jack Cope, "A Crown of Wild Olives" in *In Memoriam: Ingrid Jonker*, (ed) Jan Rabie, Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1966, p.13.
21. Jonker records this herself in an autobiographical "Lewenskets vir die Vaderland", *Versamelde Werke*, Johannesburg: Perskor, 1975, p.205. Jack Cope repeats the anecdote in "A Crown of Wild Olives", p.18.
22. Introduction to *Ingrid Jonker: Selected Poems*, Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1988, p.5.
23. Jonker, "Lewenskets vir die Vaderland", p.204.
24. Ibid, p.204.
25. Ibid. All translations from Afrikaans into English are my own.
26. Ibid.
27. Jack Cope, "A Crown of Wild Olives", p.11.
28. Ibid, p.13.
29. Ibid, p.12.

30. *Versamelde Werke*, p.211.
31. *Contrast* 4(3), March 1967, p.63.
32. Vincent Swart, *Collected Poems*. Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1981.
33. T.T. Cloete, *Die Afrikaanse Literatuur sedert Sestig*, Cape Town: Nasou, 1980, p.150.
34. Jack Cope, *A Crown of Wild Olives*, p.17.
35. Ibid.
36. Adèle Naudé, "Ingrid Jonker in Translation", *Contrast* 5(3), November 1968, p.101.
37. Jack Cope, "A Crown of Wild Olives", pp.14-15.
38. "Die Bok", in *Versamelde Werke*, pp.197-198.
39. Ibid, p.198.
40. "The Child that Died at Nyanga", *Versamelde Werke*, p.210.
41. "Lewenskets vir die Vaderland", p.205.
42. "The Child that Died at Nyanga", p.211.
43. Ibid, p.211.
44. Ibid, p.211-212.
45. Ibid, p.212.
46. Ibid.
47. Robert Greig, "Two Women", *To the Point*, 21 April 1973, p.56.
48. Robert Greig, "Suffering as Poetic Virtue", *Bolt* No. 8, June 1973, p.37.
49. Michael Fridjohn, "Poetry Applied", *New Nation*, July/August 1973, pp. 27-28.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S POETRY IN SOUTH AFRICA

In South African history the last two decades have been significant for the political transformation of society that has taken place. The 1960s ended with the National party firmly in control and all "subversive" and dissident black voices banned or exiled into silence. This control began to slip in the early 1970s. The events of June 16, 1976 in Soweto were to prove to be a watershed. For the rest of the decade and into the 1980s black opposition politics went from strength to strength, aided by the formation of the UDF (United Democratic Front) alliance and COSATU (the Congress of South African Trade Unions), as well as intensified external pressures such as sanctions. The Nationalist government was eventually forced to relinquish its policy of suppression, and in February 1990 the ANC was unbanned and political life "normalised" in South Africa.

This transformation in racial politics has been accompanied by a nascent realisation that gender transformation is also needed to bring about a completely democratic society. The awareness of gender issues may be related to a growing acceptance of the ideas of international Feminism among South Africa women. Contemporary women poets confront issues of gender in a manner quite unlike that of the poets in the previous chapter. Among all women poets, but especially the black women poets, there is a sense of the strength of women and their ability to challenge sexist stereotyping and assist each other to overcome social limitations.

In the first part of this chapter I will chart the emergence and development of a distinct women's voice within the (race) political poetry of the 1970s and '80s, and show how these women poets are bringing the issues of gender to the fore along with those of race and class. Black women poets have transformed themselves from voiceless "objects" in the poetry of others into subjects of their own poems and poetry. In the second part of the chapter I will examine the work of the exile poets of the 1980s, a period when exile seemed to be a metaphor for the psychological, existential and political alienation of many South African women poets.

(i) **Race, Class, and Gender: The Black Woman as Object/Subject**

Women of my country  
 Mother Africa's loved daughters  
 Black and white  
 we are at war  
 Forces of exploitation  
 degrade mother Africa  
 as well as us, her daughters  
 Her motherly smile is ridiculed  
 ...  
 You shall see liberation  
 We are chained women of Africa  
 We are bound to win  
 Let us fight on  
 Forward ever  
 Backward never.

The history of women's poetry in English in South Africa up to the 1970s is largely the history of the work of white middle-class women. This is hardly surprising, since it is this group of women who have had access to literacy, education, and the facilities – a room of one's own, to quote Virginia Woolf – to enable them to express themselves in this particular literary form. In colonial South Africa of the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries, it was this group who formed part of a literate culture and who traced their poetic heritage back through the poets of England. However, as this study has argued, because of the intrinsic gender discrimination of English literary culture, these women were never accepted into literary tradition. Rather, they developed their own concerns within the formal framework provided by English poetry. Their work focused on the private, inner life – it spoke of their pain, their oppression, and also their joys, within their own particular social context.

There was very little sense of a common cause with black women. White women poets were often aware of their own problems as women, but because of their relatively privileged position in terms of race and class, they failed to realise that gender discrimination knows no barriers and affects *all* women. This failure was not limited to poets, but was endemic in the white community. There has never been a women's movement in South Africa comparable to those in Europe and America. Problems of race, associated with "apartheid" government, have assumed the moral high ground in the fight against oppression in this country. Faced with overwhelming physical evidence of racial oppression – poverty, violence, unemployment, illiteracy – white

women fail to perceive the psychological evidence of their own oppression, or to note that black women suffer gender oppression in their communities as well. Because white women are physically well cared for and because their lives as women are relatively comfortable, they accept their secondary position within a patriarchal society and most are content to be provided for by their men. They take little or no interest in the lives of women on the other side of the socio-economic race/class divide. This was the point made by ANC member Zubeida Jaffer when she reported on interviews she had conducted in various communities in South Africa: "The white women I interviewed were, on the whole, very distant from the problems confronting the majority of South African women. Issues such as birth control and wife-battering seem not to feature prominently on their agendas."<sup>1</sup> Not only did Jaffer find white women to be mostly indifferent to the problems facing the majority of women, they also seemed quite willing to accept their political powerlessness and exclusion: "Their easy acceptance of the fact that they were not likely to be at the negotiating table was not something that I had expected to find."<sup>2</sup>

Since white women have failed historically to identify or make common cause with women of other race and class formations, when these women make rare appearances in their poetry it is usually as exotic objects or objects of compassion. An early colonial poet from Natal, Caroline Goodenough, writing in the 1890s exemplifies the beginnings of this tendency. In "Waiting" she considers a cross-section of Natal women outside of her own social group:

A Zulu woman on the highway,  
     With burden hard to bear;  
 A slender Hindoo following  
     With black dishevelled hair,  
 And gaudy garments fluttering,  
     And jewel at her nose;  
 Her silver anklets tinkle back,  
     And glitter as she goes.

And at a door, soft wistful eyes  
     Of one of Ishmael's race,  
 Look mournfully upon the world,  
     In which she hath no place.  
 O Arab woman, prisoner!  
     O Zulu, bought and sold!  
 O Hindoo Toy! Redemption waits  
     For woman and her world.



Goodenough notes the oppression of these women, but the poem is characterised by its silence on the topic of the oppression of white women. When she speaks of redemption for "woman and her world" it is not entirely clear whether she includes herself. It seems more likely that she expects that black women will be granted the same "rights" as white women in colonial South Africa. This silence is also a feature of her poem "Zulu Girl" where she condemns the custom of lobola whereby women are bought and sold:

Less in value than the kine  
 Gathered in thy father's fold –  
 Thus they deed this life of thine,  
 Chattel bought and sold.

What to them thy broken heart  
 If the cattle fill the kraal!  
 Meekly play thy servile part,  
 Gold is all in all.

Hope not from thy heathen night  
 To emerge to day  
 Men may learn and choose the light,  
 Women must obey.

...

Again it is not entirely clear whether, in the last two lines, she refers only to Zulu women, or to all women. The next stanza is equally problematic:

Of her freedom England boasts,  
 Aye, perchance, that may be true  
 For the men on English coasts  
 Not for such as you.

Does Caroline Goodenough include herself among the "men on English coasts"? The uncertainty arises because she fails to make a clear statement of her own subject position. However, a colonial white woman's attitude towards the black woman is clearly articulated by another poet, Mary Littleward (a librarian in Bloemfontein, writing in the early twentieth century), in her poem "Martha: from the Native Location":

Schooled is she to toil and hardship;  
 Decked in raiment quaintly fine;  
 Turbaned like a crimson tulip;  
 Little henchwoman of mine.

See; she follows, undiscerning,  
 Orders dimly understood;  
 What knows she of white man's learning?  
 Heritrix of servitude.

Yet in her, my handmaid lowly,  
 All our darkest problems meet;  
 All the paths her kinsmen slowly  
 Traced for us with silent feet.

...  
 Serf? or menace? comrade? rival?  
 Nay, we must the title fit;  
 At our gates, the past's survival,  
 Suppliant Mordecais sit.

Much of white women's failure to identify with black women on the grounds of gender may be attributed to their implicit desire to hold on to their class privileges which may be threatened by the black woman. This is revealed in Littleward's inability to find a suitable term for Martha – "Serf? or menace?" relates to the woman's racial identity, while "comrade? rival?" relates to the area of gender identity. The poet cannot be sure whether Martha should be regarded as an ally or a threat. The term "rival" clearly situates this sense of threat within the context of the competition for favours from the ruling group – white men. The reference to the Biblical book of Esther likens Martha to Mordecai, the representative of the conquered Jewish people who sat at the gates of the Persian king Ahasuerus, in faithful service to his conqueror. Likewise, Martha is a reminder of a past in which the white colonists conquered the black people of Africa and forced them into menial positions.

The awareness of the social and gender problems of black women expressed by these poets, however briefly, may have been a result of the strength of the women's suffrage movement in Britain, America and South Africa. This early Feminist movement did much to make ordinary women aware of the topics of gender, although in South Africa the suffrage movement seems to have focused primarily on obtaining the vote for white women. Olive Schreiner dissociated herself from the movement because of its failure to extend its campaign to the rights of black women. She wanted the vote for "the women of the Cape Colony, *all* women of the Cape Colony".<sup>3</sup> It seems that only white women, such as Schreiner – with a sensitivity to the gender implications of economic issues such as labour and prepared to fight for the recognition of women as productive members of society – were able to perceive a common

link between women of different race and class groupings.<sup>4</sup> It is not until 1939 that one again encounters a sense of common struggle in an anonymous poem from the *Garment Worker*. The poem is probably the product of a working-class white woman, a member of the militant Garment Workers Union:

We, women, too join in the fight!  
 We, too, are working and creating  
     the wealth of our land!  
 Half of the people of this land  
     are women –  
 And women, too will play their part  
     in making Africa  
 A land of sunshine, happiness and joy!  
 For our children,  
     for the coming generations  
 Shall not be stifled with the miseries of our lives!  
 For them we fight and build a better life!  
 To lift the burden of oppression  
     of all who toil and slave,  
 We pledge ourselves tonight!  
 All people of this land,  
     be white their colour or be they dark,  
 Have got to live a decent life!  
 And it's our bounden duty to help them all!  
 So, workers join the ranks of unity!  
 Join the ranks of strength!  
 Join the ranks for a better life for all!<sup>5</sup>

The poem, with its rhetorical form, was obviously written as a motivational piece for a trade union meeting. As such it prefigures the militant black trade union poetry of the 1980s. The anonymous poet urges women, as "half the people of the land" to make their presence felt. Yet the poem is not a call specifically for gender action, it is a call for women workers to join their male counterparts in ensuring a better life for their children. What is exceptional is the call for women to unite across the colour line.

The political structures that produced the Garment Workers Union and other militant organisations were suppressed and all but destroyed by the programme of bannings put into action by the Nationalist party government after their political victory in 1948. Their programme of social engineering, known as apartheid, ensured that the divide between white and black was made more distinct. Legislated job reservation ensured that the formerly poor-white working class were uplifted into the middle class. By the 1960s and '70s the working class in South Africa was effectively

black, and the middle class was white. This meant that economic interests were now almost indistinguishable from race interests. In general terms this meant that there was no longer any common economic ground between black women and white women. Equally, legislation such as the Immorality Act and the Mixed Marriages Act ensured that black women were no longer "rivals" or a social threat. The two groups of women perceived each other across a racial divide that produced distorted and unrealistic images, and in which their common gender oppression was all but invisible. The white woman was most likely to perceive her black counterpart as "other", an object from another ethnic and cultural group. This is apparent in Thelma Tyfield's poem "In Passing", where the black woman is seen as an exotic object:

You pass in a skirt's  
Unclouded blue and  
Sweater (scarlet),  
Doek (pale primrose) edging  
A pale brown skin  
And your hair,  
In serried  
Grass-green rollers.

Nature's  
Own stridencies  
Startle, and touch off  
Beauty – and  
You  
Triumph, too –

Unconscious  
As Nature,  
Flashing a  
Cheerful  
Colour-  
Cacophony!

This reduction of a person to a colourful curiosity can only be described as patronising, and demonstrates the white poet's complete failure to comprehend the life behind the colourful image. But this divide worked both ways, black women were equally unable to perceive their white counterparts as women, seeing them only as oppressive "madams". There is anger behind Gladys Thomas's poem "Leave Me Alone", where she blames the white woman for her oppression:

I tear my hungry babe from my breast

To come and care for yours  
 Yours grow up fine  
 But, oh God, not mine  
 From school and beach yours I fetch  
 And wonder if school mine did reach

Your man comes home at night  
 A welcome and delight  
 Wine glass in hand  
 Red chair in front of fire bright  
 To bed you go and make love  
 My bed is empty and cold  
 For all my energy is drained away  
 My man and I too soon feel old

My man comes home body all pain  
 From working all day in sun and rain  
 No woman or son in sight  
 So out again into the night  
 On corners he will stand  
 His wine bottle in hand

Your son tucked up in bed  
 Your man in front of fire red  
 You lay and wait for him in bed  
 My man still not at home  
 My sons in streets still roam

Can you still look me in the eye  
 And ask me what's wrong  
 After you've stripped me to the bone  
 You win and take everything I own  
 And still you want my home  
 What have I done that you won't leave me alone?

