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# **Emerging futures from a fading past: Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* as a rewriting of the plaasroman**

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*A Paolo, che ha saputo trovare il modo  
più bello – e il più esasperante – di  
sostenermi e spronarmi nel portare a  
termine questo lavoro*

*What I am mainly interested in as a writer is to complicate matters ... in such a densely patterned way that the text will not stop eliciting questions and that it will refuse to provide any definite answers... I was hoping to write something that would confound me.*

**Marlene van Niekerk**

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### 1.1 The author

Marlene van Niekerk was born in Caledon on 10 November 1954 and grew up in the rural Overberg area in South Africa. She is an outstanding intellectual and philosopher, best known for her novel *Triomf*, published in 1994. Her writings question the issue of whiteness in the post-apartheid South Africa, satirising the Afrikaner literary society, while also satirising her own position therein (Van Vuuren H., 712) and showing how the politics of separateness resulted in being not only damaging to the subjugated black population, but also to the “superior” white minority it was supposed to serve.

She studied language and philosophy at Stellenbosch University and graduated in 1978 with a thesis on *Thus spoke Zarathustra*. From 1980 to 1985 she continued her studies in philosophy and cultural anthropology at the University of Amsterdam, where she obtained a PhD with a thesis on the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Paul Ricoeur. Once returned in South Africa she started teaching philosophy at the University of Zululand, and later at the University of South Africa in Pretoria. Afterwards she lectured in Afrikaans and Dutch Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand. She is currently a lecturer of Creative Writing at the University of Stellenbosch and covers temporary teaching periods in Holland at the prestigious universities of Leiden and Utrecht.

She started writing already during university, when she worked on lay theatre and wrote three (unpublished) stage plays: *Vrolike Frans*, *Die kersvaders*, *Die Duiwel, sy helper en die drieligtekooie*. After graduating she moved to Germany in 1979 to work in Stuttgart and Mainz as apprentice for directing. She started off as a poet in 1977 with the collection *Sprokklster*, followed in 1983 by another volume of poetry entitled *Groenstaar* – both characterized by a rich, even baroque, use of language. After a

collection of short stories, *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het* (1992) – on the neurosis of the new generations, having to deal with their ambivalent perception of otherness – she published her first novel, the above mentioned *Triomf*, thanks to which she first achieved acknowledgement both by audience and critics. Translated by Leon de Kock and later turned into a film (2008), the novel reflects on the condition of white population in the post-apartheid era: her picture of a poor Afrikaner family living in prefabs built on the remains of Sophiatown, analyses their struggle to come to terms with all the changes deriving from the new political situation in South Africa. Their sense of loss for the idealized rural life that Afrikaners have previously been conducting on farms is underlined by the horrors of suburban life, which further undermines their identity – traditionally related to genealogy and landownership. Her second novel *Agaat* (2004), which is object of this study, focuses, as was the case with her poetry, on the rural environment she was born into. The novel diverts from the traditional literary representation of the pastoral myth and thus challenges racist-patriarchal ideology supporting the connection between white supremacy and landownership. Van Niekerk's third novel, *Memorandum: 'n Verhaal met Prente*, illustrated by the painter Adriaan van Zyl, was published in 2006. In 2010 she published another collection of short novels (*Die Sneeuslaper*) and wrote a piece of political black comedy (*Die kortstondige raklewe van Anastasia W.*). She is currently working on a third collection of poems and a fourth novel, which will once again focus on South African anxiety and complexity. In 2011 Van Niekerk was awarded the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver for her outstanding intellectual contribution to the literary arts and culture field through poetry, literature and philosophical works.

## **1.2 The novel**

Marlene Van Niekerk's novel *Agaat*, published in Afrikaans in 2004 and translated in

English two years later, is widely regarded as a re-elaboration of the traditional South-African sub-genre of the plaasroman, or farm novel. The novel takes into consideration and develops the themes which are typical of that sub-genre casting new light on the relationships between land ownership and colonialism, white supremacy and the role of women, as well as genre and ideology.

*Agaat* tells the story of and narrate the complex relationship between two women: the white landowner Milla de Wet and her coloured servant Agaat. Their story as well as the story of the land they're farming covers the time span of 40 years, starting in 1994, when Milla is lying on her deathbed and Agaat is taking care of her. The whole novel is carried on through flashbacks in the form of a second person narration, Milla's diary's entries and her recollections. The author uses different techniques in order to describe the complexity of their relationship in particular and the social and political environment of the apartheid and post-apartheid era in general. The novel doesn't follow the chronological sequence of events but rather tells a story which is fractioned and disrupted, showing the reader not only the complex power and love relationship between the two main characters but also the difficulty to recall in a subsequent way the recent history of the country. With this complex structure the author underlines the inbuilt complexity of race relations in a country where racism has been a basic constituent of social order for decades. The relationship between Agaat and Milla is the subject of substantial investigation by the latter, while the voice and opinion of the former are silenced till the very end of this extensive narration, producing a vision of the future not only of the novel but to the history of South-Africa itself. The setting of the novel is the farm Grootmoedersdrift, that Milla inherits from her mother and that had been the property of her grandmother before, which already establishes a critical approach to the traditional patriarchal order of the society as shown in the plaasroman. Even Milla's relationship with her husband Jak represents not a marriage based on the

conventional woman's need of protection but a very different need for autonomy that only her status as a married woman would provide, giving her the right to inherit the land of her mothers. The structure of the family is not based on the mutual affection and respect but rather resembles a business transaction with presumed profits for both parties, which in fact results in mutual incomprehension, dissatisfaction and frustration.

The novelty of the story first evolves when Milla adopts Agaat as her daughter, being unable to conceive a child of her own which subsequently opens the possibility for the latter to inherit the farm which would give the matriarchal tradition a new twist by means of deviation from the accustomed white dominance. Family dynamics are further complicated by the birth of the blood heir who takes Agaat's place and creates barriers first between the two women and secondly among the family members in general. The struggle of Milla, Jak and Agaat to win the affection of Jakkie could be regarded as a fight for power inside the family and on the farm. Agaat introduces Jakkie to the land using the same strategies Milla applied to her when she first entered the farm environment; she represents the reality of nature in a magical, symbolic way. Jak, on the other hand, offers his son a different approach to the land, based mainly on assessing control of the wilderness through peculiar masculine strength and power. The land and the farm are thus not only important for the self-recognition of the characters but also serve as a guarantee for their place in society. However, Jakkie's permanent departure to Canada stresses his refusal of Afrikaners culture, traditions and political ideas and his inability of relating himself to the land he was supposed to be entitled to. Agaat, on the other hand, is the one who finally inherits the land, and thus takes possession and control of it, re-establishing Milla's matriarchal heritage while giving it a new perspective, which once again underlines the vanity of the existing social order and the call for substantial changes in the formation of the society.

### **1.3 The South-African farm novel: a struggle between old and new**

The plaasroman, or farm novel in English, is a genre – or a sub-genre – which developed at the beginning of the twentieth century primarily among Afrikaners, the descendants of the Europeans who started inhabiting South-Africa from the second half of the seventeenth century during the period of administration of the Dutch East Indian Company. Afrikaners are known mainly for their role in the making and maintaining of the segregation system best known as Apartheid. The plaasroman, which depicted the essence of Afrikaner cultural heritage, provides a vivid insight into the peculiarities of Afrikaner complex identity and its development in history. Critic H.P. Van Coller argued that 'the Afrikaans farm novel [can be seen] as [an] ideological reflection on political and social reality in South-Africa' (Van Coller, 1995 qtd. in Prinsloo: 2006, 30).<sup>1</sup>

The original idea of the plaasroman was to represent the farm as a separate paradise that provided happiness, stability and safety for the Afrikaners in a world that was rapidly changing. Incapable of coping with those changes Afrikaners saw in the farm the rampart of their fading traditions. The golden period of the plaasroman was in fact in the beginning of the twentieth century, in a moment of economical and political changes which were gradually putting an end to the Afrikaner traditional lifestyle. These fundamental changes became more critical around the thirties when the custom of dividing the land among all the male siblings resulted in the formation of smaller farms that weren't sufficient to provide sustenance for a family. Many farmers were forced to move to the city, and so to abandon the farm life which had till then been so important to the maintenance of traditional values and family traditions. Conflicts inside the families were caused by the issue of inheritance eligibility and the unity of the family, the guardian of tradition and values, was corrupted. The social problems

1 "Die Afrikaanse plaasroman as ideologiese refleksie van die politieke en sosiale werklikheid in Suid-Afrika" (my translation)

deriving from the emergence of a class of landless farmers were further complicated by the world economic depression.

J.M. Coetzee interprets the plaasroman as a response to those problems and to the desire to return to a previous period in time when the Afrikaner tradition and identity were not challenged (82-83). Early – or normative – farm novel where thus a way to represent this crisis. In J.M. Coetzee 's words “[...] the loss of a farm assumes the scale of the fall of an ancient house, the end of a dynasty” (83). The house, which originally emerged through hard work and taming of the wilderness, had its roots in the land which was the source of prosperity and the beginning of the dynasty. The modern capitalist notion of the land was thus experienced has a betrayal of the ancient connection between the family and its land. By means of the plaasroman, Afrikaner writers attempted to celebrate their memories of the old rural values, restate a mythic past and commemorate the glory of their forefathers. The plaasroman gives an idyllic representation of the man-nature relation, in which the work of the farmers and the ownership of land form the antipode to the frantic existence in the industrialized city. Moreover, the main purpose of the plaasroman was not only to describe the time that was long gone, but it also had an element of propaganda towards the necessity of going back to the farm space and away from the urbanized areas.

[T]he programme espoused by the plaasroman is one of a renewal of the peasant order based on the myth of the return to earth[...]. Not only will the peasant proprietor and his sons and daughters recover their true selves by a return to the earth: their serfs too will come to recognize that town life is an aberration, that true happiness has to be found on the farm where they were born. (Coetzee J.M., 79-80)

What Coetzee is trying to point out is that the plaasroman was offering a “pastoral solution” to the problematic existence of the white man in South-Africa. It is thus not coincidental that while the plaasroman reached its climax, the Afrikaner nationalist movement was making its first steps and the apartheid ideology was being conceived. The celebration of a shared sacred history was in fact a way of supporting certain

nationalist ideas and to justify the Afrikaners' possession of land and their status in the South-African society.

#### **1.4 Characteristics of the genre**

Different critics have analysed the characteristics of the plaasroman, defining it as a separate genre or as a sub-genre inside the broader category of the novel. A canon has been established, as well as the notion of a normative plaasroman, on basis of some shared common features. Aspects which are peculiar to the genre are: a chronological representation of events, underlining the importance of a reconnection to a mythic past and a patriarchal structure of communities with the father as a dominant figure in the family. While Van Coller ascribes those characteristics only to farm novels written before 1962, Wasserman identifies six main themes of the early – or normative – plaasroman which are to be found also in the novels written after that time (Prinsloo: 2006, 31): handwork and landownership; relation to and role of space and nature; patriarchy, traditions and genealogical succession; role of women in society; religions; race relations. In a later definition of plaasroman as a genre and of its characteristics before and after the sixties, Wasserman underlines “the importance of work, the struggle against and dependence on nature, the subjected position of women, the conflict between the farm and the city, genealogy, the preserving of tradition, religion, a stereotypic representation of black characters [and connection to the land]” (Waasermann: 2000, qtd. in Prinsloo: 2006, 32).<sup>2</sup>

While authors such as C.M. van den Heever (1902-1957) or D.F. Malherbe (1881-1969) are to be counted among the early farm novelists, whose works were inspired by nationalist energies, other writers progressively detached themselves from

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2 “[...] belang van arbeid, die stryd teen en afhanklikheid van die natuur, die onderdanige posisie van die vrou, die verhouding plaas teenoor stad, genealogiese opvolging, die behoud van tradisie, godsdienstvastheid en die stereotipiese uitbeelding of verswyging van die swart karakters [asook grondgebondenheid].” (my translation)

a white supremacist narrative, producing texts which are generally referred to as critic/protest novels, since they introduced the issue raised by the anti-Apartheid movements and they focus on the stereotypical nature of traditional plaasromans. Examples of critic farm novels in English are J.M. Coetzee's writings, which challenge “an imagined past in which white South Africans exist in undisturbed symbiosis with a land” (Devarenne, 634) or Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1974), on the dispossession and restitution of the land, both during and after the apartheid era. In Afrikaans, protest plaasromans have been produced especially within a leftist literary tradition criticizing the myth of Afrikanerdom. Among many others, Etienne Leroux in the 1960s and Letoit in the 1980s are representative of this trend, of which Van Niekerk's *Agaat*, which criticizes the white patriarchal society and calls for Afrikaners to reinterpret and reinvent their identity, is also child.