Clearly the idyllic existence attributed by the poet to the white woman is an equally distorted picture of the life of white women. It ignores the real powerlessness of white women in economic and political terms. But what is more interesting, in terms of this study, is that as a black woman Gladys Thomas has assumed a subject position within the discourse of poetry. She is no longer the "object" of the white woman poet, she speaks for herself and about herself.

Gladys Thomas was the first woman of colour in South Africa to publish a collection of poems. In 1972 a number of her poems were published, together with

those of fellow Cape Town poet James Matthews, in a volume called *Cry Rage!* (The collection has the distinction of being the first volume of protest poetry to be banned in this country.) In his introduction James Matthews indicates that the poems in their volume, as the title suggests, are intended to convey the poets' anger at the "nightmare" world inhabited by blacks in South Africa: "...The declarations in this book are by a housewife and myself, a man of no account, who refuse to remain silent at all the injustices done to blacks. Our voices are not lone voices crying in the wilderness. At first, I thought we were the only ones voicing our protest but now I know there are other voices, in other rooms, joining in our protest and our words will reach the ears of the christian upholders of western civilization and let them know that we will not be fed on pie in the sky. We shall show our contempt for white man's two-faced morality."<sup>6</sup> As James Matthews indicates, the function of *Cry Rage!* was to express protest and to highlight the injustices under which blacks suffered. At this stage, therefore, Gladys Thomas can be classified as a protest poet. James Matthews describes her as a "housewife"; however this was not intended as dismissive, but to show that she was an ordinary woman – a member of the black working class – just as he is an ordinary man. It would be true to assert however, that in her own context, Gladys Thomas is an extraordinary woman, a pioneer in the field of black women's writing who deserves to have the recognition that she has achieved in Europe and America granted in her own country as well. She was born in Salt River, in Cape Town, in 1935. Apart from *Cry Rage!* she has published poetry in *Exiles Within: 7 South African Poets*; she has also written five plays, two of which were staged in townships on the Cape Flats. Three of these were awarded first prize in *The World* newspaper literary competition, just after it was banned. She has also written short stories which have been published locally and internationally. Her poetry has appeared in Germany, France, Holland, England, Nigeria, the US and China. She was included in the Chicago based KWANZAA Honours List of Black Women writers in 1978. Recently she has become a patron of the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW).

Although Gladys Thomas sees herself primarily as a voice of the oppressed black community, many of her poems express her concern for the oppression of women. But, as in "Leave Me Alone", Thomas ascribes gender oppression within the black community to the ravages of life under apartheid. Her anger is directed primarily against racism in its apartheid manifestations, and the resultant damage – both physical and psychological – to blacks forced to live under the system. In "Fall Tomorrow" she describes the degeneration of the quality of life in a society where even one's home can be taken away at the stroke of a legal pen:

Don't sow a seed  
 Don't paint a wall  
 Tomorrow it will have to fall

Let the dog howl and bark  
 Tomorrow he will  
 Sleep in the dark  
 Let the cock crow  
 Let the hen lay  
 Tomorrow will be their last day

...

Let our sons dazed in eye  
 Rape and steal  
 For they are not allowed to feel  
 Let the men drink  
 Let them fight  
 Let what is said about them  
 Then be right  
 For they are not allowed to think

...

Here Thomas sees rape and brutality against women as one of the consequences of apartheid, where men are not allowed to "feel" or "think", and so lose their basic humanity. (But her analysis of power relations does not extend far enough to demand why black men should turn on black women, or to perceive that rape is one of the ways in which men oppress women.) In her poem "Immoral Love" she looks at the results of love across the colour line, legally prohibited by the Immorality Act and the Mixed Marriages Act. She assumes the persona of a black woman who has conceived a child by a white lover:

To love in fear  
 Is to love like I love.  
 This child now growing in my womb  
 Conceived without response,  
 Your orgasm, your passion!  
 How can I feel our love  
 When I love in fear  
 Fear of the knock on the door  
 Fear of city lights  
 Fear of the blinding torch in our faces  
 Fear of prison walls

...

Hold me in your white arms

We must save our child, my love  
 Take him from this hell, my love  
 Save him from this fear, my love  
 Or must I kill him in my womb!  
 This child must not live this fear  
 Fear to know his father  
 Fear of city lights  
 Fear of the torchlight  
 Fear of prison walls  
 ...

As a "victim" of laws that render even love illegal, the poet knows that only suffering and pain await a child born of parents of different races under apartheid. But her focus is on the anguish of the black woman, who is the primary victim of such legislation if she bears a child, for she cannot legally marry the father of her child or live with him. She must carry the burden of raising her child alone within her own community. That the raising of children in a deprived community is a difficult task is made clear in the poem "My Burden", where Thomas articulates the pain of a woman whose child has died because she has been unable to obtain medical treatment despite her search:

My feet swollen and sore  
 My baby breathes no more  
 Chased away from door to door  
 Stern nurse red-faced and white  
 Too late she shouts  
 There is nothing we can do

My feet swollen and sore  
 My baby breathes no more  
 Chased away from door to door  
 Stern man of law with red face  
 Brass buttons and gold stripes on his coat of grey  
 He too sends me away

My baby's body stiff and heavy  
 I feel that in this body  
 Is all my people's sorrow.  
 God, you with all your promises  
 You said suffer little children  
 Why are our children forgotten  
 How did this long walk come about  
 Or have you lost track of me?



Come take the body from my arms  
 For soon they will break  
 This road is too long  
 With heaviness and sorrow  
 For this baby there is no tomorrow.

The poem highlights the inhumanity of the system; the woman is probably too poor to afford a doctor, but when she eventually seeks help she is angrily told she is "too late". Even the "man of law" – a policeman, one assumes – is "stern" and offers no assistance. The woman feels that even God has forsaken her.

The protest poetry written by Gladys Thomas and others within the black community – men such as Mbuyiseni Mtshali, Mongane Serote, Mafika Gwala and Sipho Sepamla – was aimed at foregrounding the injustices of apartheid and was directed at a white readership, "the Christian upholders of western civilisation" as James Matthews ironically termed his target audience. But protest poetry depicted the black man and woman as victims and perpetuated the concept of black powerlessness. As the 1970s progressed, and the doctrines of Black Consciousness as expounded by Steve Biko made deeper inroads into black thinking, black writers began to change the way in which they wrote and the topics about which they wrote. The black poetry phenomenon of the 1970s has been extensively documented elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> In terms of this study it is perhaps sufficient to note that the events of 1976 and the death of Steve Biko were instrumental in bringing about a change in writing practice. Black poets began to write for their own communities, they began to empower blacks in their work, to show them as heroic resisters, determined to end apartheid and achieve freedom, in a bloody and violent revolution if necessary. The poets began to write a poetry of resistance – rhetorical, inflammatory, and based on the public African tradition of oral poetry rather than the hermetic western tradition of the lyric poem.

This change of tone and attitude is evident in Thomas's second series of poems, published in *Exiles from Within*. She calls these her "riot poems", since they were written for and about the events of June 16, 1976 in Soweto. In her "Poet's Prologue" she reaffirms her commitment to speak as a voice of the community:

I write these poems  
 to recall an experience,  
 to reveal what I see,  
 to express what I feel.  
 I write about life

observing our people from day to day

...

What she sees in this role of observer is anger. In "Soweto June 1976" she writes in the first person plural, identifying herself with the people concerned in the uprising:

The sun rose to give us light  
in Soweto  
We started our day like any other day  
in Soweto  
Starving, working, dying, slaving  
whoring, thieving, drinking  
existing the way you want us to  
in Soweto

But this day, unlike any other day,  
our students came in silent protest and prayer  
"We will not speak your tongue,"  
in Soweto

You knew the fire  
smouldering beneath our angry souls  
in Soweto  
You should've stayed away that day  
and left our students in protest and prayer,  
in Soweto

So with your guns you shot them down!  
You started our fire,  
let out our hatred and desire  
in Soweto

...

And as we count our dead,  
our courage, dignity and sorrow,  
your day is dark,  
we don't forgive,  
we don't forget!  
Let the sun rise to light our tomorrows,  
in Soweto

Using the repetitive rhythmic device of the refrain – common in oral poetry – Thomas identifies June 16 1976 as the moment when "hatred and desire" were "let out" to fuel the "fire" of aspirations. The revolutionary rhetoric of this poem is contrasted with the gentler, though no less determined, elegy for Steve Biko, "Lilies Will Grow":

...

Where he walked  
 lilies will grow  
 and voices that once cried,  
 will sound sweet and soft.  
 Our footsteps will pass gently  
 where he walked.

He, Stephen Biko  
 walks among us no more  
 where he walked  
 lilies will grow  
 and we shall hear our children's laughter!

But it is "Winter Lament" that expresses the strength that Thomas wishes to instill in black women, a strength born of defiance and courage and the will to be freed from the effects of oppression:

You take my man from my bed,  
 you take the cover from my head,  
 you strip me naked  
 while the winter rain lashes down  
 torrents of tears.  
 But in my nakedness  
 I've rejected fear;  
 you've scourged me  
 and still I've survived.

I'll be strong now,  
 I'll feel no fear  
 for the day draws near  
 when I'll be with him.  
 I shall be covered  
 and protected;  
 the evil purged,  
 I shall be free,  
 free at last!

As a speaking subject within the discourse of poetry, Gladys Thomas speaks for "woman" who is black, who is oppressed, who suffers, but who is also resourceful, courageous and determined. If white masculine society defines her as "other" and object in terms of race, class, and gender, in poetry she, in turn, defines herself as subject, a voice that speaks and functions to express its desire to be the agent of "her"

liberation, even if, at this stage, the liberation is only envisioned in terms of race and class.

The second black woman poet to publish a collection in the early 1970s was Jennifer Davids, whose volume *Searching for Words* appeared in 1974 in the Mantis African Poets series under the David Philip imprint. As a poet, Davids perceived her role very differently to Gladys Thomas: she is a poet of the inner life rather than of protest politics, she inscribes herself within the tradition of western poetry rather than that of African protest and resistance. This may be attributed to the fact that Davids is an educated and relatively privileged woman. Born in 1945, she grew up in Cape Town; after matriculating she trained as a teacher. She began writing poetry at the age of 14, and from 1966 published poems in magazines such as *Contrast*, *Seismograph*, *New Coin*, *Worm* and *New Nation*. She lived in London from 1969 to 1972, teaching for some time at a school in Southwark before returning to Cape Town. In class terms, it is probably correct to say that Davids does not identify with the working class, and that her creative and intellectual interests have led her to adopt middle-class modes of writing. Of her creative practice, she says: "I think living for me is a sort of distillation process and the poems are like crystals I've formed."<sup>8</sup> She lists her poetic influences as follows: "...At first mainly the psalms, hymns and canticles of the church, and Shakespeare. I read poetry at random – good and bad – until through the diversity of all this came T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas ... After Eliot and Thomas I found Edwin Muir, Blake and Rilke."<sup>9</sup> Apart from these Anglo-American sources, Davids also lists several South African influences, which include women poets: "The five I mentioned earlier and others like Hopkins, Cummings, Sydney Clouts, Denise Levertov, Ingrid Jonker, Ruth Miller, Sylvia Plath [were important to me]."<sup>10</sup> It is clear that the subject position or speaking voice that Davids assumes is located within the dominant (white) tradition, and that she feels no particular pressure, in terms of race, to inscribe her voice within the discourse of racial protest. Rather, she views poetry as a distillation of experience, and a craft or skill to be acquired and perfected. (This view of poetry may account for the fact that to date Davids is the only black woman poet to have had a collection published by a "white" publishing house in South Africa.)

The writing style that Jennifer Davids adopts is that of free verse, often in the typographical format of Americans such as Cummings and Levertov; she also relies extensively on images and metaphors to convey her ideas. This can be seen in her poem "This Wilderness":

All around this coast  
 crests come crumbling  
 from far out  
 where acute codes beat  
 and flash sun on sea  
 flung  
 here such shining  
 assaults

And how the wind shapes  
 slow and quick  
 mountains dunes  
 gulls blind in it

blind the tension  
 and poems perilous

as the edge of Africa breaks and glistens  
 ...

But if, as I have argued, Davids' work is derivative, she is also aware of the need to find a means of expression that is her own. In "Searching for Words", discussed earlier in Chapter Three, she indicated the difficulty in finding "words" or a style that would suit her as a black (woman) poet. She indicates too that her inspiration must come from within her own (black) community. In "As if this were Brightness" she uses the metaphor of a journey through a forest to describe her journey towards a personal and authentic creative energy, symbolised by the sun:

...  
 the inch by inch  
 struggle for a clearing  
 where I'll find  
 the voice I clearly hear  
 the only voice I want  
 of an up-moving sun  
 breaking my horizon

Another poem on the subject of creativity, "Watching the Men Planing Wood in a Factory Yard", is of special interest since it takes up Ruth Miller's metaphor, expressed in "Lament for Poets", of the poet as carpenter:

At first encounter the ugly skeleton  
 of iron and the cruelty  
 of the wheel's teeth.  
 But somehow you realise  
 you cannot know it like this

Like this it is dead,  
 a bulk of shadows,  
 which even the free  
 falling spring light  
 cannot bring to life.  
 Only you with your hands  
 can do it.

It takes a long time  
 to know your machine,  
 and lots of work  
 to really enter into it,  
 to allow it the power  
 but never to lose control

...  
 Plane the splinters  
 from this wood  
 until it gleams  
 like a long beam of the sun.