In order to understand in which terms protest farm novels are a rewriting of canonic ones, it is necessary to analyse how the latter related to those same matters. Obviously the setting is of a basic importance in the defining of a canonic farm novel. As discussed above, the farm was represented as a peaceful place, a self-sustaining world which had to be kept separate from the outside world. To underline the separateness of the farm from the city and its role as a bastion of traditional values and knowledge, the authors generally have all episodes happen inside the farm space and present all the characters coming from outside this protected space as dangerous. Moreover the farm is presented not only as a space of work, but also as a home, deeply connected to the family history and actions. According to the conventions of patriarchal society the moral responsibility to support the home is ascribed to women. In the normative plaasroman women assume the role of 'angels of the house': they are required to take care of the house and the family, to remain inside the space of the house which is their sole competence and to bequeath the patriarchal values that force

them in a subjugated position to the husband. The subjugation of women is covered by giving them a particular, positive role – the defence of values – which turns then to be a specific limit to their mobility.

The fixed hierarchic relation between male and female, with the former as master of the house and the latter as housekeeper and champion of moral values, is not the only supposedly natural social hierarchy presented in traditional plaasroman. The issue of race relations is in fact introduced from a dominant white perspective and the voice of coloured workers is generally silenced. The coloured servants are described as backward, irresponsible, indolent and in need of constant supervision from the more civilized white masters. Even though the dispute between white and non-white characters is sometimes present, especially in later novels, it is usually the coloured characters who are finally defeated. Furthermore, the narration tends to divert attention from the work of coloured servants to focus on the efforts made by the white owner of the farm. This aspect is particularly significant in the context of the plaasroman, since the work done on the land by the white farmers is presented as the act of creation of that land, taken out of the wilderness. Avoiding a description of the role of black workers in the farming of land assumes in this case a wider meaning and gives the white farmers the possibility to enrich their mythology and support their view of the land as a white creation.

With protest farm novels, the traditional plaasroman is rethought and rewritten starting from a different ideological perspective, which is generally post-colonial or feminist. Style and language are modified accordingly to the new purposes of the novel, in order to support the critical approach on which they were based. The emergence of protest farm novels, which shifted the perspective on the Afrikaner pastoral utopia by taking socio-political developments into account, resulted in an enlargement of the literary canon previously defined on base of the quite homogeneous characteristics of

early farm novels. Both the role of coloured individuals and the controversial position of women inside the family started being described critically, with a focused attention on ideologically-charged definition of identities. The status of the farm as pastoral refuge from the brutality of urbanized areas was also questioned, along with its role as bastion of family values, which eventually brought to a problematization of the supposedly natural connection between a farmer and 'his' land.

### **1.5 Landownership and identity**

As previously discussed, landownership carries out a fundamental role in the defying of Afrikaners identity. Ampie Cotzee defines the farm as a natural place for Afrikaners, a place where their identity is rooted, while Wasserman delineates a unity of place and identity arguing that the essence of the Boer, the Afrikaner farmer, comes directly from his land ( Prinsloo:2006, 38-39 ). In his book *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, J.M. Coetzee tries to describe in details the nature of a farmer's connection to his land in the Afrikaner society: since the farm is deeply connected to the history of the family and acts as a symbol of shared common past and values, it is fundamental for it to remain in the family and to flourish in order to keep the family heritage alive (82-86). Coetzee underlines the difference between being a good steward, which involves taking care of the land, increasing the profit, consolidating the farm, building upon the inheritance, and being a bad steward, that is to “subsist upon what the ancestors built or to allow the farm to go to rack and ruin [...]” (86). J.M. Coetzee's reflection pictures farming as the re-establishing of a supposedly natural right on the land, deriving from the work of one's ancestor and to be reclaimed by each generation through its own work. The role of the farm in the determination of the farmer's identity derives thus from a combination of two factors: entitlement of the land seen as an empty space that comes to life through the white farmer's work and connection to the

forefathers who 'create' that same space in the past.

Beside farming the land in a spirit of piety towards *voogeslagte* and *nageslagte* (past and future generations), besides being a good steward, the farmer must also love the farm, love this one patch of earth above all others, so that this proprietorship comes to embody a marriage not so much between himself and the farm as between his lineage (*familie*) and the farm. (J.M. Coetzee, 86)

In such a context it is understandable that the loss of one's farm would generate grave identity issues which then would result not only in the defying of a mythicizing literary genre – the *plaasroman* – but also in a rethinking of 'Afrikanerdom' as such. When “[s]elf-realization – realization of the self not as individuals but [...] as the transitory embodiment of a lineage - becomes tied to landownership and to a particular kind of spiritual experience available only to landowners” (J.M. Coetzee, 87), the farm becomes a source of meaning fundamental to the farmer consciousness. Not only “to alienate the farm means to forsake the bones of the ancestor” (J.M. Coetzee, 85), but it is also experienced as a disconnection of the individual from the self, creating uncertainty that goes far beyond the practical difficulties of losing one's own place of work or even habitation.

As normative *plaasroman* were the expression of a sense of loss due to urbanization and inheritance policies, protest *plaasroman* can be seen as the result of a further precariousness deriving from the rise of anti-apartheid movements and the following birth of a multi-ethnic New South Africa, which brought many writers to reflect on their status as white inhabitants of the country and owners of the majority of its land from a new perspective.

## Chapter 2

### Representing the land you own

The process of farming, fundamental to the novel which is the subject of this analysis, can be regarded as a metaphor of the wider process of colonization. In fact, when settling the space of a farm, the farmer establishes not only his/her right on the land, but also gives it a different meaning and structure. As previously discussed, a specific portion of land becomes a farm and the home of a family through the work of that farmer and his/her descendants on that land. The wilderness is then turned into an organized space which would provide sustenance to the family members both economically and spiritually. As was the case in colonial times, the conquering of a land was normally accompanied by the reshaping of it, which was then ideologically justified by imagining the conquered area as a previously empty space. Not only can the farm, like the colony, be represented as the ordering of a space which had previously no order, no meaning and no boundaries; the farm is actually the basic structure which allowed colonization. As a functional metonymy, the farm was in fact the part which stood for the whole colony.

In *Agaat* the farming process is often described as a struggle for survival. Even though Grootmoedersdrift is not a wild land, it is still represented as a semi-empty space which Milla has to create for herself and by herself. The land Milla inherits is very difficult to farm and has been partially abandoned. It is moreover connected to Milla's happiest and saddest childhood memories: it reminds her of the complex relationship between her parents and between herself and her mother; it is the space where she first got in touch with nature – both as wilderness and as farmed land – establishing an attachment to it that is equally formed by curiosity, respect, love and frustration for her supposed incompetence. When starting her journey as a farmer and married woman, Milla longs for the spiritual and practical sustenance that is associated

with land ownership.

To create her own home she needs to establish her control on the farm, giving it her own order but at the same time re-establishing the connection between her ancestors and the land. In fact, accordingly to the Afrikaner farmer ideology, she shows her “respect for the blood-sweat with which Gdrift was carved from the earth” (*The way of women*, 65)<sup>3</sup>, thus confirming the idea that the space of the farm is a creation of her ancestors. At the same time she has a much wider consideration of her role as a farmer than what was typical in the traditional plaasroman. Laura Buxbaum argues that “in her youth. Milla envisioned herself as a larger-than-life creator of the world around her - “a regent of the whole Tradouw” - and believed that “everything [was her] domain”. Milla's egoism ensures that she views the land as her *possession*; she does not consider herself 'the transitory embodiment of a lineage' (J.M. Coetzee: 1988 qtd. in Buxbaum, 36)”. Her whole life on Grootmoedersdrift assumes the characteristics of a sacred mission, to be accomplished taking the necessary steps: “Everything on this farm must be properly prepared, everything foreseen and anticipated so that no chance occurrence can distract you from your ultimate objective. That's the first commandment, has always been. [...] That's how you get results. That's how you build up prosperity” (15-16). Her struggle for prosperity, which is not only the aim Milla wants to achieve for herself and her hearth, but also the goal of every good farmer in the traditional plaasroman, results in a failure. The idealistic expectations she has in the beginning crash with the harsh reality of everyday difficulties, both inside the family and in the managing of the farm. Milla's failure to bring prosperity to the farm is also her failure to reshape the land according to her own order, in other words to colonize it. These ideas will be further explored in depth in this chapter.

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3 Van Niekerk, M., *The way of Women*, Abacus: London, 2008. Further references to the novel will be referred to only with the page number.

## 2.1 Giving order to an empty land: topography and cartography as means of control

One of the ways in which the colonizers gave a new shape to the supposedly empty land they were colonizing was labelling it. The space colonizers were entering was unknown and frightening; naming it in their own language became both a way to dispel their diffidence and the way to assert control on it. The writer and critic Jamaica Kincaid imagines in one of her articles the reaction of Columbus when he first set his foot on the island of Antigua:

[...A] man setting sail with three ships, and after many, many days on the ocean, finding new lands whose existence he had never even heard of before, and then finding in these new lands people and their things and these people and their things, he had never heard of them before, and he empties the land of these people, and then he empties the people, he just empties the people. (Kincaid: 1997, 4)

Kincaid underlines how the process of naming was in fact possible only after the emptying of a land which had in fact already been named by its previous inhabitants. Through the new names the land is at the same time brought closer and subjugated to a new power, a new imagination and a new culture.

In the introduction of the novel, Jakkie describes South Africa as he used to describe it to foreign people. Some of the names of the woods, the mountains and the rivers are descriptive, while others transmit the ideological perspective of the traditional farm novel:

Woods. Deep mysterious woods. Koloniebos, Duiwelbos, Grootvaderbos, the woods of the colony, the devil, the grandfather. And mountains. Trappieshoogte, Tradouw, Twaalfuurkop, the height of steps, the way of the women, the peak of noon.

The rivers of my childhood! They were different, their names cannot tell how beautiful they were: Botrivier, Riviersonderend, Klienrivier, Duivenhoeks, Mandaagsoutrivier, Slangrivier, Buffeljagsrivier, Karringmelksrivier, Korenlandrivier: rivers burgeoning, rivers without ends, small rivers crossing; rivers redolent of dovecotes, of salt-on-Mondays, of snakes; rivers of the hunting of the buffalo, rivers like buttermilk, rivers running through fields of wheat. Winding, hopeful, stony rivers. What can have remained of them? (4)

Most of the names are so emotionally or historically charged, so “Afrikaner” in terms

of language and sounds, that the English translator of the novel, Michiel Heyns, repeatedly expressed the difficulty of the task he had to confront (Heyns: 2009) while Van Niekerk has Jakkie wonder whether it is actually possible to translate the name of the farm: “Translate Grootmoedersdrift. Try it. Granny's Ford? Granny's Passion? What does that say?”(5). Besides those names, which are extremely meaningful for Jakkie on a personal level, there are other names recalling instead the history of the colony and to the colonizer naming practice. “The stream, the first which a European would deign to give the name of river, according to Di Capelli. Afterwards Rio de Nazareth. Le Fleuve Large. Hottentot names, certainly, but what remains of those, and who still cares?”(4). Jakkie underlines with a certain irony that the procedure of naming was in fact a renaming, which results in all the original Hottentot names being forgotten – at least by the white farmers. Moreover, the fact that Jakkie is able to recall his country through the names of single elements of the landscape underlines how the same possibility is precluded to the peoples originally living in the Cape, which had been deprived not only of the physical land they were living on, but also of the memories connected to those lands and to their names.

When asked to describe his home country, Jakkie also resorts to the use of a map. As is the case with the naming of an unknown place, also the mapping of a land is a way to establish one's own power on it. Maps require measurements and the defining of borders, and are fundamental to the western conception of landownership and property. It's not accidental that the first reference to Grootmoedersdrift in the novel is Jakkie's attempt to represent it through a map for his foreign audience: “Took a sheet of paper and a pencil when people here questioned me. Drew a map [...]” (5). The story of the farms and its maps have been a fundamental step in the education of Jakkie, and that is even more true for Milla: “your mother took out the maps and spread the papers of Grootmoedersdrift on the dining room table. [...] You knew the maps by heart. Ever

since you were a little girl your mother had slid it out of its long sheath to show you the farm that would be yours one day” (25). When Jak dies, the maps are the only items from his office that Milla decides to preserve: “[o]nly the maps I kept, the old map of conveyance, the one that I'd found amongst my heirlooms after Ma's death, with the little painted pictures of all the special places on the farm. That map was the most original of the collection” (135).