Despite her focus on self-reflexive and allusive poetry, Davids' work is not entirely without a political dimension. In terms of the politics of race her poem "For Albert Luthuli" reveals the poet's sympathy and support for Luthuli, and possibly the policies of the ANC with which Luthuli was associated. In this poem Davids again uses the sun as a metaphor of creative energy:

You a fragment of the sun  
 go turn the world  
 in the long strength  
 of your fingers

Bounded  
 you gave me  
 knowledge of freedom

Silenced  
 you taught me  
 how to speak

...  
 Walk now father  
 unchecked  
 from sun to sun

In terms of the politics of gender, the feminine aspect of Davids' work is revealed in those poems where she shows a sensitivity to the world of women, such as "Poem for my Mother", where she considers the psychological divide between her mother and herself on the issue of her creativity, and "From Deep In" where she identifies with the life and suffering of Ingrid Jonker. In "Given Dark" she writes with Ingrid Jonker in mind, for the poem uses similar imagery to that employed by Jonker in "Pregnant Woman":

Things breathe thickly  
in dark and black  
thick-trunked milkwood  
throws that stirring  
and stillness  
onto ground and wall

clots the dark  
deeper more throbbing  
in bushes  
and other trees  
ease it all up and out  
in the warp and weft  
of sound

I'm in it  
my blood and breath  
all my tangled pulse  
ease with the ache  
of sensing as I walk  
stones and stars

Like Jonker, Davids sees herself as caught up in flux and process of life, but where Jonker characterised life as a "sewer", Davids finds that the "dark" provides an exciting journey for the senses of the poet. Another aspect of Jennifer Davids' work is glimpsed in "Classroom S.E. 5, 4 p.m."; here we encounter Davids the schoolteacher:

On the point of leaving you  
brusquely turn back towards me  
beginning to say  
the fine axis of your spine  
taut with hesitation

I'm impatient to go  
but stay remembering another  
child's "now it's too late"

How speaking takes time  
 and listening's this  
     huge space  
 of waiting  
 for a minute an hour  
     perhaps forever  
 with inflections of gesture  
     body voice  
 and stillness

And myself needing  
 the tense handful of words  
     you stretch out

Dauids speaks of a symbiotic relationship between teacher and pupil – the woman teacher needs to be able to nurture and care, while the child needs the sensitive ear of the teacher.

While Gladys Thomas and Jennifer Davids were the only black women poets to be published in the early 1970s, in the latter part of the decade more opportunities for black women poets, especially working-class black women poets, became available with the advent of *Staffrider* magazine in 1978. *Staffrider* was established by Ravan Press in response to the growing culture of literary activism in the black townships after 1976. The first editor, Mike Kirkwood, describes the aims of the journal: "I wanted Ravan to have a literary magazine that would respond to the new creative forces inside South Africa ... We wanted it to carry black work without appearing to indulge in a kind of tokenism, picking up, in other words, a black writer as a 'voice' that a predominantly white readership should 'listen to'. We wanted a magazine that carried black writing to black readers as well as white..."<sup>11</sup> *Staffrider's* aim was also to "express the cultural forces that rests [sic] outside the institutional framework", and as such it did not have a single editor applying a policy of "standards".<sup>12</sup> Rather, its editorial committee selected work to be published on the basis of the belief that the magazine must function as "a vehicle for a great number of writers rather than only for established literary figures".<sup>13</sup> The editorial committee, apart from Mike Kirkwood, consisted of practising writers and activists such as Mothobi Mutloatse, Jaki Serote, Matsemela Manaka, Chris Van Wyk, and more recently, Andries Oliphant who is the present editor. Despite the male control of *Staffrider*, a number of black women submitted poems and were published.



The work published by black women poets in *Staffrider* in the late 1970s and early 1980s can be described as protest poetry, but it carries an awareness of the suffering specific to women as mothers. In the manner of women's protest poetry initiated by Gladys Thomas, these women focus on racial oppression as the source of their suffering. In "My Tears" for example, Monoko Nchwe speaks of the pain of being a mother merely to deliver victims of oppression:

My life is at stake  
 My nipples are aching  
 My heart is pounding  
 My breast is swelling

I was happy for a moment  
 When pains of labour arrived  
 I thought I was delivering a baby  
 But it was a victim of oppression.

Nchwe does not identify the sex of the child, so the oppression she writes of is not gender but racial oppression. The sentiments she expresses are echoed by Boitumelo Makhema Mofokeng in her poem "A Mother's Cry":

Here I stand  
 Here I stand  
 With no child in sight  
 Did I conceive to throw away?

My children have gone to the towns  
 To seek bread  
 They never returned  
 They went to the mines  
 To dig gold  
 They died in Shaft 14  
 They went to the mills  
 They died in the grinding stones  
 They went to ISCOR  
 Their hands were guillotined  
 My children  
 Children of blood, blood of my children

Mofokeng assumes the subject position of a woman who has lost her children to the labour system of apartheid South Africa, and it is clear that this woman is a symbol of all black mothers in the country. But the black woman poet, aware of her status a

victim of race and class oppression, also knows that she must develop a certain strength, as Winnie Morolo notes in "Courage, African Woman":

...  
 I, African woman, responsible for her  
     family  
 Used to bitterness in life  
 I, woman alone  
 Nkgoleleng banake – Nkgoleleng  
     ba Africa

Courage I must not lose  
 Hopeful I am  
 That these children of mine  
 Will grow to be  
 Brave heroes  
 To lead their oppressed nation  
 Nkgoleleng banake – Nkgoleleng  
     ba Africa.

Morolo reflects also an optimism that is not found in the work of Nchwe and Mofokeng, indicating the movement from "victim" to agent of change that marks the transition from protest poetry to a poetry of resistance. There are, however, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a few poems that indicate a protean awareness that gender oppression is something that needs to be confronted within the black community. In "My Agony", Sizakele Ndlovu writes of the way in which she has been abused and exploited by a black man:

My husband-to-be has forgotten me  
 He no longer comes to me  
 For I'm disfigured.  
 I'll have a baby  
 Who will call me mom.  
 But who will it call Dad?  
 I hate love that drove me into this  
 For now it's no more.  
 It is so disappointing  
 For the father claims not to be one.  
 He is irresponsible  
 He has exploited me.  
 But I was not aware,  
 For he used to kiss me.

Black women such as Ndlovu recognise that it is not only racial oppression that causes suffering, but also gender oppression that originates within their own homes and communities. A similar point is made by Tembeka Mbobo, whose poem "Untitled" speaks of the assumptions that are made about women:

Chained to womanhood  
I couldn't fight nor try nor win  
— they thought

Unsupported I should fall  
and rise and fall  
— they perceived

Unsecured I would call  
and cry and beg  
— they assumed.

Deserted I couldn't mend  
and build and  
— spread growth.

They didn't know me ...  
They may have thought  
I was just ...  
a  
woman!

Mbobo challenges the gendered concept of "woman" as weak, passive, dependent, and subject to the whims of men. Rather she argues for, indeed demands, recognition of her dignity and strength.

In 1987 *Staffrider* published a selection of poems by women poets to commemorate Women's Day – August 9th. This is the anniversary of the women's march on the Union Buildings in 1956. The poems were mostly taken from the anthology *Malibongwe: ANC Women: Poetry is also their weapon*, which was banned at the time. In these poems the women poets assume a subject position that is defiant and resistant, they speak for and about "woman" who is heroic, strong, and politicised. In "The Great Day – August 9th" Jumaimah Motaung recounts the events of August 9th 1956:

Your mother, my mother  
 Our mothers,  
 They heard the call  
 They came together and shared ideas  
 They all had one aim in mind  
 To show the regime  
 They were not what the regime thought they were – robots.

One husband might have reprimanded his wife,  
 "What do you people think you are up to?"  
 And the wife might have answered bravely,  
 "We know our aims and objectives  
 We mean to carry them out"  
 Your mother and my mother

The day dawned  
 Staunch ...  
 "To the Union Buildings"  
 They had heard the commanding tone  
 And indeed they went  
 Carrying us on their backs  
 Gallant heroes of the time  
 Courageous they were  
 Women from all walks of life  
 Your mother, my mother  
 Our mothers.

The language is awkward, and often clumsy and clichéd, but the poet uses it nevertheless as a medium to express her sense of continuity with the women who were "our mothers". The use of political slogans and jargon, such as "regime" and "we know our aims and objectives" may detract from the poem's value to the reader who expects the so-called "neutral" diction of middle-class English poetry, but it does serve to inscribe the black woman poet within the discourse of liberation politics. These same characteristics can be seen in Duduzile Ndelu's "Fighting Women", where the heroic spirit of resistance within women is praised:

Brilliant daughter of Africa  
 Fighting women of our land  
 Hunted across the country  
 Once  
 By ever frenzied Special Branch hiding behind law  
 Who now have their pound of flesh behind bars  
 Their pound of flesh on scales of blood behind walls of writing  
 But still Dorothy, age-old African victim and victor  
 You instill fear in their hearts.

Fearless sister  
 Locked in a barbed Barberton prison  
 Where people live and die  
 Spending stabbing days  
 Entangled nights  
 In the silent cell of augered hell  
 ...  
 Keep fighting, Dorothy, keep fighting  
 Tomorrow we'll stand united  
 Hand in hand comradely  
 Holding the dream by the hand  
 In a liberated South Africa ...

Susan Lamu also writes in praise of a heroic woman, in this case the white activist Helen Joseph, in her poem "Dedication":

Mother of freedom Helen  
 At seventy-three still a threat  
 What savagery aimed against her  
 Bullets, batons, shattering windows  
  
 Helen Joseph has defeated aggression,  
 Her soul is free from racial contamination,  
 Mother, lover of freedom  
 ...

Lamu identifies Helen Joseph as a "mother" in the struggle for liberation, across racial lines, and so includes her in the community of heroic South African women. Dee September, on the other hand, writes of an issue that affects many African women, but is seldom articulated in poetry. Her poem "Refugee Mother" expresses the emotions of the woman who must care for her offspring in the midst of war:

...  
 she forgets her name – forgets the clock  
 the scorching sun – the long dusty road  
 and remembers only that she is Mother  
 with a vacant mielie bowl in hand  
 and a swollen belly of sadness  
 in a desert of dark grieving

in the restless nights of war  
 a gape of hungry mouths  
 suck at her sagging breasts  
 for a morsel of freedom  
 lick her empty fingers  
 for the taste of peace

and she remembers only  
 that she is Mother  
 to the many children of hope  
 for the children of a new age  
 creating history from her hidden tears  
 writing history in the blood of our fallen heroes.

Here the black woman is seen as the displaced victim of a war, but the poet speaks for a belief that such women are also "creating history" through their endurance and strength.

But apart from publishing women's poetry, *Staffrider* was also aware of the need to foster women's writing equally with that of men. The November/December 1979 issue contained a piece entitled "Women Writers Speak" which consisted mainly of an interview with poet Manoko Nchwe, conducted by fellow woman poet Boitumelo Mofokeng. Nchwe's words reflect many of the attitudes towards women and women's writing that were current in the black community in the late 1970s and early '80s. She sees the black woman writer in the same way as Gladys Thomas, as the voice of "woman" within black society: "A writer can never write outside her society. She cannot write about people or their lives unless she shares that life with them ... I become part of the life of a woman who is dying gradually, leaving her children to the outside world. I step into her shoes to share her grief over the loss of her husband, children or property. I hate myself if I am easily defeated by external forces."<sup>14</sup> Nchwe also encourages women to develop inner strength: "A woman writer must take a valiant self-reliant stand which in no way shall be taken to overthrow men."<sup>15</sup> Her concern with not being perceived as wanting to "overthrow men" links up with her comment on the ideology of feminism or "women's liberation": "The ideology of women's liberation is not yet clearly understood by a great number of our women, and how this ideology combines with our distorted culture I do not know."<sup>16</sup> Yet, in spite of her hesitance in defining women's liberation within her own cultural context, Nchwe realises that gender liberation must be a part of the struggle for "total liberation": "Women's liberation is beyond the relationship between man and woman. It is beyond being freed from man's oppression, but it is the first phase of our struggle to reaffirm our role

in the struggle for total liberation."<sup>17</sup> Nchwe is hesitant to declare herself a feminist, but nevertheless she is able to perceive that "women's liberation" must be part of the black woman's struggle for total liberation, and that this must be expressed in the poetry of black women poets.

The next edition of *Staffrider*, February 1980, contained a response to "Women Writers Speak" by Gcina Mhlope (under the name of Nokugcina Sigwili). Titled "Men are always women's children", the piece expresses what may be termed a feminist awareness of the need for feminine solidarity and mutual support:

It is very important for women to write what they feel. Really, we need more writing from women ... we should come together as women and try to do some creative writing – I mean writing that will help or encourage other people who might become our fellow writers in the future ... we need each other, for we depend on each other's strength ...<sup>18</sup>

Mhlope is aware that within a masculine society women need each other, and that they derive their strength, as women and as writers, from each other.

*Staffrider* magazine thus provided a forum for black women writers, where they could publish their work, and at times, their views on their creativity. It must be stressed, however, that women writers and poets were always a minority, and that their concerns were perceived as secondary to the wider issues of social liberation in terms of race and class. This probably accounts for the fact that no women poets were included in the publication *Ten Years of Staffrider*, an anthology of work from the magazine published in 1988 to celebrate its first decade. Boitumelo Mofokeng notes the exclusion and silencing of women in her essay "Where are the Women?":

*Ten Years of Staffrider* is the history of a magazine, of the people who established it, the writers who published in it, and of course of its effect on the development of literature in South Africa in the years 1978-1988.