The maps are for her a symbol of her role as a farmer and her power on the land she's farming. In fact the depiction of land on paper through co-ordinates and fixed points, and especially borders, derives from a rather western approach to place: the possibility to fix space represent a very western way to think about place: to be able to fix space on a sheet of paper through measurable data allows the owner of the map to become the owner of the land itself. In trying to underline the role of maps in the colonial discourse, critic Laura Bauxman quotes Graham Huggan reflection on the topic:

Graham Huggan argues that, "in the demonstration of colonial discursive practices," cartography has an "exemplary role" (1989, 115). He provides a deconstructive reading of the map in order to reveal what he refers to as its "contradictory coherence" (120) and the implicit desire to affirm ownership of space that informs its production. Cartographic discourse, he explains, is "characterized by the discrepancy between its authoritative status and its approximate function, a discrepancy which marks out the 'recognizable totality' of the map as a manifestation of control rather than as an authenticating seal of coherence" (117). Furthermore, "this coherence is then contradicted by what [José] Rabasa calls 'blind spots'" in the map (118).

These "'blind spots' reveal flaws in the overall presentation of the map" and thus suggest the possibility of alternate readings of maps (118). Huggan concludes that the map should be considered "as a palimpsest covering over alternative spatial configurations" (120). (Huggan qtd. in Bauxman, 36)

Not only are the maps seen a proof of Milla's right on her land, but since landownership is so deeply connected to her identity as a farmer and an individual, so are the maps. Bauxman further argues that “Milla's obsession with the maps of her farm can be seen as a last desperate attempt to exert her power, to experience her 'regency' once more. The maps themselves are a reminder and a 'manifestation of her control'

over her farm and her household” (Bauxman, 36). Milla's desire to re-establish her power is also a way to escape Agaat's control on herself and the time she has left:

And you may have domination over my hours that you count off there and apportion with your devious little snake-hand and your white casque in front of the clock face, Agaat. But there is also space, cartographed, stippled, inalienable, the mountains, the valleys, the distance from A to B, laid down in place names for a century or two or three [...] (6)

While Milla's time is limited, maps are the representation of an eternal space, which “move and will continue moving when [she's] gone. Maps attend lifetimes. What is an age without maps?” (70) Milla seems to be incapable of thinking about her life and experiences without relating it to a map, but at the same time she claims there exist no maps to explore or understand her: “I'm an unadorned woman my ravel and my rags nobody can assemble there is no map or direction with which to navigate me (331)”. In doing so, Milla tries to establish the predominance of her own narration on herself on all other possible narrations. In this regards, Bauxman relates the maps to Milla's diaries: “both serve to impose her master narrative on events. Nevertheless, they contain 'blind spots' which contradict their coherence. In both cases, it is telling that the occlusions in question refer to Agaat, whose presence threatens to destabilise Milla's version of events” (Bauxman, 36).

The importance of maps is reflected in Milla's obsessive desire to see them at least once before dying. The motor neuron disease Milla is succumbing to force her to lie in her bed: “[a]ll the rooms of my house, the progress to where I am now, the history leading to this last room, the domain remaining to me. Shrinking domain” (19). In her condition, unable to physically assert her power on the farm and feeling for the first time in her life her mobility is constricted, she regards the map as the sole possibility she has left to experience her agency again. “How to remember , without speech, without writing, without map, an *exile within myself*. Motionless. Solid. In my bed. In my body. Shrunken away from *the world I created*” (140, my emphasis). And further:

“I want to see a map of my farm! This domain enclosed in chrome railings, this sterile room where you've got me by gullet, I'm more than that! I'm more than a rabbit in a cage!” (37). Exiled from the land, that is, exiled from herself, Milla feels she needs to recover the connection with the space in order to be able to restore her lost identity. It is not casual that Agaat, when trying to understand the object of Milla's desires, describes it as “something that's outside and inside at the same time” (178). Milla's desire to place the farm inside the boundaries of herself develops in the book in a very physical description of the process, in which the corporal dimension is cardinal:

Between the land and the map I must look, up and down, far and near until I've had enough, until I'm satiated with what I have occupied here.

And then they must roll it up in a tube and put on my neckbrace again like the mouth of a quiver. And I will close my eyes and prepare myself so that they can unscrew my head and allow the map to slip into my lacunae.

Because without my world inside me I will contract and congeal, more even than I am now, without speech and without actions and without any purchase upon time. (90)

This unexpected turn in the narration demonstrates the author's intention of challenging the traditional *plaasroman*. The romantic tones of the farmer longing for an idyllic farm where he would have been at peace with himself, are in this passage completely distorted. Commenting on this passage Bauxman claims that:

Milla's use of the word 'satiated' in the initial quotation may, at first glance, appear rather innocuous. However, the second passage elaborates on the definition in visceral, grotesque detail. She wishes to consume the external world literally and thus merge spatiality and corporeality. Moreover, she envisions the map, the image of her farm, as capable of filling the emptiness inside her. The map thus fulfils the dual purpose of providing psychological succour and physical support. (Bauxman, 37)

Her desire to consume her land together with the maps contrasts with the traditional fusion between land and farmer as discussed by J.M. Coetzee in so far that it doesn't have anything of the romantic fusion with the pastoral prospected by *plaasromans* (86). The moment when she actually sees the maps, Milla's desire to absorb the farm in herself is finally contrasted by her body, under the effect of a strong laxative. Her necessity to see the maps to recover her identity and her control over the land, and so

on herself, are finally contradicted by her physical urges, driven by Agaat. She is thus left completely helpless and resorts to imagining using the maps instead of the usual pan as only possible solution to her drama.

Unroll [the map] under me, keep the edges together and watch me make a sewerage farm out of them [ . . . ] . What does it matter in any case? Fold the water map into a little boat, set the contour map for a sail. Caulk the holds with pulp from Grootmoedersdrift. Then I sail away on my last voyage in it.  
Up to my chin in shit.  
Once and forever put in my place. Would that satisfy you? (343)

As Bauxman points out “the symbolism of the map has shifted dramatically” (38): from being the symbol of Milla's power on the farm and the embodiment of that same power, it becomes a mere representation with no actual value. The ideological function of maps as a way to assert the power on a territory by reducing it to its representation is dismantled by the symbolic overlap of “an evacuation [and] an exposition” (340).<sup>4</sup>

## **2.2 The power of knowledge and the knowledge of the farmer**

Ever since Foucault outlined the concept of *discourse* and Edward Said described how the western textual construction of the Orient can work as an ideological justification for colonization and imperialism, the connection between the possibility of producing knowledge about a land, country, population or class and the power to subjugate it became a cardinal critical point in postcolonial studies. Describing something alien according to one's own categories and parameters is another way to give it a specific order and thus to assert one's power over it. While “discovering” new lands European colonizers created also a rich body of knowledge to describe them and their population, to bring them closer to their own understanding while at the same time circumscribing them to their otherness. After the first encounter, new lands were colonized and the control over it became more practical than theoretical; still knowledge never ceased to

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<sup>4</sup> For further analysis of the relation between corporeality and spatiality in the novel see: Bauxman L., 'Embodying Space': The Search for a Nurturing Environment in Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf, Agaat* and *Memorandum*,

occupy a main role in the setting and maintaining of colonies. In fact European knowledge imposed itself not only in the depicting of new lands – a depiction which assumes the value of a reshaping – but also in the creation of those lands' history. The development of uncivilized and underprivileged countries became an ideological mission and western knowledge became the instrument to accomplish it.

As far as nature and land are concerned, western knowledge aimed on one side at classifying alien environments, flora and fauna and on the other side at providing an ideological justification for their exploitation. Apart from being the key to development, farming itself was seen as a way to dominate the wilderness the colonizer was exposed to. In *Agaat* contrastive approaches to land and farming are contemplated. The western knowledge about land and soil – expressed first of all by Milla and Jak's relation to farming – seems to differ along gender lines. While Milla claims soil has a sacred value and thus needs to be respected, Jak is more drawn to the economical value of their enterprise and appears to be interested only in his personal gain, regardless of any spiritual connection to the land of the forefathers: “ his criterion for good healthy soil is a good healthy yield” (60). Moreover “[h]e dreamed of a completely mechanised farm that would require only one or two pair of hands” (78).

Jak expresses the desire to dominate nature and to bring it under human control for as much as it is possible and in so doing to civilize the country according to a western idea of development. The progress of technology, of which he is a strong supporter, are depicted as unnatural:

[H]e had done experiments to determine the influence of the various feeds and feed supplements on the fertility of the sheep. [...] They're all very close already to the Super Utility Merino. That's the objective. [...]  
If you consider, Jak said, that there were only fat-tailed Hottentot sheep with knock-knees and Cape sheep covered in tatters in this country when the white man arrived here, then we've come a long way. (506-507)

His knowledge of land, soil and farming is only theoretical and Milla never stops

reminding him how ignorant he is on the subject. In this context, Jak struggle for success assumes the tones of a struggle to obtain supremacy, not only on nature but also on his wife and house.

Milla's approach to farming is instead based on her practical and theoretical knowledge of nature and on the respect she knows it deserves. The author seems to be establishing a direct opposition between 'old knowledge' – evaluating traditional farming methods and claiming respect for the rhythms of nature – and 'new knowledge' – aiming at larger profits through the use of technology – with a clear orientation towards the former. This contrast is presented as “the beginning of the differences. Jakop and little Milla differences” (60).

During the day you worked yourself silly on the farm. [...] Modern appliances are the answer, Milla, he said, these aren't the Middle Ages any more. Why churn on with lucerne and lupins and compost when there's fertiliser? It's all about synergies, Jak [...] Nature is subtle and complex. (75)

While Milla tries to impose her farming methods on her husband, he eventually chooses to farm separately. “Let's see he said, you do as you see fit on your precious little farm and I farm the new land” (61).

This domestic controversy, which on Jak's side is primarily a call for independence and an attempt to assert his power, is then brought into the public sphere during a social gathering. Due to the fact that after years of marriage she is finally pregnant, Milla feels extremely strong and fulfilled as the matriarchal chief of the house: she doesn't need Jak's contribution any more. Her new power inside the family gives her the right to express her personal view about farming also in public. While Jak and the other gentlemen claim that “[w]ith the new fertilizer one couldn't go wrong[...]. They could scientifically determine exactly how much phosphate, how much nitrogen, how much potassium one needed [...]” (94), Milla not only advises them to pay nature the respect it is worthy of, but also warns them against the danger of a capitalist way of

production: “That's a mistake farmers can always make. [...] I'm speaking of the wheel of Lady fortune, you said, and I'm speaking of her assistants the moneylenders [...], they who make themselves indispensable by offering certain essential services and goods on credit, and I'm speaking of monopolies” (94-95). While the guests “couldn't believe their ears”, Milla reminds them the importance of past traditions and “the lesson of history”: “Fallow is the answer, it's a tradition born of respect for nature. [...] It's the rhythms of nature that you have to respect as the Creator determined them. [...] This new greed is barbaric, it's a form of sacrilege” (97). Confronting a “crowd of men”, Milla states the sacredness of nature and of the process of life – of which she, as a pregnant woman, seems to be the defender. Moreover, she expresses her opinion on technical economic matters, such as the condition of the soil and the danger the farmers are running into, which have her win the approval of some of her fellow male farmers: “Look at the condition of the soil, you said. Thinner and poorer by the year. [...] Mrs de Wet is right, he said, and what's more, gentlemen, the soil problem in the hill country is a bigger problem than the so-called colour problem” (97).

Milla's appearing as the embodiment of Mother Nature and a representative of women as the category in charge of defending nature and traditional values would be after all quite conventional. Even though at first sight this could be a legitimate interpretation, the context can actually suggest a more complex state of things. A first indication towards a less monolithic interpretation of gender roles in the novel is Milla's parents' relation to land and the knowledge they choose to share with her during her education. In this case it is the father who evaluates the sacredness of nature the most and encourages Milla to take care of the soil she will be in charge of: “Pa taught me the importance of this old knowledge he said the wheel always turns my child there will be a time again of poverty & need & the farmer who doesn't know about the old ways then will be gone to glory[...].” (65). On a technical level a farmer has to deal with

“the deterioration of the veld in our country & the exhaustion & ill-treatment of the soil” (65), but on a more substantial level, the mission of the farmer is “the care of the defenceless earth [...] & how we must protect it all against the onslaughts of so-called civilization [...]” (65). On the contrary, the knowledge Milla receives from her mother does not regard the attitude towards nature, but the the way to rule it and the needed organization skills: “You liked working with people in a team, according to a fixed plan, with a predictable outcome, with a view to the long term. That's the only way a farm can work, you'd learnt from your mother” (77).