As it stands, it is a sad history, at least for me, because it suggests that women's contribution in that period was a very small, almost non-existent one. But the truth is that women did write for *Staffrider* and almost all of them have been excluded from this anthology. No reason can be sufficient to justify their exclusion: its effect has been to deny them not only the recognition which should belong to them as writers of our times, but their rightful place in the history of the development of our culture. The international world has been denied the opportunity of knowing and understanding the role of women writers, especially black women writers, in South Africa ... We have heard much in the last few years, about the

importance of women's "Breaking the Silence"; these women who wrote and performed their work have broken it. But this anthology, which ignores or forgets their work has been reimposing silence on them...<sup>19</sup>

Mofokeng suggests her own reasons for this silencing of women's voices: "Exclusion of women writers also suggests that their work was considered irrelevant or insufficiently professional for re-publication ... Those women who are included are certainly worthy of respect, and I don't want to be misinterpreted when I say that to idolise established writers and ignore the up-and-coming is a mistaken editorial policy. The anthology most unfortunately leads us to ask whether considerations of race and sex, which we have worked so hard to destroy, have been applied. Distinctions between established and non-established writers are finally class distinctions, and we do not want to be driven back to them."<sup>20</sup> Mofokeng implies that the exclusion of black women writers from the *Staffrider* anthology, (except for the established prose writer, Miriam Tlali), is an issue of race and sex discrimination. However, Mofokeng also recognises this as class discrimination: "established" writers are generally accepted into the established tradition, the "non-established" voices generally belong to the newly articulate black working-class (women) writers. But Mofokeng possibly also means to suggest, as do Marxist feminists, that women are an oppressed class; by labelling their work "irrelevant" or "insufficiently professional" the male editors are oppressing (black) women, as a class, in the same way that the privileged middle class oppresses the working class.

While *Staffrider* continued to appear in the 1980s and to publish women's work, the focus of creative energy in the mid to late 1980s had shifted away from *Staffrider* and the informal writer's groups it supported, to the newly formed cultural sections of the highly organised and politicised trade union movement, associated with the UDF alliance and the then still banned ANC. The trade unions operated under the umbrella of FOSATU (Federation of South African Trade Unions) until the establishment, in November 1985, of COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions). Fosatu, and then Cosatu, considered culture to be an important part of the political struggle. Cultural wings were established to promote the work of "cultural activists" and "cultural workers" as writers came to be known. Among the most active of the cultural workers is Nise Malange, who, along with fellow male writers Alfred Temba Qabula and Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo, was instrumental in helping to create the Durban Workers Cultural Local and the Trade Union and Cultural Centre at Clairwood. Astrid Von Kotze outlines the aims of the working-class culture fostered by these bodies:



There is a long history of working-class struggle in South Africa. But it is only over the last few years that workers have organised to fight their oppression on the cultural front. In their poems and plays and songs they put forward their own views about how they see the world and how they would like to change it. They tell stories of their exploitation, they talk about their history of struggle against oppression and about their organisations and their leaders. They have begun to take culture out of the hands of the establishment and to create new forms that are meaningful to the democratic forces who are working for change.<sup>21</sup>

The most important cultural form used by these worker groups is that of drama. They create, usually by means of workshop participation, plays that highlight instances of oppression and exploitation in the workplace. These plays are performed as a means of motivating workers to join in the political struggle. However, while these plays are, in a real sense, protest theatre, they never portray the worker as victim: "This is an important feature of worker plays – the 'heroes' are exploited and abused, but they are never shown as defeated or crushed. The notion of a depressed 'down-trodden' work force is as unacceptable to the makers of plays as it would be to the audience."<sup>22</sup> The worker play can be seen as an instrument of political resistance to be used in the struggle for a democratic society. However, as Von Kotze also notes, this movement has been dominated by men: "Most of the workers who have contributed to this process are men. Women have participated on a sporadic rather than a regular basis. Few women have participated in the creative workshops and performances, and equally few go to the events. This is not surprising: few women are actively involved in organisations in general."<sup>23</sup> Von Kotze quotes a Cosatu document which expresses that organisation's awareness that issues of gender have not yet been taken up by the membership of the unions: "Generally the broad issues raised with the rise of the woman's liberation movement internationally have not taken root among the rank and file of progressive organisations. In trade unions particularly – except for a thin layer of worker leadership – there is an alarming lack of awareness of the oppression of women and the old chauvinist traditions are staunchly defended."<sup>24</sup>

In this context Nise Malange represents an exceptional feminine energy: she was an integral part of the formation of the worker cultural bodies in Durban, she has participated in many of the plays, she reads her own poetry at trade union meetings, and has published several of her poems in *Black Mamba Rising*, an anthology of poetry produced by writers associated with the trade union movement. Malange was born in Clovelly near Cape Town in 1960. She grew up in a one-room shack there, and later at

Vrygrond. Because she was the child of an "African" father and a "Coloured" mother, she suffered under race classification legislation and the Group Areas Act. She was educated first at a "coloured" school at Elsies River, and then at Nyanga East. But her education was interrupted in 1975 by political tensions when her father sent her to his family in the Transkei to get her away from dangerous township influences. After the 1976 rebellion she returned to Cape Town, where she lived through the 1977 student rebellion. She was then sent to the Ciskei to resume her education, but political problems were encountered there, and by 1981 she was back in Cape Town. In 1982 she moved to Howick in Natal to stay with other members of her family. In 1983 she began working for the trade unions in Durban and became an organiser for the Transport and General Workers Union. She presently works for Natal University, Durban, in their "Culture and Working Life" project.

Nise Malange is a product of her time – a young woman whose life and education have been shaped, and disrupted, by the effects of apartheid. She has become a member of the progressive movements in order to fight against her oppression, and she uses her literary abilities to contribute to the struggle for liberation in terms of race, class and gender. The poems published in *Black Mamba Rising* were created to be read at union meetings, and as such are focused on the politics of race and class. In "Today" for example, she lists the male heroes of the struggle as examples for her audience:

Everyone who has died  
Is here today  
Those who died in the struggle of the people  
Are here  
Singing with us –  
They are holding our hands,  
Just that touch  
Moving through all our bodies  
Like a bloodstream

Biko  
Is here today  
Neil Aggett  
Who died for the liberation of workers  
Is here today  
Ephraim Shabalala  
Who died  
The system's victim  
Is here today

Andries Raditsela  
 Who died  
 For us all  
 Is here today,  
 With us  
 Sharing  
 This day with us.  
 ...

Malange uses the rhythmic repetitions of African oral poetry to generate increasing tension, leading up to her poetic climax:

The oppressors, the killers  
 The murderers, assassins  
 The traitors, the impimpis  
 All those who were against our people's freedom  
 – Are wandering among us  
 They are looking closely  
 Into our eyes  
 They want to speak  
 To us about what they have done  
 But there is no way for us  
 To be aware of their presence

Away oppressor  
 Away traitor  
 Go away  
 Go away  
 All those who were against peace and justice  
 Must go away from us today.  
 Today!

The poem relies on rhetoric and oral delivery for its impact. It uses political slogans and labels – oppressors, assassins – so that the audience, familiar with the jargon of progressive politics, can identify with the sentiments expressed by the poet. This is not a poetry of subtle nuance and complex metaphor – it is strong, direct, persuasive, and openly politicised. It is, above all, functional: it is praise poetry and as such is used to establish a sense of continuity and community with the organisation and its fallen hero/warriors.

Nise Malange uses the same oral form, with its purpose of stirring emotion, to motivate women to fight against oppression that is specific to them as women. Her poem "Long Live Women", published in *Breaking the Silence*, is dedicated "to all the women of our land":

LONG LIVE WOMEN – LONG LIVE THE MOTHERS OF THIS EARTH

Without you, what will this earth look like?  
 You have given joy and beauty in this earth  
 You have given birth to the leaders of this earth  
 and they have robbed you of your rights  
 Don't cry, don't cry women.  
 History will judge them

When I talk to women – words become stuck in my throat  
 Because I am woman  
 Because we are women we cannot allow exploitation  
 We cannot fold our arms and pray whilst our country is in a state of  
 collapsing.

We cannot sit behind whilst our kids, brothers and sisters are dying in the  
 streets  
 Whilst our mothers and sisters are sentenced to long term imprisonment  
 Whilst they are charged for treason  
 Whilst they are brutally killed by cowards  
 Whilst country wide we are fed with propaganda

Probably all the meetings and organisations will be silenced and my voice  
 will not reach you:  
 It does not matter  
 You will continue to hear me, I will always be beside you and my memory  
 will always be loyal to you  
 And we will overcome this grey and bitter moment where our mothers and  
 sisters are buried alive

Let's stand up and fight!  
 I am talking to you women of our country,  
 to the peasant women who believed in the struggle for equal rights,  
 to the working women who worked more,  
 to the mothers who knew of our concern for her children,  
 to the women who have sacrificed their lives for our rights.

The invocation in the last stanza is for women to "stand up and fight", not only for rights associated with race and class, but also for their rights as women. In "Nightshift Mother", also published in *Breaking the Silence*, Malange highlights the way in which society subjects black women to the triple oppression of race, class, and gender:

Left with a double load  
 at home  
 my children left uncared

Anxiety

at work  
my boss insists we should  
be grateful for the opportunities  
he gives women to be exploited

Anxiety

And I am stranded with these loads  
this "nightshift job" which brings home pittance

And I am forced to take on nightshift cleaning  
because I have no other training  
And I feel forced because I am a single mother  
with no place to place my children in the day  
And I feel worn  
as sleep is a gone out memory  
As I have to care for the young ones each and every day.

...

But in this poem too, Malange urges women to unite against their common exploitation:

...

And we  
unmarried mothers, widows,  
elder women, migrants, but always  
mothers.

We are  
cleaning and cleaning  
lift each other off our knees  
and fight our exploitation.

In both poems Malange confirms that working-class women must unite in order to combat their oppression and "lift each other off [their] knees". In both poems she uses the form of the praise poem, which is also a part of the oral tradition of black women, to motivate contemporary black women to political action. In her poetry, Nise Malange adopts the subject position of the woman as cultural and political activist, concerned to combat *all* forms of oppression, including gender oppression.

Both Nise Malange and her Johannesburg-based contemporary, Boitumelo Mofokeng, are also members of COSAW (the Congress of South African Writers). Cosaw was formed as the organising body for progressive writers in South Africa. One of its aims is "to promote non-racial and non-sexist" literature. It also aims to promote the links between the writer and the community, as is noted in the constitution:

We recognise that writers, and culture workers generally, are products of and belong to the community. As such, they have a responsibility to serve the community.

We recognise the critical role that literature and the other arts must play as instruments in the struggle for liberation.

As part of the liberation struggle, we acknowledge the central role played by the mass democratic movement and worker organisations in the struggle for liberation. The development of our culture must reflect this central role.<sup>25</sup>

Cosaw aligns itself with the "struggle for liberation" and openly admits its political agenda. It also recognises that it must combat sexism and gender discrimination as part of its larger project. At the 1989 AGM a resolution was passed to form a Women's Forum to address issues that affect women writers. Boitumelo Mofokeng was elected as the first convener of the Women's Forum. In 1988 Cosaw devoted its AGM to the topic of women's writing, collecting the proceedings into a publication entitled *Buang Basadi/Khulumani Makhosikazi/Women Speak*. Many women poets are associated with Cosaw, the most exceptional being Transvaal-based Ndahleni Radebe, and the Cape Town poet Mavis Smallberg. Radebe writes strong poetry, often using free verse and the rhythms of oral poetry, as in "Woman", a poem that is also rich in biblical resonances:

You bring peace to earth  
 You bring reconciliation  
 Woman  
 You are magnificent  
 You are mother

At the inn there was no room  
 You were between life and death  
 You went to the stable  
 You brought forth your seed  
 You are woman.

You have been despised  
 You have been hated  
 You know what it is to fear  
 To worry, to hunger and thirst  
 Woman  
 And still you know what it is to be triumphant

Cry out for joy

For your seed has multiplied  
 Shout out with great joy  
 For you have grown strong  
 Woman  
 You will bring everything to pass.

Mavis Smallberg has a greater facility with language, and is more ambitious in her projects. Her poem "June" is unusual for two reasons, firstly because of its length – women poets rarely write long poems – and secondly because it tells of the experiences of a woman political prisoner in detention. Smallberg recounts June's story, sometimes narrating in the first person as she recalls her words:

They came at night  
 At dead of night  
 Two huge men  
 With deadened eyes  
 ...  
 I was pushed inside a corner  
 Face up against the wall  
 They grabbed my hair  
 They jerked my neck  
 And sent me sprawling  
 Smack into the other wall  
 My hair, in tufts, lay  
 Spread upon the floor.

I screamed  
 I cried of hurt and pain  
 But I never begged for mercy  
 I did it through the people  
 I did not do it on my own  
 The people inside  
 The people outside  
 I could never do it on my own  
 ...

June is eventually able to lay charges against those who have tortured her, and the poem ends with a scene in which they are identified with a dramatic gesture:

...

But I walked along the rows.  
 I stopped and looked at them.  
 Straight into their sullen eyes  
 One of them returned my look.  
 And slowly drew his finger past his throat.  
 But my mind was calm;  
 I felt so calm!  
 I did what needed to be done  
 And placed my hand upon the shoulder  
 Of each and every guilty one.

And now my life is threatened  
 As we await the trial.  
 I never stay alone.  
 I do not ever go out only on my own.  
 I fear the guardians of the state.  
 But the cause I fight is just.  
 I do it through the people  
 I could never do it on my own.

...

In the tradition of political resistance poetry, June is not a victim, but has the strength to ensure that justice is done even if it endangers her life. The constant recourse to "the people" as the source of this strength indicates June's, and Smallberg's, belief in the power of organised resistance.

Another important event in the history of women's writing in South Africa has been the establishment in the late 1980s of Seriti Sa Sechaba, a publishing house concerned solely with the publication of women's writing. Seriti Sa Sechaba is run on the same lines as Virago in Britain, and it has done much to foster the writing of women across disciplines in South Africa. Seriti Sa Sechaba has produced an anthology of prose and poetry, *From the Heart* (1988), and has published poetry collections by Cikizwe Mokoena and Portia Rankoane. Seriti Sa Sechaba is devoted to publishing women's work, and has no particular allegiances in so far as race and class are concerned (although so far they have tended to publish work by black women). Although *From the Heart* included writing by women associated with political organisations, such as Boitumelo Mofokeng and Ndaleneni Radebe, their publication of collections by Mokoena and Rankoane indicates that they are prepared to promote individual poets rather than the wide range of voices favoured by the democratic cultural organisations in their publications. Cikizwe Mokoena has no links with the



worker organisations, she is a science teacher, a professional woman, part of the black middle-class. Her collection *A Pot of Poetry* appeared in 1987, and was the first volume of poetry to be published in South Africa by an African woman. Mokoena writes with a strange archaic diction, using words such as "nay" and "methinks", which renders her voice less authentic than those of the women worker poets. Yet Mokoena is also concerned, in some of her poems, with women's issues. In "First Fiddle" she writes of her battle for self-affirmation with her family:

My uncle's sister she did me down  
 a docile creature she made me one  
 ...  
 First fiddle is the only game  
 I aspire and like to see me play  
 but my uncle's sister says me nay  
 ...  
 My fingers are all there and nimble  
 I do not have a fear to stumble  
 I dance to my sweet music now  
 they watch me in awe without a giggle  
 my step is new I play first fiddle.