Another aspect which would provide a deconstruction of Milla's – and women's – role in the preserving of traditional farming is her choice to modify the long-standing habits of crop-sharing on Grootmoedersdrift: while speaking to the black workers of the farm, Milla states her plan for the farm saying that “the sharing is over, we're going to farm professionally here now, you plough in the wrong way, the soil washes away, we're going to start ploughing with rippers on the contour” (58). This passage highlights another fundamental issue in the depiction of South-African farms and farmers: in her struggle to preserve land and traditions, Milla does not take into account the black workers' traditions, thus establishing a predominance of her own – white – values on apparently invisible black customs.

Those elements contradict a rather simplistic reading of gender in the novel and leave thus the question open of why Milla seems to be presented as the champion of traditions and the defender of land, in opposition to Jak's capitalist attitude. The answer is to be found in the Afrikaner plaasroman and its ideology. Milla's approach to farming can thus be related not so much to a specific role of women as defender of helpless nature, as to a refuse of technology seen as a danger for the preservation of the idyllic space created by the forefathers, a space in which the voice of the black workers has to be silenced. However, the voice of Agaat is very much present in the book, even though

in a subtle and less evident way than Milla's.

As far as farm knowledge is concerned, Agaat is first of all presented as the receiver of Milla's knowledge. From the very beginning, when she's just a little girl, she encounters the space of the farm and is encouraged to learn from it: "I show her in my pictures book: Horse's tail, pig's tail, sheep's tail, dog's tail. There is a little finger pointing now, with its own will and purpose. Horse's eye, pig's eye, sheep's eye, dog's eye, she shows"(414). At this stage Milla considers Agaat as an empty container which she has the exclusive responsibility to fill: "[she] absorbs knowledge like a sponge. [...] [S]hould I send her to school?" (540). Later on she becomes familiar with the old books which Milla considers to be part of her "farming equipment" (40) and with farm magazines, showing a wider interest in theoretic knowledge than Jak – who according to Milla prefers to "mess[...] around with agents" (33). The reader is provided with a list of the books which form Milla's collection and thus also Agaat's library: apart from classical literature from college and reference works she inherited from her father, Milla appears to possess traditional and protest or postcolonial South African novels, such as *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* by Elsa Joubert, *The Story of an African Farm* by Olive Schreiner and *In the Heart of the Country* by J.M. Coetzee. We are actually told that the latter is "what [Agaat] reads last, recently" (13). Her response to Coetzee's critical view of the farm, seen as a grotesque metaphor for fading South Africa's values, is controversial; Agaat is apparently grown so much into Afrikaner ideology that her comment on the book is a rather practical one, based on her personal abilities as a farmer: "Nay what, she said, she could farm up a piece of land better than the wrecked old Johanna who lost her marbles for no reason at all, and she wouldn't let a bunch of forwards kaffir get her down" (13). She even gets to affirm that no fictional work is as good as her mistress's diary, which she has been reading since the beginning of Milla's physical decline. According to Milla's interpretation, though, Agaat changes

her attitude after having read *The Seed is Mine* because of the extremely personal connection she had established with fennel seed – an aspect which will be explored later on in this work.

Farmer knowledge assumes the role of a sacred knowledge and gets in fact to be appraised as such. An evidence of that is the ritual reading of a farmer book held by Agaat on Milla's death-bed, which is introduced as follows: “from the section Soil and factors that can influence plant growth, from the chapter An unchecked danger, from the paragraph, The erosion process” (557) and immediately followed by a powerful hymn invoking the presence of God. Nevertheless an undertone of mockery is always present, and it is thus not evident whether the religious value is attributed by Agaat self or only by Milla. The reader in fact can never be absolutely sure of his interpretation of Agaat's behaviour or words. This is especially true since for the greater part of the novel the reader can actually see her only through the eyes of Milla, who alternates her certainty about Agaat's thoughts with an equal amount of doubts.

Agricultural knowledge in the novel is deeply connected with power. The power to establish one's own control on the land but also the power to declare one's supremacy on the house and inside the family. While Jak is constantly trying to asserts the power he should have as chief of the patriarchal family and in so doing to fight his frustration for not actually being one, Milla uses her knowledge to make him feel inferior and thus confirm her status as mistress of the house. The silenced presence of Agaat and her personal knowledge further complicate the situation and represent in fact an element of disturb that also contributes to define the struggle for power inside the couple.

### **2.3 Two different (gendered) approaches to nature: Jak's exploratory attitude**

The relation that Jak develops with the landscape responds to a typically masculine approach to nature, nurtured by a rich literary tradition attributing to men the right and

duty to explore wilderness, confront it and finally dominate it. The same attitude is found by Jakkie among many of his contemporaries, “the finely cultivated, the intellectuals” who endlessly declare their dominance through their “self-exculpating autobiographical writing, variants on the Hemingway option. How to get an uncivilised place in a civilised way. And stay there. A grim tussle with mother nature” (4-5). Jak's literary predilections are the results of this same attitude: it is not casual that his favourite books do not investigate agricultural techniques but tell instead adventurous stories of dangerous explorations, by Ian Fleming – the author of James Bond – or Louis L'Amour – the author of several western novels. After all “[h]e was no farm boy. His hands were soft, he was the only son of the GP in Caledon, schooled at Bishop to be a gentleman” (22).

At first Jak approaches farming as a challenging experience through which he could prove his masculinity. After having obtained his first successes, but still troubled by his wife's constant reproaches, he eventually diverts his interests elsewhere, looking for another way to test his value. Even though he considers himself to be a “soilmaster” (103), Milla's opinion of him and of his efforts and capabilities is in fact quite low: “J. thinks he's shown what he can do with wheat & isn't at all interested in the farm any more. [...] Planning & management bore him. Soil & water are all my responsibility & I tell him that's the difference between a living and a dead farm” (32-33). Jak eventually resorts to the exploration of uninhabited areas and dangerous sports. He would turn to nature especially during the quieter times at Grootmoedersdrift: “Weekend and holidays were the worst, and the quiet times on the farm between seasons. Because then he wanted to go mountain-climbing or running or rowing, or to read his books” (77). Not only does he seek competition as a way to show his value, he also indulges in a very evident self-gratification – made of portraits and tailor-made sports clothing – which is in fact very distant from the image of the rough man who is

ready and able to conquer the wilderness. However, this characterization of Jak comes actually from the voice of his wife. Milla depicts him as an easily bored, self-centred, violent, stubborn boy who cannot and does not want to take care of his house and family and thus runs away to nature in order to avoid his responsibilities. Even though this description may seem quite accurate and makes in fact the sympathies of the readers to go to Milla, Jak manages to get his say on the subject too and, very surprisingly, to partially modify the reader's opinion over him and their marriage. Jak presents himself as the victim of Milla's desire for power, and his urge to compete is somehow made more understandable. In his words his necessity to escape from the farm and connect to nature becomes his need to find his own sacred place, where he would finally be free from Milla's control and dissatisfaction:

I see it in the wilderness, I see it when I'm hanging from my ropes between heaven and earth, then I understand it, dumb retarded bastard that I am, I see it only after I've run myself to a frazzle for miles, or when I'm clambering up sheer rock faces. Then I see it, then I see what's happening here! (354)

More than a moment of epiphany, wild nature becomes to him also the means through which he can relate to his son and an educational tool. They achieved “best times for father-and-son teams [...], came home with glittering trophies and gilt canoes mounted on wooden blocks” (323). Jak's desire to involve Jakkie in his competitions and races means actually more to him than just a desire to spend some time together and reinforce the family bonds. The struggle against wild nature which, as discussed above, expresses a desire to explore and dominate it in order to prove a man's power to bring the unknown under control and to turn wilderness into civilization, is considered a fundamental step to grow up as a 'real man'. What the landscape means to Jak is “[o]bstacles courses through dongas and drinking troughs. Spleen-stitch. Inguinal hernia. Up and down those mountains” and it is especially valuable because “[i]t will make a man of [Jakkie]” (7). Jak's attitude towards his son as he is growing up reflects

his need to prove his masculinity. As he feels himself that his power has been taken away by Milla, he also feels that she and Agaat are taking away his son's developing masculinity: “When Jak heard [Milla and Jakkie] making music, he would lure him away. Musical morbs again, he would say, and took him along to go running or rowing” (323). His other wish is to re-establish the patriarchal order typical of Afrikaner society: “Jak wants to teach him [to swim] but he's far too rough with the child [...]. J. says he must toughen up the child there are hard bones ahead I ask what bones he says the bones of our fathers their battle which we must fight further our enemies are legion” (271). Jak repeatedly tries to test his son's capability and eventually brings him to the mountains on a survival trip: “ This is not a picnic, we're going to match our strength against nature. [...] Now there was a risk of exposure, of getting lost, in the wilderness, in the cold” (323). Even though he partially promotes their adventure as a way to get to know each other better, his actual purpose is to have Jakkie “taste a bit of what life's actually all about” (321). Milla experiences the whole educating process as an attempt of Jak to take Jakkie away from her: “[m]y child, you thought, I'm losing my child, first to Agaat and now to Jak [...]” (323). Once grown up, Jakkie appears to have become the 'real man' his father wanted him to be: “[h]e was a body of potentials for his father, a model of endurance, of physical discipline, of drilled limbs and sharpened reflexes. [...] You knew that it was the supreme games of heroes [...] You had the right to be proud” (387). Jak is actually only deceiving himself since his son's identification with Afrikaner identity and a very masculine – dominating – approach to land does not correspond to the truth. Jakkie, in fact, depicts the land of his childhood with the lyric tones he inherited from his mother and above all with the affection Agaat transmitted to him.<sup>5</sup>

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5 Jakkie's lyric description of the farm and the land around it, even if characterized by an undertone of irony due to his love-hate relationship with the 'beloved country', focuses on the romantic aspects of the landscape – and in particular on colours and scents (1-7).

## 2.4 Two different (gendered) approaches to nature: Milla's quest for a refuge

When beginning her new life as a farmer and a married woman, Milla is full of expectations about her accomplishing all her goals and being able to fulfil her role as the mainstay of the family. However, her relationship with her husband, her incapability to conceive an heir and her complex relationship with Agaat make her life on the farm extremely arduous. In this context both nature and the farm become for her a refuge, thanks to which she can feel both relieved and useful. On one side she uses farming as a survival strategy to divert her attention from her dissatisfaction and unhappiness: “[y]ou tried to console yourself with work. When there was plenty of pressure on the farm, things that had to be done urgently and accurately, you were the happiest” (77). Moreover, nature is presented as a tentative solution for her loneliness: after trying to console herself thinking that “Not one of the women [she] knew was 'fulfilled' “ (79) she attempts to involve them in some productive yet quite silly activities which would keep them occupied but which unfortunately do not succeed.

What failed most miserably was walking club for amateur botanists that you tried to get going. [...] But after you'd invaded the foothills a few time with the *little ladies*, stumbling along in their Sunday-best shoes, and their dresses that snagged on everything, and the anxious out-of-breath countenance solely concerned about what they had to serve their husbands for supper, you gave it up. *You were not like them, you thought, you'd born to more adventurous ways.* (79, my emphasis)

After having sought other women's company, she finally realizes a communion between them is not actually possible. In fact she considers those “little ladies” as inferior to herself; while they seem completely at ease with covering the role patriarchal society imposed on them, she considers herself as a more free, adventurous individual, who could not find her satisfaction in the ordinary daily routine of simply being a wife and a mother. The other women are presented as inadequate and incapable of coping with the environment, and finally not even willing to do so. It is nevertheless true that the walking club Milla promotes, as well as the reading group and the music-

appreciation group, are in fact absolutely non-adventurous stereotyped feminine activities. Her sense of superiority seems merely an attempt to built up her self-esteem, indulging the idea that she is somehow special, different from anybody else.