Although Mokoena argues against the stereotyping of black women into "docile creature(s)", she focuses on herself as an individual rather than as a member of a larger group of women, and she accuses her "uncle's sister" rather than identifying her attitude as part of a larger social problem. She demonstrates no concern that other women should also be allowed to play "first fiddle". In "On the Run" Mokoena writes of a woman who decides to flee from the "slave owner":

Is it a convict or a sorcerer  
 a bandit or a conjurer  
 this one who has decided to run  
 yet trailed as shadow is by sun

Methinks she might be seen  
 as one who has always been  
 subdued by some spell  
 which to others she couldn't sell

She runs away a refuge to be  
 but he seeks her from her hiding  
 to destroy yes annihilate her,  
 if unable to bring her  
 alive to the torturous chiding.

...

The poem uses the concepts of the slave and the slave owner as a metaphor of the relationship between man and woman. However, the poem is awkward, and its awkwardness reflects the problems of its author, an educated middle-class woman who belongs neither to the African oral tradition nor to the tradition of English poetry that she tries to imitate in her rhyming quatrains. Mokoena fails to find an adequate form, and equally she fails to consider the political implications of her subject position – for whom does she speak? Consequently her poetry lacks the strength and impact of Nise Malange's, or even Ndalení Radebe's.

The second collection published by Seriti Sa Sechaba was Portia Rankoane's *Moment of Truth* (1988). Rankoane is a much younger woman than Mokoena. She writes in a less affected style, using free verse to capture the cadences of speech. But she too writes as an individual, rather than as part of a community. Her poem "A Worker" expresses the sentiments of a woman who works as a domestic:

I'm a long way from home  
I have travelled the dusty road to Johannesburg  
I have come to seek work, any work that I can find.

Years ago deprived by circumstance  
I have little education, and little of your school learning  
though I have in abundance the education of my life  
and that of my people.

I know also that I have to work to educate my kids  
It is hard work, it is strenuous and back breaking  
A huge house, a toddler, a dog and all the ironing  
All that and even the car

All that for a drop in the ocean, a pittance  
All that and it is not even enough for school fees  
Not even enough to keep the wolf from the door.

The poem ends on a pessimistic note, for it speaks of the woman worker as a victim of deprivation and exploitation. When compared with Nise Malange's "Nightshift Mother", it is obvious that Rankoane's focus on the individual and her lack of political insight or commitment renders her unable to see a larger picture in which women can join together for mutual support and to work for their own liberation from such exploitation. Once the commitment is made, especially in terms of gender politics, even the woman who has little education and language facility can create poems that allow such women to speak as agents of their own liberation. This can be seen in the poem "Domestic Workers", written by a group of women in a literacy programme:

We are called girls. We are called maids.  
It is like we are small.  
It is like we are children.

We are told what to do  
We are told what to say  
We are told what to think  
We are told what to wear

...  
We are women. We are mothers.  
Too much work can break our bodies.  
Too much suffering can break our hearts.

Our problem is that we live alone.  
Our problem is that we work alone.  
Our problem is that we suffer alone.

But we find friendship if we meet together.  
And we find answers if we talk together.  
And we find strength if we work together.  
And we find hope if we stand together.

Any discussion of the poetry of black women in South Africa would be incomplete without reference to the work of Gcina Mhlope, whose poem "We Are at War" prefaces this section of Chapter Five. Mhlope, as mentioned earlier, is more overtly feminist than most of her black contemporaries, and she emphasises the necessary solidarity between women of all races in South Africa. Although she does not belong to any specific political grouping, she associates herself with progressive politics and has worked with Cosaw. She is primarily a storyteller, dramatist and actress, although she also writes poetry. She brings to this poetry some of the exceptional creative energy that characterises her dramatic work. Hers is the voice of the contemporary professional and urban black woman demanding her place in society – a place untainted by gender discrimination:

...  
Say no, Black Woman  
Say no  
When they call your white sister  
a madam  
Say No

...  
Say No, Black woman  
Say No  
When they give you a back seat  
in the liberation wagon  
Say No  
Yes Black Woman  
a Big NO

(ii) Myths of (Dis)Possession: Home and Exile in Recent Women's Poetry

There are two myths of possession here:  
 the myth of the exile, wanderer,  
 carrying loss like a bomb under his coat,  
 a load of winter wood on his back,  
 mercenary of his own heart's plunder;  
 and the myth of the householder,  
 partisan of familiar fields,  
 who builds his past from mud and water  
 and his future with the same.

(Ingrid de Kok "Shadows behind, before")

The two "myths of possession" described by Ingrid de Kok in her poem "Shadows behind, before" are the central feature of much women's poetry in the 1980s. Increasing racial and political tension within the country contributed to the exile – whether voluntary or enforced – of many South African women poets. For the white women discussed below, Sheila Roberts and Ingrid de Kok, this was a voluntary exile, while for the black women, the *Malibongwe* poets, it was an exile of necessity in order to escape political harassment and imprisonment.

Their sense of exile is predicated on the concept of separation from the land, South Africa, but it is also expressed in their poetry as political, personal and existential exile. The relationship between exile and writing, and between the concept of exile and gender, needs to be explored at this stage, before a discussion of the poetry can be undertaken. In the introduction to their book *Women's Writing in Exile*, Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram outline these relationships:

Voluntary exile, something of a luxury when we consider it closely, constitutes for a number of writers an escape from the entrapping domain of the silenced mother-under-patriarchy, the manifestation of women's internalised exile/estrangement: a "matricidal" intent is writ large through some of the texts of exile.<sup>26</sup>

In South African terms the "father" is the state, whose laws and bans function to silence the "mother" – those whose political views are in opposition to those of the state and who are gendered politically as feminine. In the case of white poets who are voluntary exiles, their escape is to a more amenable climate, both politically and culturally. For black women poets who are forced to leave, it is an escape from a harsh "father", who

threatens to silence them both literally and metaphorically, to a place where they can recoup their energies for a further assault on the father in order to remove him and empower the mother. The suggestion of matricide, made by Broe and Ingram, does not really hold in the South African case. White women poets such as Roberts and De Kok seem unwilling to "kill the mother", showing rather a longing for (re)unification with her, while the black poets seem more intent on patricide and the empowering of "mother" Africa, (albeit a rather phallic mother within the politics of race!).

Broe and Ingram go on to describe another problem related to the work of the writer in exile, particularly the woman writer in exile:

Such an escape into the world of the apparently liberating Word, the world of culture, of adulthood, though, often means entry into the confines of patriarchal language and heterosexual and heterosexist imperatives. Enabled, on one hand, to write, to create new worlds and to recreate what should have been home, many writers find the other hand shackled by the expectations and rules of the world of words they have chosen to inhabit.<sup>27</sup>

The problem of their (gendered) relationship with words is not one that seems to trouble the poets under discussion in this chapter: Sheila Roberts and Ingrid de Kok display little concern at the constraints of patriarchal language, preferring rather to master its syntax and form, which both achieve to a large extent since both are technically proficient poets. The black women are equally removed from their problematic relationship with language, but in reading their work it becomes increasingly evident to the critic that these women find themselves "liberated" within their words, but constrained within the (masculine) language of liberation politics. As Broe and Ingram point out: "Male exiles/expatriates ... are almost always at home in their Word, and the countries they leave are *their* countries, *patria*."<sup>28</sup>

In the writing of all the poets studied below, exile is perceived as separation and their desire is for "home", whether literal or psychological. "Home" is the object of desire and the return from exile represents an often uneasy (re)unification with that object of desire and a closing of the wounds of separation. Yet within the larger, gendered framework, women poets such as these are still searching for a "home" within culture and letters that will end their separation and exile and heal the split created by gender oppression within patriarchal society.

(1) Sheila Roberts: *Dialogues and Divertimenti*

In this soundless bowl  
no southern spirit can think or sing  
against a wild of snow.

... But my own worst dream thrives of an assailant who is mere moving  
air to my snapping guns and pointed knives.

Sheila Roberts published her first solo collection of poems, *Dialogues and Divertimenti*, in 1985 in South Africa. Although living in the United States, Roberts maintains close personal and professional ties with her homeland. Born in 1937, in Johannesburg, she grew up in the Transvaal town of Potchefstroom. She educated herself through correspondence with the University of South Africa, obtaining a Masters degree in English while working as a typist, then teacher and lecturer. After gaining a doctorate at the University of Pretoria, Sheila Roberts left South Africa to take up a position at Michigan State University. She currently lives and works in Milwaukee. She is best known in South Africa for her fiction, both novels and short stories: her first collection of short stories *Outside Life's Feast* (1975) was awarded the Olive Schreiner prize, and she was also awarded a Thomas Pringle Prize by the English Academy of South Africa in 1984 for short stories published in the journal *Contrast*. Her poems first appeared under the Bataleur press imprint in 1977 in a shared volume, her section bearing the title *Lou's Life and Other Poems*. But it is only in *Dialogues and Divertimenti* that she speaks with poetic assurance and skill of her experiences as exile.

The collection opens with a series of poems for her offspring, "Poem for Nadia", "Poem for Kelly" and "Poem for Sandra". In all three poems Roberts places exile and alienation within the family context. In "Poem for Nadia" she celebrates the birth of a granddaughter, but emphasises the idea of familial continuity:

...  
I'm knitting clothes. My thread our bond,  
the yarn our tale of life before,  
what you are now and what there is to come.  
My clumsy habit may become your habit too;  
my coats your refuge from real cold  
and mine from growing unattached and old.

Against the "exile" of old age and loneliness, Roberts claims the bonds of blood and love. In "Poem for Kelly", written in 1979 for her son, she describes how these bonds can provide strength in geographical exile:

Row, my son, row  
 but dip shallow, gently to the right,  
 already your ten-year-old arms might  
 exceeds mine,  
 and we zigzag a path  
 through the quiet lake

...

We pause  
 and, alien, lightly judge  
 the homesteads losing colour

...

The poem suggests that it is the child who understands the nature of exile, or who has made the transference, while the mother still grasps and clings in her uncertainty:

...

You lifted a turtle  
 the size  
 of a tiny, shiny cobblestone.  
 Acquisitively, I wanted it.  
 You said, settling it on the mud-satined floor,  
 Let's let the little sucker go...

Finally, in "Poem for Sandra" she describes her exile, in emotional terms, from her daughter who has left home. She expresses her alienation in terms of the familiar becoming strange:

When my daughter left  
 I tramped like a scuff-booted  
 repairman  
 through a strange house,  
 looking for the broken part  
 or leak.  
 I prowled the silence,  
 sniffing like a circumvented  
 enemy  
 the abandoned camp,  
 among discarded clothes  
 at dresser and cupboard doors.

Yet in order to combat the wounds of separation and loss she preserves what remains of the child's presence:

I did not draw the curtains,  
 mend or destroy the mess,  
 but let the gloom reside  
 in that still room of clues:  
 impersonally no longer possible  
 when too much has been said:  
 no further stripping can take place.  
 I could only for this moment  
 close the door,  
 masking the evidence of a loss.

These three poems prepare the reader for "Dispossession", a horrifying piece in which the family unit becomes a metaphor for the processes of alienation and severance through which the exile must pass. The poem tells of a family gathering, at which the father, "in sober dotage", takes the opportunity to "revive ancient angers", primarily by abusing the mother. At this particular gathering the abusive attack extends to the children, for the father claims "that we five kids/were none of us his". The younger children react with outspoken anger, while "we older others" remain silent and ashamed, "knowing/we indeed derived from him". Roberts notes the effect on the mother:

... my moderate mother,  
 slowed, tremulous and ill,  
 her stitched mouth lipless in unfashionable  
 self-control  
 knitting those ungloved knuckled hands,  
 turned still potent eyes on him,  
 and I wondered what she thought.

In the last stanza Roberts suggests that the self-control and silence are partly motivated by compassion:

Was she regretting a life of thankless  
 faithfulness?  
 Or did she understand his unformed fear  
 (*his* illegitimate conception)  
 that he would be repudiated, put aside,  
 like a single sock or glove, when our mother died.  
 And so he did the discarding first,  
 hoping in these snide abortions  
 to retain his pride.



The father recognises *his* emotional exile from the family, and so disowns them before they may disown him. Roberts understands the hurt and anger that must motivate such a decisive separation of the self from the social bonds of family. But Roberts also recognises that she herself "derives" from her father, and that in seeking exile – even in geographical terms – she too is disowning and separating in order to mask angers and psychic wounding. She suggests this as a necessary process – the exile must discard in order to survive his/her exile with a measure of dignity and pride.

In "Dispossession", Sheila Roberts seems to sympathise with her "moderate mother", seeing her as the uncomplaining recipient of her father's angers, accepting the abuse in silence and repressing her own angers. There is filial anger at the father's victimisation of the mother, but an anger tinged with guilt at her complicity in her mother's pain. These emotions also inform "For my Mother on Chemotherapy", where the poet contemplates a photograph sent to her. She describes the psychological emptiness she perceives in the photograph of her mother:

You are seated in a garden chair  
dead-centre of the lawn.

Like a renegade's head shorn  
by partisans,  
your bare scalp egglike,  
holds the light,  
In shadow, your eyesockets trap  
neither anger, shame, nor fright.  
There falls a nonresistance  
on your stare.  
Forefingers link each other loosely  
in your lap.