The only time Milla actually manages to develop what she thinks is a true connection with another woman – and with nature – is when she first brings Agaat home. The presence of the little girl changes her whole attitude towards life and nature and she starts to perceive a connection between all living things:

It's the first time in my life that I understand it like this, the impersonal unity of all livings things. It doesn't matter who is who. The speaker and the listener. The shell and the sea, the mother cat and the human hand that stirs her blind litter, the wind and the soughing pine, the dry drift and the flood. It's one energy. We are one, Agaat and I, I feel it stir in my navel. (445)

The connection she believes she is experiencing with Agaat brings her closer to natural elements, which become for her the embodiment of life itself. Moreover, nature becomes also the place where she can built her relationship with Agaat, free from the social limitations which will later bring her to outcast her. The relationship between herself and the land she owns is not only fundamental for her identity but it is also what ultimately keeps her alive giving her the proof life still exists outside herself and her dying body:

[p]erhaps they can carry me out into the yard one more time [...]. So that I can see. So that I can smell the dust [...], praise the one who will break open a bale before my feet so that I can see the density, the power, and the glory. [...] I want to feel once more in my palms the chirp and throb of the body of a chick. (89)

In this circumstance she experience such a deep connection with her land that she actually describes herself as land, while Agaat's taking care of her is compared to farming. The farm is here presented not as the emblem of organization and efficiency, but as a deeply troubled entity:

*I'm her sick merino sheep her exhausted soil her fallow land full of white stones  
her blown-up cow and acre of lodged grain her rusty wheat her drift [...]. (362)*

Milla, and the farm, are seen as surrendering to its master – Agaat – and pleading her

for help. Aagaat becomes thus an healing figure in charge of reconciling Milla with her land and herself. In fact, even though Milla perceives herself as one thing with her land, the land itself seems to be refusing her. A variety of difficulties arise and her experience as a farmer and wife/mother is never so smooth as she thinks it would be.

Very interestingly, Africa was rarely mythicized as a land of abundance and ease, as was the case with America. As J.M. Coetzee points out, the African landscape “remains alien, impenetrable, until a language is found in which to win it, speak it, represent it” (7). However, the difficult position of the Afrikaners, who considered themselves as truly Africans but where in fact of European origin, did not allow them to find a way to communicate with the land successfully or to develop a personal, specific connection with it. Coetzee continues arguing that “if the pastoral writer mythologizes the earth as a mother, it is more often than not an harsh, dry mother without curves and hollows, infertile, unwilling to welcome her children back even when they ask to be buried in her” (9). Even though Milla does not really perceive the earth as a mother but considers herself to be the mother of the earth instead – the one responsible for bringing life to the abandoned farm – she still has to face a rejection from what she would like to be her safe refuge.

### **2.5 Aagaat's second sight: a new approach towards nature**

As her father did with her when she was a child, Milla takes Aagaat to the forest to show her the nature around them. Their exploration of nature is coloured by genuine curiosity, but it is also a way to teach her what she needs to know about plants:

Those were your best moments, those excursions, those long hours in fragrant nurseries with your reference books and looking at the exotic flowering-habits and feeling the leaves of all unfamiliar plants. (398)

Milla appears to be enthusiastic about Aagaat's spontaneous curiosity when observing nature, plants and animals, but she also considers it fundamental to turn their

excursions into instructive moments. Recreating the moments she spent in the forest with her father when she was little and thanks to his reference books, Milla is not only teaching Agaat the names of plants and insects but also the way she is supposed to relate to them. In observing nature she is also attributing it an order:

One of our best things nowadays is to walk in the veld & learn the names of things. Insects, birds, small reptiles, small mammals, grass varieties, wild flowers, stones. I take Pa's old reference books along [...] and then we identify things & collect samples. (534)

Moreover, she tries to control Agaat's spontaneous attempt to connect to nature. After having thought her a sequence of movements which she calls 'The Greeting to the Sun' – “Now I thought up a warming-up exercise. 'The Greeting to the Sun' I called it. [...] good morning, o mighty king sun!” (413-414) – she is surprised to see Agaat inventing her own improvised dance:

Now there's no way stopping her now she's even teaching me. Again this morning we had the so-called dance of the emperor butterflies that first sits dead still with its wings tightly folded [...] and then it unfolds its wings with the dawning so she tells & she invents the dance as she goes along. [...] he gets the urge to fly, quite intoxicated with his own colour in the sun that's rising higher & higher & shining brighter & brighter [...]. (540)

Milla cannot tolerate the struggle for freedom expressed by this dance and soon starts imposing her own order on it: “Point your toes, Agaat! I call & demonstrate the ballet position with the hands [...]” (541).

Nevertheless, Agaat often expresses her personal interpretation of the natural events she confronted herself with. Agaat's remarks are often surprising to Milla and they offer a new perspective on nature. Agaat seems to have a deeper understanding of nature, or at least a different way to look at it:

A. has a god eye, remembers all marks, see things that I don't notice [...].  
Some stones are warmer than others she says. Can it be that the child has *second sight*? (534, emphasis mine)

Agaat's remarks and her unsettling reactions at the contact with natural elements also contribute to make nature a less safe refuge for Milla. Her comforting perception of

reality is in fact shaken by Aagaat's interpretations, which introduce the possibility of new meanings and thus undermines the body of knowledge she is used to associate to nature.

According to Cheryl Stobie, Aagaat “practises a kind of nature mysticism allied to the elements, particularly fire, but also associated with animal sacrifice and butterflies [...]” (Stobie: 2009, 65). She appears to be thrilled by the darker aspects of nature, which to Milla are connected to a negative, possibly evil imaginary. “Took A. up into Luipaardskloof to the bat cave she's very fascinated by a mouse that can fly creepy & smelly the place [...]” (539). This becomes even more evident after Aagaat has been outcast from the family house. From that moment on she starts disappearing during the night to execute in secret the improvised rituals through which she connects to nature in her own personal way. Those moments are spied on by Milla, who tries in vain to detect their meaning:

The running off in the night. Feels as if I could have dreamed it all. [...] That to-do on the hill I can't figure out. [...] Judgement? Blessing? Over the hills over the valley along the river? A farewell ritual? (129)

Aagaat's rituals seems to be her personal answer to the moments of discomfort she experiences and have thus an healing value: when relating to nature, she is regenerating herself. Moreover, they are addressed to different natural elements. For example, when the family goes to the seaside on holiday and many white tourists are present, it is made very clear to her that she does not belong to the family. In this case it is the sea which accommodates her mournings :

She walks over the sand deep washed-out pools of water straight into the sea straight ahead into the waves without hesitation or turning back or lifting of arms a prow. (268)

Something similar happens when Jakkie leaves to follow his military training, after which he is supposed to join the Air Force permanently. Once again, to Milla's surprise,

she disappears. “Wonder where A. is. Disappeared into thin air when they left here. What on earth does she do to console herself?” (366). Her solution is to run away into nature, where she, unlike Milla, can actually find her refuge:

Tracked hr down this afternoon down next to the wild-fig avenue & further down nest to the river [...] there she stood & did hr funny movements forward & back turn around stamping the feet the arm up the cap down. (366)

Milla's inability to understand Agaat's behaviour brings her to believe it is something evil. She accuses Agaat to be a witch performing satanic rites (380). In fact, what Milla does is to refuse a priori a relationship with nature she cannot understand and dismisses as evil, in a clear example of what the fear of what is different can produce.

## Chapter 3

### A powerful femininity

#### 3.1 The volksmoeder's myth

In order to understand in which terms *Agaat* revises the traditional idea of womanhood in the plaasroman, it is useful to investigate how this idea was originally defined and presented. As previously discussed, the plaasroman attributed a very specific role to women in the family structure. While their role can be easily compared to that of the idealized woman of the English Victorian Age, the so-called 'angel in the house', it had in fact some specific features which brought to the birth of the volksmoeder myth. The Afrikaner volksmoeder, or 'mother of the nation' did not only have the responsibility to preserve the values of patriarchal society inside the house and protect her husband from the degradation of the outer world, but was also considered “a central unifying force within Afrikanerdom and, as such, was expected to fulfil a political role as well” (Brink, 273). The figure of volksmoeder was in fact strictly linked to the mythicized Afrikaner past and was thus considered sacred.

Brinks summarizes the process through which the volksmoeder myth was born, starting from its origin in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Afrikaner woman started being idealized as a response to English colonial historiography describing Afrikaner settlers as ignorant, immoral and cruel, closer to the uncivilized inborn population than to the other European settlers. The experience of the Anglo-Boer War and the emergence of Afrikaner nationalism at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century further enriched the volksmoeder figure. Historiography describing the suffering of Afrikaner women and children during the war celebrated women's patriotism and courage, and finally contributed to enlarge the set of characteristics attributed to women. Later, in a period of social and economic changes, when due to urbanization the farm was losing its status as society's most fundamental structure, the Afrikaner woman – as was the

case with the farm – became the bastion of endangered values.

Brink underlines how “[i]n this concern one can identify 'both a genuine, popular nationalist enthusiasm and a systematic, even Machiavellian, instilling of nationalist ideology through the mass media, the educational system, administrative regulations, and so forth’(274-275). This deliberately promoted idea of woman was lately internalized by women believing their role was not only to be mothers to their sons but also to the whole nation:

At one level, then, the notion represented the ideological incorporation of women into a male-dominated nationalism. In this way a socially, morally, economically and politically subordinate place was clearly defined for Afrikaner women within society. The volksmoeder ideal promoted a dependent position for women, as participants in the lives of their husbands and children rather than active in their own lives. Only within this [...] role could women achieve social recognition. (Brink, 291)

In regard to this definition it is obvious that Milla does not meet the criteria of the volksmoeder's myth, which is in fact revised by the novel. The most evident reason why she cannot possibly be an example of traditional mother of the nation is that she does not occupy a subordinate position to her husband but is instead the main farmer on the land she possesses. Moreover, her actions and choices demonstrate her desire to transcend the specific limit assigned to her gender by Afrikaner patriarchal society, which finally refuses her. A first example of this is her speech about farming techniques and soil, which she holds in front of a group of male farmers. Milla's impetuous intervention arise the audience's curiosity more than their interest, and is perceived as risible:

The roar that arose drew more people to the table. What's going on here? We also want to hear! *What's the joke?*  
*Jak was uncomfortable.* He tried, but he couldn't get up because people were crowding around the table. He fumbled with his bow tie, took large gulps from his glass.  
Ask Milla de Wet! one called out, she started it. *Ask Jak, looks like she's got him under her thumb!* (95, my emphasis)

Milla's inappropriate intervention in the public sphere, which according to patriarchal ideology should be exclusive competence of the man, is an immediate source of

embarrassment for Jak, who is derided for not being able to control his wife. The reaction of a group of friends Milla looks at when looking for support, also demonstrates how her behaviour is regarded as socially unacceptable:

“[t]he little chap glanced around somewhat anxiously when he saw that you wanted to say something. His wife looked at the glass in your hand. Beatrice as well, all the woman at the table thought that when a woman opened her mouth like that in male company it had to be because she was tipsy”. (97)

Milla's behaviour is so unacceptable to the other women that they have to identify a possible explanation to it that wouldn't endanger the whole system, which is finally an abuse of alcohol. Milla, driven by her anger towards Jak, gives no signs of embarrassment – “You're welcome to look as much as you like, you thought to yourself and smiled at Beatrice” (97) – but humiliates her husband in public implicitly accusing him of beating her: “if a farmer clears and levels his land year after year it's as good as beating his wife every night. In a manner of speaking, you added, but the words were out and they had been spoken” (98). These words not only come as a shock to the audience, but they also put an end to Milla's participation in the social event, metaphorically putting an end to the possibility of a social coexistence outside the rule of Afrikaner society: “[y]ou saw Beatrice gasping for breath and putting her hand in front of her mouth. A heavy silence descended. [...] Now it's enough, Jak hissed, now we're leaving, you and I” (98).

Milla's insinuation is perceived as dangerous exactly because it reveals the weaknesses of the patriarchal system and it betrays the sacredness of marriage. This is even more evident when Milla decides to openly tell her friend Beatrice about the domestic violence of which she has been the victim and to ask her about her marriage as well:

Then you told her about Jak, about how he treated you. She listened. [...] the more you told the less she wanted to hear, but you kept her there. [...] And then you saw it, how she clammed shut, how the defensiveness came over her, over her mouth and into her eyes. *More than defensiveness, disgust, judgement.* Of you, not of Jak.

I shall never talk out of the house, Milla. Marriage is holy and it's private. *Everything depends on that.* Thys has his faults but he's a good human being, a good man, and I stand by him through thick and thin, as I promised before the holy Lord. (102-103, my emphasis)

Even though Milla seems to completely refuse her role as volksmoeder and to be indifferent to the judgement of people, at times she appears to be sacrificing herself in order to respond to the requests of society. While the spirit of sacrifice is one of the defying characteristics of the volksmoeder as summarized by Van Niekerk<sup>6</sup>, we can assume from the text that Milla uses social pressure as an excuse for some of her choices and so avoids taking full responsibility for them. In this regard her decision to radically modify the status of Agaat inside the family through moving her out of the house and so turning her into a servant is particularly relevant:

Understand for the first time why everything had to happen the way it did God's great Providence.[...] *Now everything is as it should be suppose it's the right thing to do* for everyone's sake. It's not as if there was any other way out. Phoned Beatrice to tell her of my decision & she's now considerably relieved & full of sweet talks & wants to propose me for chairlady of WAU. Imagine! I could slap the woman, really.

Situation with J. be thanked better now that I'm doing something about the matter. That it should cost so much but I'd rather not think about it. (31-32, my emphasis)

While she depicts her repudiating her foster daughter as something she was forced to do by the laws of a society which takes colour difference into great account, at the same time she repeatedly tries to exculpate herself through expressing her conviction that she is doing “the right thing”, presenting her acting according to the Afrikaner ideology as her duty as a good steward. What she does not notice is that what she is truly sacrificing is Agaat's happiness and the deep relationship between the two of them. Even though Milla realizes the sacrifice “will cost so much”, she prefers not to think about the consequences of her surrendering. Not surprisingly, her choice to “do something about the matter” resolves in her being reintegrated as a functional member

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<sup>6</sup> Van Niekerk identify the characteristics of the volksmoeder as “religion, bravery, a love of freedom, the spirit of sacrifice, self-reliance, housewifeliness, integrity, virtue and the setting of an example to others” (1996, qtd. in Devarenne, 632).

of society – by Beatrice, who offers her to become chairlady of a women association, and by her husband, who believes Milla's priority is to take care of her legitimate heir.

### **3.2 A matriarch in the making**

The dominant position of women on Grootmoedersdrift contrasts with the traditional patriarchal structure of Afrikaner farms. According to J.M. Coetzee “in the farm novel we find women, in effect, imprisoned in the farmhouse, confined to the breast-function of giving food to men, cut off from outdoors” (9). In this case, on the contrary, women are the ones who actually hold the power in their hands and are also very present in the outside space, which gets to be their domain. This is true not only for the present time of the narration – in which Milla and Agaat share the power on the farm and are responsible for it – but also for the past. The forefathers celebrated in this plaasroman are actually “foremothers”: Milla's mother, grandmother and great-grandmother founded and cared for the maintaining and consolidating of the farm. The figure of the great-grandmother is held as an example and stories about her have been told to Milla since she was a little girl: “and look here, the portrait of the grandmother. [...] Look, Milla, it's she who farmed into being this little plot of earth. One day it will be yours. A matriarch in the making” (242). The name of the farm itself recalls the female ancestor who created it, giving birth to Milla's homestead: “*It had been her ancestral land for generation back in her mother's line [...].* They were the ones, according to her, who planted the wild fig avenue there and traced the *foundation of the homestead* with lynx-hide ropes” (25, my emphasis). From a matriarchal line perspective, Milla is now in charge of being a good steward, that is to reclaim the right her female ancestors previously established on the land through her work: “You don't throw away your birthright, your mother said to Jak, that which your ancestors built up in the sweat of their brow, that you look after and you live up to” (25).

The patriarchal family structure is challenged but not completely dismantled. As previously discussed, Milla needs to achieve the status of married woman to be able to become the master of the farm. However, as it is the case both for her and her female ancestors, the actual role of the husband is limited. While explaining to his future son-in-law how the life on the farm and the structure of the family will be after the wedding, Milla's mother tells him that farming is “in Kamilla's blood” and that “[h]er great-grandmother farmed there *all alone* for thirty years after her husband's death” (25, my emphasis). In so doing, Milla's mother not only reconnects the entitlement of the land to the first woman who farmed it, underlining Milla's matriarchal heritage and responsibility in restating the connection between the family and the land, but also stresses the independence of this quasi-mythical “foremother” in the establishing and preserving of the farm. The following generations reinforce the matriarchal heritage due to the physical or metaphorical death of the patriarchal figure. While Milla's great-grandmother farmed on her own after her husband's death, Milla's mother had to abandon the farming of the land she inherited in order to take care of her husband's farm.

While the matriarchal line is re-established when Milla inherits Grootmoedersdrift getting married to a landless man, her mother is expected to guarantee the proliferation of the patriarchal line. Interesting enough she is not actually able to do so, not being able to provide the family with a male heir. However, even on her husband's farm, Milla's mother is actually the dominant figure: as Jak notes, she has “finished off [Milla's] father” (25). She is the one in charge of the farm and the one who has the power on the land and inside the family. Not only does she organize the working days on the farm, she also covers her husband's role as far as family matters concerns: she is the one to evaluate Jak as a potential farmer for her land and husband for her daughter.

Ma was sceptical when you first told her about him. [...] *show me a man who prefers*

*music and drama to rugby.* You wanted to ask, what about Pa, but *Pa put his finger to his lips* and you bit back your words. [...] Your mother was adamant. After Jak had got his degree in law at Stellenbosch, she said, you had to see it that he did a diploma at Elsenburg Agricultural College to prepare him for farming. Either that, or he doesn't set his foot on *my land*, she said” (22-23, my emphasis).

Her dominant position allows her to set conditions on her daughter's suitor: she wants to make sure he is “man enough” to be able to assume the role that patriarchal farmer society attributes to him.<sup>7</sup> However, she perceives her own husband as insufficient and incapable to cope with the power he is supposed to have, a power that she herself is more than willing to hold. At the same time, she instructs Milla on how to become the head of the house herself, silencing the voice and thoughts of her future husband.

Milla's semi-conscious struggle for power starts as a seduction, carried on both through speech and sexual acts. Milla uses Jak's lack of confidence and desire to be appreciated to seduce him with promises of an easy success. Moreover, she uses sex as a weapon to manipulate him and lead him to their new life as farmers. Even though with a hint of embarrassment, she uses her body to divert his attention from the actual entity of the commitment he's taking: “[y]ou were ashamed. You twined your fingers through Jak's and leant over him, so that your breasts rested on his shoulder while you were pretending to study the map”(25). The culminating moment of Milla's seduction – and the ritual moment when she finally achieves the power on the farm – is the first time the couple travels to Grootmoedersdrift through the Tradouw, a mountainous pass whose name means “the way of women”. The pass has obviously a metaphorical meaning: it is the passage towards a new life in the farm and an improved status in her life. “Tradouw, the way of the women in the Hottentot language [...]. You were a real woman now, a ring on your finger. Now the two of you just had to get to the other side” (30). While directing Jak on the road, Milla feels she is in charge of their future

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Jakkie will later define Agaat as “man enough” to rule on the farm she will inherit (583), while for his father's efforts to “make a man of him”, Jakkie himself appears not to be suitable for the task.

and of the land they are crossing. Her personal power reflects not only in Jak, but also in the physical structure of reality around them. “I’m the one who directs everything, the roughly ranked rock faces, the dark waterway far below, the curves in the road, the clouds far above. Everything your domain” (27).

The new path they are taking up begins with an act of sex, a reference to the beginning of life according to the laws of nature. Their erotic intercourse is ruled not by Jak but by Milla, who feels her power growing more and more as her fiancé's desire for her grows and as he progressively loses rational control on himself. While in the beginning she plans to finally surrender herself to him once arrived in the farm, on her own soil – “On the other side of the mountain you would lie down for him, on your property, as it had to be in your story-book” (28-29) – she eventually changes her mind during the trip. Sexual intercourse becomes then the seal of her new status as woman and farmer: “You had a fantasy that your mother would see you. See with her own eyes how ownership and history and heritage all were finding their course, as it was predestined, with the brute energy of a fresh start” (27). Her desire to be seen by her mother expresses once more her desire to reject her mother's control on her and finally become her own master. Furthermore, she reconnected the ideological issues of heritage to its more physical aspects.

While the passing of Tradouw helps Milla to achieve definitive control on her body, her future husband and her farm, Jak's violence the night before the wedding and her having to cover up the bruises he gave her, brings the narration back towards a more traditional, patriarchal view of marriage and put her back to a subjugated position. Milla is “[d]ragged [...] by the hair across the back stoep of the homestead of Grootmoedersdrift” (40). Violence is not only the starting point of Milla and Jak's relationship, but it becomes also a common element of their marriage. However, when the development of the narration allows the reader to see Jak's perspective on the facts,

violence is explained as one of the ways Jak expresses his frustration towards his wife, for whom nothing seems to suffice:

She complained about the earth and complained about the water and complained about the air and complained about the fire. [...] she wanted him to be the master and control everything as she would do it herself if she herself could be good-looking and strong and clever and rich and be the master. (305)

Jak provides the reader with a different perspective on Milla's personality when he accuses her to be extremely self-centred and dishonest with him and herself: "Mrs Helpless the Wet with the querulous bleat is a costume. Trying to attract attention, that's all. [...] actually she's perfectly sure-footed, Queen of the Night, immortal, and she rules the world around here (435). He further attributes her attachment to the farm and family to what he perceives as Milla's basic need:

Her homestead, her farm, her birthright, her child, her reputation in the farming community? All just to be able to stay with this Jak de Wet [...]. You need me to mistreat you. Do you know why? That's how your mother taught you. And her mother before her taught her, all the way to Eve, to the tree in paradise. (355)

According to Jak's reading, Milla's would be, after all, still subjected to the patriarchal ideology transmitted to her by her female ancestors. To him what connects women to one other is not so much a particular role inside family and society, but their status as subjected elements. While obviously Jak's interpretation could be misleading because biased, it effectively contributes to a non monolithic representation of patriarchy in the novel: the violence Milla experiences in her wedding and the legacy of patriarchal hierarchy place her only partially outside of the conventional subjugated role of women and can thus be considered as a narrative tool to problematize power relations among the characters.

### **3.3 Motherhood and maternalism**

The issue of motherhood, as part of the volksmoeder myth and as a defying element of

Milla's character, is very important to the novel. In her struggle to shape Grootmoedersdrift as a nourishing environment, Milla has to deal with the problematic relation she had with her female ancestors – both her great-grandmother who set an unreachable standard of womanhood and her loveless mother who could never appreciate her and her efforts – and with the one she tries to establish with her foster daughter Agaat.

As previously discussed, when confronted with her duty as a volksmoeder, Milla feels on one side rebellious, but on the other side also deeply deficient. Her greater fault in this sense is her not being able to get pregnant, which she experiences as a personal failure and not as a fortuity. When expressing her disappointment, she stresses her inadequacy towards what she considers to be a woman's main duty in life. As a childless woman she feels incomplete, as if a fundamental part of herself is missing. Moreover, she blames solely herself – and not her husband – for not being able to conceive a child, who would be both the proof of her achievements as a matriarch and a possibility for her to succeed in establishing an everlasting connection with another human being, thus compensating for the lack of affection she experienced in her life.

In describing her condition, Milla relates it to the natural world, which is in fact the basis of her understanding of reality and life. Since she believes giving birth should be the natural task of women, her not failure in conceiving is perceived as something against the laws of nature: “Why can the animals manage it so easily? Am I of the wrong nature, then?” (77). Moreover, she compares her fertility issues with farming when referring to herself as the soil and to Jak as the plougher who is supposed to provide the seed. However, the metaphorical encounter between soil and farmer does not present any of the idyllic features it was traditionally supposed to have. Instead of being an extreme act of love between the caring farmer and his land, an act which would bring prosperity to the family and honour to the forefathers, ploughing is in fact

presented as an act of violence through which the farmer wants to prove his indisputable power on the soil he's farming, or in this case on his wife: "If you want to be my soil, I'll do on it as I want to. [...] Now tell me, what kind of soil are you?" (99).