Roberts reacts with anger and guilt:

Did you freely give consent  
to take your focused place,  
alone, unwigged, unscarved,  
in unremitting sunlight on the grass?  
Were you constrained by jokes,  
or their (pretended?) crass concern  
for my remoteness,  
my distance from the unhalved  
truth of age and failing breath,  
and unimaginable, hairless death.

Do you no longer care  
 about your hair?  
 And was your sight, turned inward,  
 by intention unaware  
 of their would-be family scene?  
 Can you understand our challenged vanity?

But finally, Roberts imagines that the woman within her mother – exiled from her family by illness and the dehumanising process of chemotherapy – may still live in the memories of her youthful self, before the duties of motherhood within this particularly patriarchal family structure drained her of her identity and dignity:

...  
 Do you remember other older-younger photographs  
 where full-maned, unmaimed, uncondemned, you laugh,  
 indifferent to us still unborn  
 and easy in your destiny?

The emotional power of "Dispossession" and "For my Mother" tend to overshadow "Poem for my Dead Husband" and "Doris, the Polish Aunt, is Dead", poems in which Sheila Roberts explores the exile of death, the final and most complete separation. In the former poem, Roberts rebukes herself for her inability to prevent the suicide of her husband, while in the latter she reminisces about an aunt who has died. In the last stanza of this poem Roberts describes this separation, death, as an emotional, physical and spiritual exile:

...  
 Immediately, now,  
 I need to tell her of my ways, my wants,  
 and watch her unperturbed  
 ordain (I happy smiling do disbelieve)  
 these pains,  
 these accolades and fears and legislated  
 mine,  
 are rightly to be clasped by her, by ours,  
 by me,  
 so for a moment pleased, without will  
 charmed by her cosmic order,  
 I might even seem to listen  
 for a nonexistent spirit's wings.

The poems that describe emotional and psychological exile prepare the reader for the poems that define the psychic effects of physical exile which comprise the major

portion of the latter half of *Dialogues and Divertimenti*. In "Nausea" – which echoes the title of Sartre's novel of existential crisis – Roberts expresses her own sense of existential crisis in her new homeland in terms of an aspect of American life that causes physical discomfort:

If they should ask me to name the worst thing  
about America, I would say, noise, man,  
the noise, *that* hits you  
first, second, last, and every time.

No one should call on a big city for peace,  
unless, like Xerxes, he would beat on waves,  
or take Sisyphus' stone for a hike. That's understood.  
But the small towns are the feckless Bedlams  
of this US earth.

...

There is no fence or wall between frame houses  
to catch the noise and drop it in some flower-bed,  
or squeeze it to a softer pulp,  
so sticky choices multiply: you can attend  
both neighbours' stereos or TV sets, put on your own,  
eavesdrop their weekly weekend party,  
their cars rooting at your grass and thin driveway,  
or you can fasten on your walkman. Clone-like,  
you can sit autistic amongst the vast acoustic mess.  
And pray.

...

In the next poem, "Michigan Winter", Roberts describes the emotionally numbing effect of the paradoxically silent landscape which seems as dead as a desert:

The tombing silence more than cold  
transfixed body and breath.  
Only a misted wind  
hissed  
over spraying snow. No  
other sound,  
and all around  
the unending waste whitened  
and the same.  
The trees hung,  
feathers or pencil strokes  
scratching the granite sky  
and my tired iron legs  
pegged  
drifts like bundled shrouds  
or fallen, trammelling clouds.

In contrast, nostalgic memories of "home" stir poetic images of warmth and sensuality:

I remember once hearing  
 clear  
 the call and screech of life  
 in the warm bush that night and day  
 was never still. I had my fill  
 of sun.  
 Leathery feet could pad  
 the powdered hot ungiving earth,  
 touch boulders red as kilns,  
 smell baking thorn tree gum,  
 see the hum of bees  
 and lizards like illusions  
 flicking  
 under great green leaves like flags.

In the alien context of the frozen north, Roberts feels psychologically frozen, knowing that she can only hope for a psychological spring:

How can I love myself or you  
 or those  
 in any role  
 when my senses,  
 sutlers to my heart and soul,  
 are so confined?  
 My frozen touch,  
 my disbelieving eyes  
 on white and white-on-grey.  
 In this soundless bowl  
 no southern spirit can think or sing  
 against a wild of snow.  
 I will with patience  
 hope to touch you in the spring.

As the season of spring releases the landscape into life, so the poet's psychological spring will release her into creativity. But this seems a long and slow process, as she explains in "Exiled from Sun":

For six months disbelieving  
 I have looked on cold.  
 Even April today —  
 drops shake the jerrybuilt frame:  
 gone the snow floor,  
 now thaw  
 leaves tins, scraps, fragments  
 in the rain.  
 The grey smell  
 in the recycled air  
 tints arteries, dims hearts,  
 blurs colour of mind and eye  
 inducing a thin malaise  
 not strong enough to daze,  
 nor sweetening,  
 so one can weep and stare  
 at maniacal birds  
 perched  
 on dun mockeries of spring:  
 mere attenuated fibres of despair,  
 small means to lift a page  
 or words  
 and live within the printed, lying rage  
 of own or other's sun.  
 ...

When spring eventually arrives, it is equated with violence and death, in the poem  
 "Michigan Easter":

She wore a bonnet  
 of large wire-gauze flowers  
 to praise some harvest  
 still beneath the snow-scab crusted earth,  
 the red petals  
 moving blood spats  
 against the six-month-old grey sky.  
 How dumb, said my son,  
 ripping the wrapping  
 from an Easter basket  
 to find only half eggs laid on top  
 and coloured paper strips  
 beneath.

I remember once  
 a tiny purple-dyed chick given me,  
 and dreamt  
 it would grow big enough to lay  
 mauve eggs.  
 Monday my mother drowned it in the toilet.  
 They die in any case, she said.

The wonder of the child waiting for a world filled with "mauve eggs" is shattered by the mother who drowns the easter chick – symbol of new life – in the toilet. This episode is paralleled in her son's disgust at being short changed on his easter by finding only half eggs in his easter basket. In both cases, symbols of life are rendered empty and worthless by means of violence, trickery, and lies, a perhaps fitting trope for the emotions of the poet in relation to the hopes of new life she may have entertained but which may seem violently dashed and buried "beneath the snow-scab crusted earth". The poet also emphasises the distance between the ideal world of dreams and aspirations, and real world where flowers may be paper, easter baskets are subject to trickery and purple chicks laying mauve eggs merely a childish illusion. The exile may dream exotic dreams, but reality is often very different.

Sheila Roberts' uneasy relationship with her new American home is best expressed in "After Heavy Rain", where a stranded opossum becomes a metaphor for her own alienation and fear. After a storm the family discover the opossum in a corner of the porch next to the "fat black bag of garbage". They try to remove it

... But  
 it dug its snout into the wall  
 by the pork bones from the bag  
 as if wishing the daylight world  
 with our voices would go away.

Her children react with delight at this strange visitation, but the poet recognises the desperation in the animal's flight to the alien environment of her porch:

They felt delighted by the  
 diversion, yet afraid (rabies,  
 tetanus, lock-jaw, who knew?)  
 but I a new strange shame, as if  
 in the presence of an unwanted  
 elder; some unwashed, crouching  
 bagman or woman in a doorway,  
 displaying the rooted mange of years.

Its rubber-ribbed tail, like  
 knotted hands, roped legs,  
 dropped flesh, should have been  
 hidden, it seemed, and its  
 loneliness taken to a hollowed  
 trunk where sodden leaves and  
 twigs, small webs, soft dirt,  
 could let it blend into some  
 semblance of nature's acceptance.  
 My clean clocked life could not,  
 in its defence, expand to  
 entertain its hideousness, its  
 painful, curving spine, pale eyes,  
 and slender panting jaws.  
 Prehistoric, it could never be habitual as a cat. Frantic

from my own thoughts, I wished  
 it truly dead or scampered off.

The opossum, seen as an alien and "prehistoric" creature in the context of suburban America, mirrors her own plight, her loneliness and her exile, and so she wishes that it will disappear and so relieve her of her discomforting thoughts.

As a white South African in flight, Sheila Roberts took with her the apocalyptic vision of chaos, violence and revolution that haunts the white South African psyche. This can be seen in "Thoughts on the Nazi Extermination Camps and the Coming South African Revolution":

...  
 Is it true?  
 Shall simple instinct supersede  
 our stiff-necked overlay  
 and will we wail  
 like those pale matchsticked  
 puppets  
 trucked to crematoria?  
 Or will we bite in dumbness  
 what's to come?

If it comes soon, you say,  
 If the black sea flows soon,  
 If we be like Shaw's robust Barbara,  
 bright-eyed from small beneficence,  
 we will  
 still in liberal blindfolds  
 die bland.

...

The violent deaths and cruelty of the German extermination camps are seen by Roberts as a possible forerunner of similar violence in South Africa, where whites will be overwhelmed by the "black sea". However, in her new home in Michigan, Roberts comes to realise that contemporary violence and cruelty are not limited to South Africa, but that violence is endemic in human society. In "Michigan Murders" she tells the story of a family murder:

...

The uncle, Keckler, bragged for years  
 he had strangled Truax's brother with a dog-chain  
 and dragged him dying to the yard  
 where he buried him, not quite dead, twelve feet deep  
 at a spot where he planned to build a barn  
 and sturdily did.  
 No Keckler or Truax, knowing where their large  
 allegiances lay,  
 called the police.

...

It seems Keckler came to Truax,  
 claiming ownership of a pick-up truck.  
 In the snarled debate, Truax, frantic in childhood  
 remembrance and terror, drew a gun,  
 shooting Keckler twice and so confirming him  
 as the family Rasputin.  
 For Keckler would not die, but climbed threatening,  
 beckoning to you mother-fucker Truax.  
 Truax threw far more bullets, bursting limply  
 against non-fatal bone and flesh,  
 and still Keckler came on.  
 Truax took a rifle and slugged unsluggish  
 Keckler twice in the head, stopping him at last,  
 but, unconvinced, tied up the body before he  
 (who from that point, as a Truax, was not going anywhere)  
 burned in his dread-filled self.

...



Awaiting sentence, haunted Truax  
 hanged himself  
 with a piece of prison sheet.

The horrendous violence within the story disturbs the poet, revealing as it does the obscenity of human evil:

The mind pauses as before any ugly mystery –  
 a cripple purposely maimed for beggarden,  
 huge glossy flies orgiastic on shit,  
 a doctor needlessly cutting flesh for cash –  
 still and blank it stays for clarity.

Yet the poet realises that this tale of horror and violence has its mirror image in her own psychic world, as manifested in her dreams:

There is no clarity. But my own worst dream thrives  
 of an assailant who is mere moving air  
 to my snapping guns and pointed knives.

She then discovers that this dark shadow of the psyche is part of all humans:

Their names ring in my head:  
 Frankie and Keckler,  
 Truax and Clyde,  
 Bonnie and Johnny,  
 Jekyll and Hyde.

Each person has the potential for violence, in his or her "Jekyll and Hyde" personality. But what perplexes the poet is the difficulty of identifying the locus of evil in society – for where a judge and jury might indict Truax as a murderer, it might be argued that he acted in self-defence. Or it might be argued, as the Truax family does, that the Michigan jail system is the evil:

And now I see the Truax family is printing  
 T-shirts to support a campaign  
 against Michigan jails.

The evil itself is tangible, but difficult to locate or eradicate – whether in Michigan, USA or in South Africa.

(2) Ingrid de Kok: *Familiar Ground*

Home is where the heart is:  
a tin can tied to a stray dog.

The opening lines of Ingrid de Kok's poem, "To drink its water", quoted above, reflect her difficult relationship with her "Familiar Ground" – her home country – after her "exile" in Canada. "A tin can tied to a stray dog" is an image that suggests a fear and an irritation that is almost impossible to escape. Ingrid de Kok, like Sheila Roberts, was born in the Transvaal (in 1951), and grew up in the small mining town of Stilfontein. She was educated at the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Cape Town and Queens University in Canada. She presently works in the Department of Adult Education and Extra Mural Studies at the University of Cape Town. On the evidence of her poetry, her sojourn in Canada was perceived as an exile, and yet her return to South Africa is difficult because of her continuing uneasy relationship with the dominant political ideology of the country of her birth.

The uneasiness of this relationship with "home" is related to aspects of race- and gender-based attitudes in South African society. She recounts the genesis of her awareness of such attitudes in her poem "Our Sharpeville". The poem is written around the topic of the historic events at Sharpeville in 1960, when pass law protesters were shot down by the police. The events at Sharpeville had the effect of igniting black anger and polarising white attitudes of fear and hostility. In "Our Sharpeville" De Kok recounts how these attitudes are conveyed to her, as a child, by the adults in her life. One day, as she plays in the garden, a truckload of miners roars past in the street. The child is fascinated by the foreign yet familiar quality of their singing:

I ran to the gate to watch them pass.  
And it seemed like a great caravan  
moving across the desert to an oasis  
I remembered from my Sunday school book:  
olive trees, a deep jade pool,  
men resting in clusters after a long journey,  
the danger of the mission still around them,  
and night falling, its silver stars just like the ones  
you got for remembering your Bible texts.

The innocent child sees the blacks as exotic and romantic, and she searches for metaphors within her limited experience, her Sunday school book and images from Biblical stories. The irony of her place within a culture that claims a Christian heritage

and yet oppresses fellow humans is made evident when her romantic dream is shattered by the voice of adult "reality":

Then my grandmother called from behind the front door,  
her voice a stiff boom over the steps:  
"Come inside; they do things to little girls".

This ominous warning transforms the innocent vision of the child into guilt and uncertainty. She joins her elders in the fear engendered by the "pool of blood" at Sharpeville:

For it was noon, and there was no jade pool.  
Instead, a pool of blood that already had a living name  
and grew like a shadow as the day lengthened.  
The dead, buried in voices that reached even my gate,  
the chanting men on the ambushed trucks,  
these were not heroes in my town,  
but maulers of children,  
doing things that had to remain nameless.  
And our Sharpeville was this fearful thing  
that might tempt us across the well swept streets.