Jak highlights Milla's failure using it as a way to prove his superiority as a farmer; after having improved the farm according to his technological ideas and standards, he addresses his wife saying "[n]ow it's only you who must show that you can increase abundantly" (61) and later, when she is lecturing him about traditional farming methods, he adds "[y]ou're a fine one to talk! [...] Bah! Nature! And you can't get pregnant! (75). While Jak – having increased the farm and thus re-established the family's control on the land – has carried out his duty in the Afrikaner family, Milla on the contrary hasn't fulfilled her task as a volksmoeder, since she isn't able to provide a heir who would carry on and reinforce the connection between the family and the land. Interestingly, Jak believes her supposed infertility depends not on a physical problem, but on her refusing to adjust to her traditional role as the caring and nourishing figure inside their household: "It's in your head something is wrong. It's because you wear yourself out like that, he said, just stop bawling, then things will come right [...]. Where is the loving gentle Milla I married?" (75). Focused on her purpose and by then resigned to build a positive relation with her husband, Milla starts considering sex only as a necessary, even though unpleasant, step on the road to maternity: "You no longer guided his hand over your body to teach him how to touch you. You were after something else. You bent your head and sucked him off and caught his semen in you hand and tried to inseminate yourself" (76). Unable to controvert the laws of nature and to provide by herself for her insemination, when she finally gets pregnant she sees it as an unexpected reward :

[...] Long after you've given up all hopes the reward.  
It felt as if [...] you're body vibrated, your body, always inadequate, always inferior, but now too much, too full. [...] not a laboriously artificial and forced affair, but an

entirely natural process. (93)

Milla experiences pregnancy as a revelation which she perceives first of all through her body. This is a knowledge that her husband cannot share, since “he could not know it with his body” (93). However, she tries to deceive herself describing her pregnancy as “an entirely natural process”, thus denying her efforts to obtain the attention of her husband and, when this wasn't possible any more, to get pregnant otherwise ( i.e. her humiliating and gross attempts to inseminate herself).

While trying to produce an heir to the family, Milla finds another way to satisfy her motherhood instinct and her need for human connection. That is when Agaat enters the picture. Even though, especially in the beginning, Milla manages to connect with the discarded girl, the relationship between the two is vitiated by the weight of a colonial heritage which does not allow Milla to go past the race difference. In the darkest hours of her marriage, Milla turns to her foster child for comfort: “that's the best that I've felt with her. Peaceful. Secure. A kind of motherhood even. [...] I wanted to press her to me. But that's against the rules” (443-444). When Jak beats her, Milla slips into Agaat's bed and lay down near her, even though without having the courage to establish the level of physical connection she desires: in so doing she enters a safe space, a “motherhood even” thanks to which she can neutralize the effects of violence and thus regenerate herself.

Having failed to create a nourishing environment by herself, Milla cannot even accept the one created by Agaat, since she has been taught to consider her an inferior human being. What could have been a meaningful mother-daughter relation is finally ruined by Milla's internalized racism and social conventions. In this regards, Marijke van Vuuren notes how Milla's names reflect the influence of the social taboos on which the segregation laws were based: “Milla, who has reminded others that she comes from the "house of reason" (238) (her maiden name is Redelinguys), has come to live in the

house of De Wet – the law” (Van Vuuren M., 96) . Her feeling superior to Agaat spoils their relationship from the very beginning, since she feels she is saving the poor girl from a dreadful fate by giving her civilization and, most importantly, creating her as a “fully developed human being” who would meet white standards. Moreover, while educating Agaat as a *boer* daughter and having her live in her own room inside the house, she gives her the impression she actually belongs to the family. The intimacy between Milla and Agaat, which could have been the only source of affection for the former, translates into a means of control on the latter, according to the principle identified by critic Shireen Ally as “maternalism”. Alley describes maternalism as a strategic use of intimacy carried out by employers in order to better control workers, of which the “mystifying ideology of being 'like one of the family' [is] the most potent expression” (Alley: 2010, qtd. in Hunter, 75). In fact, when confining Agaat to her new room outside the house, Milla “betrays the trust and love that she has deliberately cultivated [in her]” (Hunter, 75). Agaat's identity, which had been carefully built in the previous years by her foster mother, is dismantled at once. Only much later will Milla realize what devastating impact her choices have had on Agaat's life.

### **3.3.1 Milla's self assigned creative power**

As previously discussed, when relating to her foster child Milla sees her as a subjugated being and herself as the origin and main cause of her existence. Appropriating the role of mother, the one who gives life, she at the same time attributes to Agaat the role of object of her creation, the one who has been blessed with the gift of life. Evidence of Milla considering herself as the God who “breathe[s] life into the child” (451), thus raising her from a state of quasi-death – she was physically and psychologically damaged – to a life lived according to white standards and ideologies – that is, a civilized life – are present throughout the whole text. Van Vuuren in particular

notes how Milla's referring to the life she is breathing into Agaat is not simply a crude analogy:

This is reminiscent of the Creator breathing ruagh (breath, spirit) into Adam to make of him a living being. At first Agaat is reluctant to speak at all ("as if she's scared that I'm going to take something from her if she opens her mouth" (518)); later she refuses to speak on exhaling, "as if she's scared I'll steal her breath" (524). This, then, suggests a reversal of divine creation. And the child is right. Milla, in putting her language into Agaat's mouth, is simultaneously empowering her and robbing her of the possibility of developing her own language, her own identity. She will become Milla's creature. (Van Vuuren, M., 95)

As was the case with the farm, Milla believes Agaat also has to develop in order to be fruitful, according to a specific, self-centred plan orchestrated by herself and then described by Jak as "the worst case of megalomania & control freakery south of the Sahara" (532):

Every day I have reason to believe that all my trouble and dedication were not in vain & that the faith I had in the matter and every drop of sweat and tears that I put into her has now started bearing fruits. (532)

Again this was made possible by her conceiving Agaat as a meaningless creature, who was nothing previously to her intervention. Milla's definition of her plan – "all I wanted to do, was to make a human being of her, to give her something to live for, a house, opportunities, love" (492) – clearly shows that Agaat was considered not only non-human, but also non-existent before Milla created her "in her likeness". According to Milla, Agaat's arrival at Grootmoedersdrift coincides with her birth, and as such it has to be celebrated: "I feel I must celebrate it so that she can start becoming human here on Gdrift. Explained to her nicely: we commemorate the day that the Lord gave you as a gift to yourself and to me (479)".

When she first meets Agaat, the little girl is described as something wild, profoundly connected to the elements of nature, which needs to be purified in order to become human: "of iron she smelt, of blood, of soot and grass" (562). Milla's taking care of Agaat's small body begins not casually with a ritual washing, which she forces

on the little girl:

The child pulled up her knees, but soon lowered them again. You clamped her with one arm around the chest and started washing her with the other hand. The water left dark lines on the dusty skin. [...]

There, you said, more to yourself than to the child, now at least one of us is more or less respectable. (573-574)

Before being able to shape Agaat's individuality, Milla has to have her weak body to start "working properly".

God knows what happened to the creature, discarded, forgotten. [...] I must force her to eat [...]. With the other hand rub the throat to make her swallow. [...]

Sit, I say. Pee. Poo. Push. I make little moaning sounds to encourage her. Pour water out of a glass into a jug for the pee. (401,405)

The following step in the creation of Agaat as a human being is taking care of her soul, which means to have her baptised. This moment is also defined through a correlation to nature:

She must just answer yes to all the questions, so that her name that she's been given can be written in the Great Book of Life. Otherwise what?she asks. Otherwise Agaat Lourier will blow around without any purpose, a floating seed in the wind and will never fall to ground and perish and bear good fruit, I say (482).

Agaat is compared to a floating seed which needs to be planted, that is to a meaningless existence which would acquire a sense only once it is rooted into Afrikaner culture through baptism. Far from being only a religious rite, it is also the moment when Agaat is officially given her name, and with it her new identity inside as a boer daughter. Milla has not only made her a human being, she has actually turned her into a white child – "so white she is that she plays back all the little white things as she knows we like them" (510) – which generates a rejection from what originally were "her people", the other coloured workers. Their reaction when they see Milla trying to comb Agaat's hair with a traditional African braid, is one of mockery: "now mies has just got Agaat white & then she tries to turn her into a Traskei kaffir-girl" (510).

With her misleading attitude, Milla has "mothered' a culturally hybrid woman"

(Hunter, 80-81) who cannot find her own place in either of the cultures, having internalized white culture and ideology – she appears to be an even stricter master to the workers than Milla herself – but at the same time not being able to completely belong: in the words of Homi Bhabha, she is almost white but not quite.

Milla repeatedly experiences moments of epiphany which could open her eyes on the damages she has caused to her foster daughter. One of those comes from Agaat herself who, playing with her doll, managed to give a grotesque but realistic representation of Milla's educational approach, asking her to do things she couldn't possibly do and using the threat of violence to have her obey:

Then [the doll] falls off, then she gets a slap, then she falls off, then she gets a finger in the eye!  
Sit doll, sit! If you can't sit up straight nicely and look at me, and answer me when I speak to you, then I'm phoning the police! (493)

Another clear indication comes from Jak, who accuses Milla to be using the same strategies she used before to manipulate him:

Now you've broken her in. Clay in your hands. A blank page. Now you can impress anything upon her. Just see too it that you know your story, Milla. It'd better be a good one. The one that you fobbed off on me didn't work so well. (408)

Nevertheless, Milla will understand only a lot later what her “good intentions” had done to her black servant, who as a child considered her to be her “only mother” (541) and whom she rejected reminding her of her subjugated position when able to have a legitimate heir. The last years of Milla's life, when her sickness has confined her to her bed, are full both of resentment and of a sense of guilt:

Oh, my little Agaat, my child that I pushed away from me, my child that I forsook after I'd appropriated her, that I caught without capturing her, that I locked up before I'd unlocked her! (462).

And also:

Poor Agaat, What has my life been? What has her life been? How can I ever reward her for daring to come this far with me here on Grootmoedersdrift? How does one compensate somebody for the fact that she allowed herself to be taken

away and taken in and then cast out again? And to be made and unmade and remade?

Not that she had a choice. I even gave her another name. (184)

As previously discussed when arguing about topography as an expression of power of the person naming the land, giving a new name to a place, or a person, is a strong performative act. Through naming Agaat, her mistress decides for her who she will be and thus tried to shape her identity as a newly born human being. In particular, Milla chooses the name Agaat because it is similar to the the girl's previous one, Asgaat – which is considered nothing more than a nickname – and because of the associations its etymology evokes. The choosing of a new name for the girl is quite tortuous. When Milla first finds her she is told “she doesn't really have a name, we call her Gat, Asgat, because she sits with her arse in the ash in the fireplace all the time. She won't wear a panty” (569-570), which once again underlines her non-humanity and which Milla clearly does not appreciate. Then, when she tries to think of a more proper name, that would suit her without being to distant from what she's used to, she comes up with the meaningless Aspatat – “perhaps then Aspatat provisionally, it's better than nothing and it's better than Asgaat, ash-pit, ash-arse, good Lord above!”(401). Finally, at the doctor's suggestion, she decides for Agaat:

'Agaat' he suggested then. [...] it's Dutch for Aghata, it's close to the sound of Asgat with the guttural 'g', it's a semi-precious stone, I say, quite, he says, *you only see the value of it if it's correctly polished*, but that's not all, look with me in the book here, it's from the Greek 'agathos' which means 'good'. (416, emphasis mine)

Through the comparison with the semi-precious stone, which acquires value only when it's polished, the need for refinement and thus a preconceived idea of inferiority are stressed. Also the abused girl needs to be “polished” in order to be valuable. When choosing the name Agaat, Milla entrusts herself with the task of refining the girl and disclosing her main value, her goodness. Since Milla is the one who assigns the girl her value, according to her own expectation, the name is meant to define also Agaat's

identity. Furthermore, the chosen name underlines the connection between Aagaat and the natural world, more specifically with the ground from which stones originate. The connection with nature is once more emphasized by Milla's remarks:

I looked under Agate in Pa's old minerals book & there it was! Remarkable! Cloud agate Plume agate Fire agate Eye agate Iris agate Snakeskin agate Moss agate Rainbow agate! Look, I say, *all the world is in your name*. (534, emphasis mine)

However, the connection with nature stressed by Milla is not perceived in the same way by Aagaat. The possibility for a different meaning of the name Aagaat is in fact introduced by Milla herself:

The things of the world are tied to one another at all points with words I say & we know one thing through the name of another thing & we join the names together. It's a chain & if you move one link then they all move the possibilities are endless. (534)

This approach to language and words' meaning can be described as semiotic and leaves the possibility open for endless reinterpretation of reality. Moreover, it possibly gives the reader a key to interpretation of Milla's own words and of her ideological perception and description of her world, and of the whole novel as well.