The "heroes" of black resistance are reduced to "maulers of children", and their supposed savagery provides a good reason for normally restrained whites to leave their homes and venture forth in defence of their ideology of separatism. De Kok indicates that this ideology is based in paranoia:

If I had turned I would have seen  
brocade curtains drawn tightly across sheer net ones,  
known there were eyes behind both,  
heard the dogs pacing in the locked yard next door.

As a child, De Kok does not perceive these evidences of psychic malaise, and so she feels only guilt and shame at her departure from the predominant social code, expressed as a rather reluctant return to the white laager:

But, walking backwards, all I felt was shame,  
at being a girl, at having been found at the gate,  
at having heard my grandmother lie  
and at my fear her lie might be true.  
Walking backwards, called back,  
I returned to the closed rooms, home.

De Kok indicates that the attitudes of fear and hostility in the white South African psyche include repressed feelings of sexual fear/fascination. These are subconsciously passed on to the child who is made to feel guilt and shame because her own innocent fascination is interpreted as sexual invitation by her grandmother, who in turn perceives blacks only in sexually violent terms. The "pool of blood" is thus a metaphor for South African society – a reality for many blacks and a constant reminder of fear and annihilation for whites.

In leaving South Africa for Canada, De Kok leaves behind the paranoid racism and the fear. But she finds that she cannot break the bonds with "home". In "Shadows behind, before" she expresses the plight of the exile in search of another place to call home:

Sky, almond and chalk,  
fields bleached with old use,  
the highway a silver arrow  
through the heart of it all.  
If I keep travelling this way  
will I know when I've reached the site,  
knowledge trickling through my fingers  
my hands so full of its soil?

The poet as exile realises that the dilemma she faces is psychological, and that she must deal with the "two myths" that she discovers within her psychological landscape:

There are two myths of possession here:  
the myth of the exile, wanderer,  
carrying loss like a bomb under his coat,  
a load of winter wood on his back,  
mercenary of his own heart's plunder;  
and the myth of the householder,  
partisan of familiar fields,  
who builds his past from mud and water  
and his future with the same.

Within this alien context, the exile is always an outsider, no matter how welcoming the new might seem:

No matter if he visits a valley, the exile  
watches from a copse on a windless hill.  
But a native in his own place cannot afford  
to speculate on the distance to his father's barn.

Each in silence walks a pathway  
 to a pond that barely moves,  
 but one turns his back on his own long shadow  
 and one watches his shadow lead him deep into winter.

In the last stanza De Kok compares the transience and impermanence of the life of the exile with that of the "householder" who has fixity and permanence, but who must also face the bitterness and impermanence of life itself:

In this chill evening ride  
 the houses buckle into the road's long belt.  
 Behind a window a woman watches me pass,  
 matching my eyes as they snatch and drop her.  
 She sees me, promised unknown distance,  
 free or urgent to be travelling away;  
 I see her draw water from a deep metallic well,  
 I see her candles for the dead.

De Kok seems to conclude that exile is largely a psychological state, generated within the psyche of the individual, for as she suggests, we are all in exile to a certain extent. But if she can rationalise exile in psychological terms, there is still a longing for the landscape of home. In "Ruth in the Corn" she expresses that longing for her southern roots:

The geese overhead,  
 the autumn hieroglyph  
 that everyone can read  
 and understand.

When you who live and know this place,  
 when you watch them pass,  
 you remember their return  
 even as you lose the sound  
 of their high migration.

But the others, who see  
 plantations of olives,  
 the Southern Cross,  
 the scrub on the edge of the desert  
 in the pattern of flight,  
 when they follow the long geese  
 overhead, leaving forever,  
 they want to sing of the south,  
 even of the southern cities,  
 even of the small hot rooms.

Sick for home are those watching people  
when the fall sky moves its migrating birds.

Like Sheila Roberts, Ingrid de Kok also extends the concept of exile into the area of relationships. In her sensitive poem "Woman, leaning away", she describes the nature of the relationship between her current lover and his mother in terms of emotional exile:

He hands it to me  
as if it were her wedding ring  
the picture of his mother  
remoter than the island  
she couldn't leave.

She is leaning away from herself,  
from the photograph, from us,  
towards something out there,  
a tree or stone or colour.  
Her dress is soft, unstylish,  
and perhaps her hands are folded.  
He will give her anything,  
corals, pearls, all his photographs of her  
if she will turn just once  
to see him watching her  
the way one watches for a bird  
whose sound in the dense green  
promises shape just before it is silent again.

The poet imagines the lonely life of this woman, on the island to which she is tied:

I think of her as a woman  
whose eyes must have been grey  
who said nothing of her own mother  
or the things she heard as a child  
on a balcony over the narrow streets  
leaning towards the sea.

When her children leave the island, nothing changes for this woman who has internalised her island so that she is emotionally isolated. Her only response to the loss is to let more air into her home to remove all traces of previous habitation:

When her children left for the mainland  
 she may have laid out her clothes on the bed,  
 opened the shutters to air the empty rooms,  
 then turned to stand,  
 stiller than the photograph,  
 near a trellis of sweet smells  
 so thick it concealed the hills.

The poet realises that the photograph was deliberately given by the lover, in order to test whether she too will withdraw into her own emotional island and leave him once more in emotional exile:

Only afterwards  
 lying beside him in the cool  
 I realise this was a test  
 to see if I too would lean  
 away from him and the open window  
 while I looked on the photograph  
 of his silent mother.

The concept of exile is also used to explore social constructs of gender identity. In her poem "Woman in the Glass", De Kok expresses her alienation from contemporary stereotypes of feminine sexuality. She begins the poem by declaring herself unwilling to comply with any of the stereotypical behaviour expected of her by a lover:

I am not the woman in the train  
 who pulls your hand between her legs  
 and then looks out of the window.

I am not the woman with the henna hair  
 in a city street, who never says a word  
 but beckons you, beckons you.

Nor am I the woman in the glass  
 who looks at you look at her  
 and the glass smokes over.

Nor the woman who holds you  
 whilst you call out the names of lost lovers  
 as you will call out this one.

Nor am I the woman in the dark  
 whose silence is the meteor  
 in the sky of your conversation.

She then describes the woman that her lover desires her to be:

That woman:  
 bent over, offering her sex to you  
 like a globe of garlic, asking for nothing;  
 the one without fingerprints,  
 hiding in the amulet of your protection;  
 the one surrounded by photographers  
 printing her supple smile, her skin:  
 that woman.

I stand to the side and watch her,  
 widow-virgin, burn on your pyre.  
 Acrobat falling into a net of ash,  
 in the flames her mouth drips wax,  
 her eyebrows peel off,  
 her sex unstitches its tiny mirrors.

Yet while expressing her distance from "that woman", the poet realises that she too has a certain investment in these images:

Your woman: cousin, sister, twin.  
 You want her burning, distant, dumb.  
 I want to save, and tear, her tongue.

The poet wishes to save the woman so that she may speak out and not be eternally mute, so that the poet in turn may express her sexuality and not be reduced to passive silence. Yet at the same time, the anger that this "woman" generates within her motivates the destructive desire to "tear" her tongue and so destroy her. The title "Woman in the glass" suggests the ambivalent relationship between the sexual self of western culture – as rendered in gender stereotyping – and the "real" self who watches the behaviour of the stereotype. De Kok's poem is a powerful indictment of the socially forced exile of the sexual identity from the personal identity of the individual woman within contemporary society.

The poems in the latter part of Ingrid de Kok's collection express her feelings on her return to South Africa, when she achieves (re)unification with her "familiar ground", but must continue to struggle psychologically with the violence endemic in



South African society. In "Al Wat Kind is" ("All That Is Child") she writes about the terrifying violence of the police against young children:

They took all that was child  
and in the dark closed room  
visions of a ripe split melon  
were at the tip of a knife  
they held to the child's dry tongue.

All that was child  
lies on the tarmac;  
the intestines spill  
like beans from a sack,  
seaweed from the winter sea.

In a repetition of her earlier "pool of blood" image, De Kok describes the unnatural nature of state violence:

The bird of state has talons  
and shit that drops like lead.  
Its metal wings corrode the streets,  
it hatches pools of blood.

Yet the poet foresees a time when even this unnatural force will be destroyed:

But when in time the single stones  
compact their weight and speed together,  
roll up the incline toward the lamvanger's lair,  
crushing sand into rock, rock into boulder,  
boulder into mountain, mountain into sky,  
then the lungs of the bird will choke,  
the wings will blister and crack,  
At last the eyes will glaze, defeated.

And this torn light,  
this long torn light  
will repair itself  
out of the filaments of children,  
and all that is child will return to the house,  
will open the doors of the house.

The final poem in the collection, "Small Passing", expresses a vision of the present that has meaning for the poet's vision of the future. The poem is written "for a woman

whose baby died stillborn", and who was told by a man to stop mourning, "because the trials and horrors suffered daily by black women in this country are more significant than the loss of one white child":

In this country you may not  
 suffer the death of your stillborn,  
 remember the last push into shadow and silence,  
 the useless wires and cords on your stomach,  
 the nurse's face, the walls, the afterbirth in a basin.  
 Do not touch your breasts  
 still full of purpose.  
 Do not circle the house,  
 pack, unpack the small clothes.  
 Do not lie awake at night hearing  
 the doctor say "It was just as well"  
 and "You can have another".  
 In this country you may not  
 mourn small passings.

The poet goes on to describe the socio-economic conditions that prevent the mourning of "small passings":

See: the newspaper boy in the rain  
 will sleep tonight in a doorway.  
 The woman in the bus line  
 may next month be on a train  
 to a place not her own.  
 The baby in the backyard now  
 will be sent to a tired aunt,  
 grow chubby, then lean,  
 return a stranger.  
 Mandela's daughter tried to find her father  
 through the glass. She thought they'd let her touch him.  
 And this woman's hands are so heavy when she dusts  
 the photographs of other children  
 they fall to the floor and break.  
 Clumsy woman, she moves so slowly  
 as if in a funeral rite.

On the pavements the nannies meet.  
 These are legal gatherings.  
 They talk about everything, about home,  
 white children play among them,  
 their skins like litmus, their bonnets clean.

The familiar South African scene of black nannies caring for white children suggests that there is a special bond between women and children, no matter what their skin colour. De Kok then continues by comparing the death of the white baby with that of a black child:

Small wrist in the grave.  
 Baby no one carried live  
 between houses, among trees.  
 Child shot running,  
 stones in his pocket,  
 boy's swollen stomach  
 full of hungry air.  
 Girls carrying babies  
 not much smaller than themselves  
 Erosion. Soil washed down to the sea.

De Kok suggests, through the image of soil erosion, that South African society is being destroyed by violence just as violent rain washes away the most fertile soil to the sea. Perhaps also, compassion and empathy – expressed as grief for a stillborn child – are also being lost in the torrent of violence that engulfs the land. In the last stanza, De Kok suggests that mothers never lose their compassion for other mothers, because they experience the bond between a mother and her child:

I think these mothers dream  
 headstones of the unborn.  
 Their mourning rises like a wall  
 no vine will cling to.  
 They will not tell you your suffering is white.  
 They will not say it is just as well.  
 They will not compete for the ashes of infants.  
 I think they may say to you:  
 Come with us to the place of mothers.  
 We will stroke your flat empty belly,  
 let you weep with us in the dark  
 and arm you with one of our babies  
 to carry home on your back.

De Kok's South Africa may still be a place of violence and fear, but it is also a place where the common bonds of sympathy between women may transcend the hostility and fear engendered by a patriarchal and racist society.

(3) *Malibongwe: ANC Women Poets in Exile*

let them roll  
 let the blues roll out  
 but "this load is heavy it requires men"  
 has nothing to do with baritone or beard  
 it is a word of warning wisdom  
 when the uncountable miles  
 between you and home  
 the beautiful land  
 you vowed to liberate  
 become unbearable.

These words from "Exile Blues" by Baleka Kgositsile capture the spirit of the *Malibongwe* anthology – the voices of politically exiled women who have taken on the militant role of men in order to liberate the "beautiful land" of South Africa. The homeland is the mother who must be liberated from the patriarchal oppression of the state, and these women poets assume the traditionally masculine role of militancy in order to achieve this. They also adopt the poetic diction and syntax of their male counterparts in the liberation struggle. It may be for this reason that Lynda Gilfillan claims that, "because of the ANC women's overt identification with the liberation movement, it is more appropriate to evaluate their writing as 'resistance literature' than as 'women's writing'".<sup>29</sup> Gilfillan goes on to suggest that because the poets perceive themselves primarily as ANC members they do not address the question of gender: "... in South Africa, between the mid '70s and the late '80s, the literate voices of the ANC women articulate resistance to the oppression of black women only insofar as such oppression relates to race."<sup>30</sup> Zimbabwean critic Emmanuel Ngara may be closer to a real description of the text when he describes *Malibongwe* as a work of "militant feminism".<sup>31</sup> Gilfillan identifies the problem of poetic language within the text; the women poets are using the diction and style of masculine resistance rhetoric, yet they are using it, as Ngara notes, within the parameters of a militant black feminism. Such a feminism gives equal attention and weight to racial oppression which is seen as inevitably linked to and part of a gender oppression. This is made quite clear by two of the poems in the section on "Birth and Genocide". In "Tribal Customs" by Phyllis Altman, a comparison is drawn between the racial oppression practised by the Nazis and their gender oppression:

She was fourteen  
 when they tore the ovaries  
 From her living body

Then sent her to a brothel  
 For the use of Nazi soldiers  
 ...

A similar comparison is drawn in "Black, eleven and sterile", by Lindiwe Mabuza. The poem was inspired by an incident that took place in America in the 1970s, which Mabuza sees as symptomatic of white, masculine views of black women's reproductive capacities. The incident in question was "the sterilisation of two black sisters in Alabama, aged eleven and twelve. They did not know, the mother did not know at the time. The doctor performing the operation was employed by the Office of Equal Opportunity (OEO) of the USA federal government".<sup>32</sup> Mabuza points to the patriarchal and racist attitudes of state organisations in the West, and compares these to the practices of the Nazis:

because your colour is your jew  
 i dare not think too long of you  
 ...  
 now each sperm must slowly knock  
 then die in our empty womb.  
 our virgin lands were ravaged and raped  
 the seed will not stir to dance!  
 womb of my race  
 target of their hate  
 womb of my race  
 forever they scrub you clean...  
 clean womb, clean teeth, clean USA-South Africa  
 and little black girls have paid the price  
 for the whitening of America  
 and we here have paid taxes  
 for the pruning of the poor!

The destruction of the reproductive capacity of the black child/woman is seen as a metaphor for the destruction of the productive life of the black people, whether in the US or in South Africa, but equally it is seen as a patriarchal contempt for black women that combines elements of race and gender oppression.

The editor, Sono Molefe (a pseudonym for Lindiwe Mabuza), admits that her women poets speak primarily as ANC members, but she also emphasises their individual identities as women:

But who are these women? ... There are students and former school-teachers. There are trained soldiers, daughters of workers; militant patriots fully engaged in the continuous act of liberation, one and all, struggle is their chosen path. The age range also represents that steady mounting dynamism of the oppressed of that land: a fifteen year old as assured of direction; unwavering side by side with a fifty year old...<sup>33</sup>

After identifying her women poets, Molefe explains what the concept of exile means to these women:

... Exile and alienation are seen in relation to the fundamental alienation of the overwhelming working majority in South Africa from land, cultural wealth, wholeness – wholeness; all the products of that majority's sweat and blood – through general deprivation and exclusion from decisions affecting the people's lives. In this sense there is no self-pity. It is this political awareness and engagement with all aspects of South Africa that rescues their perspective from self-devouring individualism and from whining weakness.<sup>34</sup>

Although Sheila Roberts and Ingrid de Kok can hardly be accused of "whining weakness", Molefe does indicate quite clearly the major difference between these two poets and the *Malibongwe* women: where Roberts and De Kok focus on individual poetic responses to the problems of exile, the *Malibongwe* poets focus on the political and communal aspects, as well as the root causes of their exile in political and racial oppression. It is for this reason, Molefe claims, that no single "voice" stands out in the collection: "... the general tone of the collection ... remains solidly communal."<sup>35</sup> Emmanuel Nagara also notes this feature of the collection, but sees it as a virtue when compared to a collection such as *Poets to the People*: "The poetry in *Malibongwe* is less abstract and more practically oriented than the poems in *Poets to the People*. One also notices that writers like Oswald Mtshali, Dennis Brutus and Keorapetse Kgotsitsile speak as individuals whereas the voice that speaks in *Malibongwe* is a communal voice."<sup>36</sup>

As a collection, *Malibongwe* is subdivided into six sections: (i) Africa shall be free; (ii) Birth and genocide; (iii) Spirit of Soweto: the ghetto, massacres, resolve; (iv) Women in Struggle; (v) Our Men who fought and died and fight; (vi) Phases of Struggle: resolution, exile, perspective, love, call to justice and arms. For the feminist critic and reader, the most interesting sections are "Birth and genocide" (which contains the poems by Phyllis Altman and Lindiwe Mabuza discussed above), and "Women in Struggle" which articulates the particular combination of race and gender

edition of *Staffrider* mentioned earlier, and were also collected in *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women's Poetry*.<sup>37</sup> Two of the poems have not been reprinted elsewhere, and these are of interest in terms of the politics of gender and the politics of exile that they explicate. In "The South African Regime Banned Her", Phyllis Altman describes the pain of political banning and exile.

I would not accept their sacraments  
No oil to seal my lips my mind my eyes my heart.

So they tore out my tongue and crippled my hand  
Gave me dumb silence as penance  
Desolate days to number my rosary  
My home my cell, removed from the world of men.

Yet, hidden here  
I breathe I think I live I love  
That love my solace – the love they hate

It's I who love and they who hate  
But I am infinite.

Altman sees her banning and exile as acts of violence committed against her by an oppressive state apparatus, comparable to the tearing out of her tongue and the crippling of her hand. Altman frames her poem in terms of religious imagery, suggesting her sense of a sacred mission in the political sphere. Like Christ, it is she who "loves" and who is thus infinite, whose ideas will remain as an ideological force long after the regime in question has proved itself to be finite. For Altman, and other women who have been silenced and exiled because of their political beliefs, exile is an act of violent separation. It is not the chosen path of relatively privileged women such as Sheila Roberts and Ingrid de Kok, who can ponder on their exile and even end it, if so desired. It is the harsh reality outlined by Amelia House when she acknowledged that exile means that there is "no easy going back".<sup>38</sup> The voluntary return from exile whether literally as a return to the homeland, or metaphorically, as an act of defiance against a banning order to the exile of silence, can only result in further violence being perpetrated against the woman in question.

Where Phyllis Altman focuses on the inherent violence of political exile, Lindiwe Mabuza deals with the question of the courage and strength needed by all women, but especially black women, who have to cope not only with exile but also with the equally harsh reality of living in apartheid South Africa. In "Super-Women (Grown by

Apartheid)" she considers the way in which women have had to take on traditionally masculine attributes and roles in their struggle to survive:

...  
 without a man  
 i am a man  
 without a husband  
 i am husband-wife  
 without a father  
 children might grow  
 without other hands  
 the earth must bring forth  
 without without without always  
 i must be without

Mabuza points to a particular phenomenon of life for blacks in South Africa that impinges on gender relations and tends to produce, in many fields, "super-women" and emasculated men. At the end of the poem she notes: "The notion of the rural African woman as superwoman derives from the fact that while she has to perform all the tasks traditionally relegated to women, she, however has to be much more. Since all the able-bodied males are recruited as part of contract labour, rural African women in particular must also perform man's work, just as their male counterparts may have to perform traditional woman's work, in the urban areas."<sup>39</sup> Mabuza also sees women as a primary force in bringing about changes in this socio-political scenario:

she, the woman, the man  
 exorcises the land  
 possessed by madmen of history  
 the classes convulse  
 the mine marriages dissolve  
 and the exonerated reef  
 fling  
 to the mountain tops  
 the burnished sons of the land  
 with her together  
 they claim our land  
 they reclaim the wastelands  
 with bold boulders of  
 righteousness  
 and glory-to-man-woman

While Mabuza is singing the praises of the heroic black woman, it is also possible to read her poem as a dynamic marriage of masculine and feminine qualities in the



transformation of the socio-political landscape. The poem ends with a vision of a future society in which individuals exist in a context of humanity and security:

with all  
 i am  
 with man  
 i am human  
 with husband  
 i am wife  
 with father  
 the children must grow  
 with other hands  
 the earth brings forth  
 without without  
 we will no longer be  
 without.

While Mabuza's poem notes the breakdown of traditional gender divisions in labour, her focus is on political and economic transformation, and it is not entirely clear whether she is advocating a future return to traditional gender divisions of labour or whether she desires a radical re-visioning of the division of labour in the light of the obvious capabilities of the black "super-woman". It would be a pity if, after helping to achieve racial equality, such women were to see their oppression continued in the traditional forms of labour division.

It will have become apparent by now that the majority of the poems in *Malibongwe* are written in the style of resistance poetry, a style derived from the traditional form of African oral poetry. As Molefe notes in her introduction:

If ... there is no conformity to "accepted" poetry norms in their message it is because mainly those acquainted with elements of traditional poetics would fully appreciate the mode within which some of these poems are written. The rhetorical style of a number of the poems is a case in point. Because of the oral and hence public nature of traditional poetry, it has its own poetics, quite different from that conducive to quiet reading in one's study...<sup>40</sup>

While the traditional rhetorical style of oral poetry may be far removed from the introspective explorations of women poets of exile such as Sheila Roberts and Ingrid de Kok, it is ideally suited to the urgent socio-political and public concerns of their ANC counterparts. Baleka Kgosisile unites the pain of the individual and the communal solidarity of the exile in the closing lines of her poem "Exile Blues" in the strident, rhetorical style of the ANC women poets:

...  
 when you feel trapped  
 suffocating cornered  
 at a cul de sac  
 and your tears roll down uncontrollably  
 as memories invade you daily  
 maybe let them roll  
 let them blues roll out  
 let them roll out the blues  
 till oblivion sneaks to your rescue  
 when later you feel lighter  
 retrieve the zeal that made you leave home  
 lest you go down the drain  
 with the sinking rot of history  
 when the song goes  
 "this load is heavy it requires men"  
 that has nothing to do with baritone or beard  
 it is a word of wisdom and warning  
 that our history is so reddened  
 with the blood of the best of our land  
 even the enemy gets more vicious by the second  
 because the enemy also knows  
 "victory is certain!!"  
 is not an empty slogan.

### Notes

1. Zubeida Jaffer, "Standing Up, but not being Counted". *Cosmopolitan*, January 1991, p.66.
2. Ibid.
3. Quoted in Ruth First and Ann Scott, *Olive Schreiner: A Biography*, New York: Schocken Books, 1980, pp.262-3.
4. Schreiner's book *Woman and Labour* provides evidence of her concern with this issue.
5. Poem reproduced in *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women's Poetry*, p.122.

6. James Matthews, introduction to *Cry Rage!*, Johannesburg: Spro-Cas Publications, 1972.
7. See Michael Chapman's *Soweto Poetry: A Casebook*, Johannesburg: McGraw Hill, 1982 and *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*, Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1984, ch.4.
8. Jennifer Davids, *Searching for Words*, Cape Town: David Philip, 1974, introduction, p.iii.
9. Ibid, pp.iii-iv.
10. Ibid, p.iv.
11. Mike Kirkwood, interviewed by Nick Visser in "Staffrider: An Informal Discussion" *English in Africa* 7(2), p.23.
12. Ibid, p.26.
13. Ibid, p.23.
14. "Women Writers Speak" *Staffrider* 2(4), November/December 1979, p.60.
15. Ibid, p.60.
16. Ibid, p.61.
17. Ibid, p.61.
18. Nokugcina Sigwili, "Men are always women's children", *Staffrider* 3(1), February 1980.
19. Boitumelo Mofokeng, "Where are the Women?: Ten Years of *Staffrider*", *Current Writing* 1, October 1989, pp.40-41.
20. Ibid.
21. Astrid Von Kotze, *Organise and Act*, p.8.

22. Ibid, p.13.
23. Astrid Von Kotze, "Women Workers and the Struggle for Cultural Transformations", *Agenda* No 3, 1988, p.49.
24. Ibid, p.50.
25. Constitution of COSAW, *Current Writing* 1, October 1989, p.43.
26. Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram (eds), *Women's Writing in Exile*, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989, p.5.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid, p.14.
29. Lynda Gilfillan, "Black Women Poets in Exile: The Weapon of Words". Unpublished paper (1990), p.2.
30. Ibid.
31. Emmanuel Ngara, *Ideology and Form in African Poetry*, p.142.
32. Sono Molefe (ed), *Malibongwe: ANC Women: Poetry is also Their Weapon*, p.30.
33. Ibid, p.4.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Emmanuel Ngara, *Ideology and Form in African Poetry*, p.143.
37. The poems are "Women Arise", "Militant Beauty", "The Great Day – August 9th", "Dedication", "Fighting Women" and "Forget not our Mothers".
38. See Amelia House, *Deliverance: Poems for South Africa* (no page numbers).
39. Sono Molefe (ed), *Malibongwe*, p.57.
40. Ibid, p.5.

## CONCLUSION

When I commenced this study in the mid 1980s, it was my intention to investigate the nature of the woman poet's creativity in the South African context. I wanted to account for the perceived lack of women poets in the South African English poetic tradition and to investigate the reasons for this gendered silence in our writing. Then, having discovered a multitude of women poets, it became my aim to bring these voices to a wider audience by means of my anthology *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women's Poetry*, and by means of the present study. I wanted to document the activities of English-speaking women poets from their earliest beginnings in nineteenth-century colonial South Africa to the present.

*Breaking the Silence* appeared in 1990, and was officially launched at the first ever Women's Studies Conference in South Africa, held at the University of Natal in Durban in February of 1991. In 1990 I also completed the first draft of this study. It was the year in which State President F.W. de Klerk unbanned the African National Congress, released Nelson Mandela, and instituted social and political changes that have lead the country into a process of political upheaval and stress. Increasingly we have come to feel that the period since 1990 is a time of interregnum, as we witness the death of the old order and await the birth of the new.

What this "new" South Africa will be remains to be seen, but no one doubts that it must be radically different from the "old" South Africa with its race and gender discrimination. The progressive democratic movements, of which the African National Congress is the strongest, seem determined that a new constitution will redress issues of race *and* gender. In this future dispensation we can be relatively sure that every aspect of life will be affected, including the writing, production and dissemination of texts. Will "poetry" survive as the traditional genre we have studied in schools and universities? Will the study of "literature" survive? Or will the pragmatic pressures of "people's education" render poetry and its study an atavistic and elitist pastime?

Certainly I cannot answer these questions. But I also feel instinctively that this study has been completed at exactly the right time, a period of hiatus before transformation from the old to the new. It documents the past from a gender perspective and offers a corrective re-reading, yet it does not define the future because it cannot. It can only offer tentative suggestions. I am aware that much in this study may be challenged, perhaps even refuted. But there is also much that needed to be made plain in order that the processes of growth and transformation characteristic of this period can occur. It is from 1990 onwards that we can expect South Africans of all races, both men and women, to begin to produce texts that may be termed post-apartheid, post-colonial, and even post-feminist. Writing that goes beyond the politically divisive issues that have engaged our writers ever since the first settlers brought their literate and disruptive cultures to the southern African continent.

It is my sincere hope that *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women's Poetry* and *Stranger in Your Midst: A Study of South African Women's Poetry in English* will contribute to the new South African society by stimulating further writing and research into the creativity of South African women. For whatever lies ahead for women as writers in the English language in South Africa, they must surely build on the foundations of the past, if only to transform that past into a vital and dynamic future.

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