It is not surprising that space to Aagaat's personal interpretation of her name, and of her relationship with nature and her foster-mother, is also given. With a brilliant narrative choice Van Niekerk gives the readers access to Aagaat's perspective only at the very end of the novel, when they finally get to know the secret story Aagaat was telling Jakkie as he was growing up. Her whole existence and her relationship with Milla and Jakkie are depicted under a completely different light and the reader is brought to rethink his own assumptions about the characters and the narration. As far as the name Aagaat is concerned, the story provides the reader with a different understanding of its meaning and of its connection to nature. When questioned by Jakkie about her origin, Aagaat says:

I crawled out of fire. [...] I was dug out of the ash stolen out of the hearth fell out of a cloud came up with the fennel washed down in the flood was moved with the

sickle threshed with the wheat baked in the bread. [...] But it's actually A-g-g-g-g-gaat that goes g-g-g-g like a *house snake behind the skirting board*. [...] A. it's a name of *everything that's good. It's everything and nothing six of one and half a dozen of the other*. (311-312, emphasis mine)

The name Agaat is once again reconnected to nature, but the connotation is certainly different: not something potentially precious which needs to be taken out from the ground to achieve its real value but something which finds its main strength in the fire where it originated. Both Milla and Jak refer to Agaat comparing her to a stone: the former emphasises her possibilities of development by repeatedly comparing her to the semi-precious stone; the latter focuses on her colour and her non-humanity – “It's a child, said the woman. It's a stone, said the husband, it's a piece of coal.” (587). While both these comparisons underline Agaat defects – which seclude her to the reign of the quasi-human, or quasi-white, and leave her to struggle for an unattainable perfection – Agaat's interpretation attributes a new value to the stone, and thus to herself:

Heaven is a stone she says out of the blue. Yes, I say precious stone walls of jasper & streets of gold. No she says that's not what she means & she shows me the stone with the fossilised fern leaf. That's the soul she says trapped in heaven [...]! (535)

Through her own vision of ground and fire Agaat manages to scatter the occidental religious tradition which places the divine in a celestial dimension and the evil in the depth of the earth and in the fire. Being compared to heaven, the stone not only contains the soul, but is also the place of goodness and holy, which are also defined according to a new perspective:

What is holy? She asks again. I say everything that's wild, everything that's free, everything that we didn't make ourselves, everything the we can't cling to & tie down. Your soul is holy. Wouldn't she gaze at me: But you caught me & tamed me. So I pressed hr close to me, shame. (536)

Milla's attempts to educate Agaat and to teach her to be good are turned by Agaat's simple remark into an attempt to domesticate something free and wild – and so holy, according to Milla's own words – into something manageable. When confronted with

her own actions, Milla cannot help feeling ashamed, as if she suddenly realized she had taken too much power into her hands, a power she had no right to have.

The disconnection from the hearth – the place where Agaat actually originates, also reflected in her first name, Asgat – is represented as a process of removal, through which the girl was progressively and against her will taken away from her centre. After her first crawling movement – possibly a reference to the snake metaphor introduced afterwards – she is the object of somebody else's actions, which resulted in her turning into the house snake, the evil you will encounter in your supposedly safe nest. At the same time she is also told she is, or has to be, good, and that being good is her essence. Milla's ambiguity towards Agaat's identity, brings her to develop an indeterminate perception of herself: she is both everything and nothing, evil and good.

The definition of evil and good themselves are brought into question. Agaat gives a new reading of the word “good” as understood by Milla, interpreting it as a noun instead of an adjective, thus as a physical good, an object somebody possesses:

Good, she says crying, one good two goods, goods is loose goods she says crying  
& *goods are a lot of things that don't have a name* & goods are your goods that  
you have in your suitcase, *stolen goods*. (535, emphasis mine)

According to this interpretation, Agaat identity would be shaped not by her goodness, but by her status as Milla's possession. This is made perfectly clear to her when she is left out of the house and the foster daughter is turned into a servant. In Agaat's own narration that is the moment when she died as Milla's creature and was born as a new person able to develop her own identity and power unbeknown to her mistress.

On the other side, the connections between Agaat and the snake, given both by the guttural sound in her name and the metaphorical description of her weaker arm as a snake's-head, would traditionally emphasise her evil nature but are in this case undermined by the peculiar value that the guttural g sound – reconnected to the call of a snake – assumes for Milla:

That was the beginning. That sound. You felt empty and full at the same time from it, felt sorrow and pity surging in your throat. Ggggg at the back of the throat, as if it were a sound that belonged to yourself. (562)

The harsh sound which is in fact the first produced by the little girl, is perceived by Milla as the one connecting the two of them in the first place, a sound that she experienced as belonging to herself. The evil characteristics generally attributed to the snake and recalled by the guttural sound can thus be imputed to Milla herself.

At the same time Agaat is also connected to God, the highest example of goodness:

And at present God is vengeful as in his youth, and it feels a whole lot more honest. Indeed, He has become a woman. He is now named Agaat, not that I think you can understand Greek. 'Agaat', do you know what else it also mean apart from the name for a semi-precious stone? (231)

The God Milla is referring too seems to be not the Creator, the one society as taught her to believe in, but a unforgiving, yet rightful female entity. The woman who in the end has the power is Agaat, not Milla. Referring once more to the etymology of the name, Milla eventually relates goodness not to benignity but to justice. Agaat would thus represent not the kind of goodness Milla originally planned to teach her, which was mainly obedience, but honesty instead. Moreover, by describing Agaat as a judging God, Milla gives up her the power to judge her for what she has done to her (Van Vuuren, M., 103) and possibly to forgive her.<sup>8</sup>

### **3.4 Agaat's appropriation of the maternal role**

As previously discussed, the core of the volksmoeder was her central position in the house and the family. While Milla repeatedly shows her inadequacy in fulfilling this role, Agaat demonstrates to be a better core to the family than Milla ever was. Throughout the novel evidences are present that Agaat is in fact the centre of the family hearth and the one who tries to smooth out its inherent conflicts. Both Milla and Jak,

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<sup>8</sup> The issue of (possible) forgiveness in the novel will be further discussed in chapter 6.

supposedly the two cores of the family, acknowledge she is the one keeping the family together: Milla affirms that Agaat tries to find a way to reconcile the family members because “[s]he wanted to keep her household together” (472) and Jak addresses to her saying “[o]ur beloved Gaat [...] our baker and butler, just like a hen trying to keep her chickens together” (509). However, since the family relations are so extensively and evidently damaged, it is clear her attempt is only utopian. The family myth promoted by Afrikaner ideology has failed and what is left for her to do is basically to keep up an appearance of unity, while at the same time reinventing herself by achieving a certain amount of power – even though in a less evident way than her mistress – and to take revenge for the injustice she has suffered. In order to do so, she manages to appropriate a core role inside the family – the one Milla could never fully obtain. To reach this goal she develops alternative and subtler means of control, which being less clearly structured prove to be less clearly detectable too. By strategically acting on the borders, she manages to create a space for herself in an apparently closed and fixed environment, without her intervention being at first sight noticeable.

Motherhood is, as we have seen, fundamental to the volksmoeder myth. In order to realize herself as a woman, Milla feels she has to bear a child. On the contrary maternity is presented as an option that does not exist for Agaat. First of all, the physical damage she has been victim of as a child may have made her incapable of conceiving. Moreover, the possibility of her being pregnant is perceived by Milla only as inconvenient. Even though they are equal on the physical level, being women, the different standards of womanhood promoted by the society they live in oblige the first to become a mother while at the same time deprive the latter of this possibility. Interestingly, Agaat's impossibility to bear a child is explained to her through comparisons with the animal reproduction, which once more underlines her supposedly inferior humanity:

You know what the bull does to the cow & what comes of it? just pain & suffering & *you're not quite right you're deformed* & they did bad things to you when you were small so you can't have children in any case even if you want to & maybe it's hereditary & you know what happens to the late lamb whose mother casts him off? We can't go around raising them all as hanslammers it takes *too much time & troubles*. (143, emphasis mine)

What is experienced by Milla both as a miracle and as a natural event in a woman's life, becomes when referred to Agaat only a source of troubles. Agaat's supposed incapability to reproduce, and thus to reinforce her own blood and her own attachment to the land she inhabits, is due to the bad things they did to her when she was little and to her not being “quite right”. This deformity could be interpreted as a metaphor for the damages a racist society has caused to subjected individuals because of their supposed inferiority, a metaphor which is embedded in the distorted relationship between the two women as well. Moreover, the reference to outcast lambs and to hanslammers – the orphaned or rejected lambs which are reared by hand<sup>9</sup> – can be easily reconnected to the disturbed mother-daughter relationship: ironically, Milla affirms that raising a lamb that has been rejected by a late mother is not convenient to the farmer. While the comparison with her own choice to adopt Agaat is quite evident to the reader, it does not look so evident to Milla herself.

On the other hand, Agaat's attitude towards animals and her ability to relate to them underline that her maternal instinct is very strong and that she could have been a good mother if she was allowed to, even better than anybody else. “[S]he's fed countless little dying animals in her life. Fledglings. Nobody who could raise them like Agaat”(36). Afrikaners social conventions made it impossible for Agaat both to become a mother and to have one. She is taken away from her family, which was indeed mistreating her, only to end up in another harmful environment. After having been refused by her foster-mother, who broke their relationship to make space for a

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<sup>9</sup> Glossary, *Agaat*, 593. The metaphorical reference to hanslammers is actually quite crucial in the novel and will be further discussed in the following chapter when analysing the role of animals as counterpart of human characters.

supposedly more appropriate and worthy relationship with her real heir, Agaat decides to get her revenge by interfering in this newly born mother-son relationship. In the same way as Agaat was deprived of her connection to Milla, Milla is eventually deprived of her connection with Jakkie.

Several episodes suggesting that Agaat is in fact becoming Jakkie's main maternal figure are present throughout the whole narration. However, only Agaat's own narration at the end of the novel makes it evident that this process was not a natural development but the outcome of Agaat's deliberate plan:

Come, little buttermilk, come come little bluegum-flower, come out snow-white lamb of my *même*, come!  
[...] and she gave him a name that only she knew about.  
*You-are-mine she called him.* (590, emphasis mine)

Before this clear statement, it generally seems Milla's fear of being overthrown by Agaat is the result of her paranoia about being inadequate to be a mother. From the very moment Jakkie was born, Milla expresses her doubts about being able to cover a fundamental role in his life, a role that she is sure will be covered more by Agaat than by herself. Speaking to herself she thinks “[i]t would be Agaat's baby, you knew, but you didn't say it out loud” (153). Agaat seems to be extremely capable not only in the practical matters but also in the creation of an emotional connection with the child, who appears to be almost afraid of his real mother:

But what on earth would I have done without hr now?She picks him up when he wakes up & changes him when he's wet & cleans him when he's dirty & bathes him & dresses him as if it's the child of her own blood [...].  
*Feel myself in her shade her inferior by far in terms of patience & ingenuity [...]*  
But his little face clouds over immediately when he notices me & he frowns as if he's seeing a dreadful problem on my face & he grimaces & *he cries fit to break my hearth so that I return him to A. she always has a plan.* (174-175, emphasis mine)

And then:

Jakkie not yet five & *so attached to her one would swear she was his actual mother. Perhaps she is.* (252, emphasis mine)

Observing the relationship developing between Agaat and Jakkie from outside, Milla experiences mixed feelings. On the one side she is thankful to Agaat because she appears to be able to manage every situation that occurs. On the other side she feels inferior to her both in terms of her practical skills – it is now Agaat who always has a plan instead of herself – and of the emotional connection she is able to establish with Jakkie. Her frustration reaches its peak when she discovers Agaat is actually breastfeeding Jakkie:

I look & I see & I can't believe what I see perhaps I dreamed it the apron's shoulder band is off & the sleeve of the dress hangs empty & her head is bent to the child on her lap. Could just see his little feet sticking out on the one side. Perfectly contented. [...] I listen to the little sounds it sucks & sigh *it's a whole language out there* [...]. (177, emphasis mine)

Seeing her two children connected in this very intimate ritual is for Milla an ultimate sign that she has in fact failed in becoming a mother. Her failure is interestingly underlined by a chronologically antecedent episode in the novel. After having given Agaat her name and having fallen asleep at her side Milla experienced a sense of fulfilment that as a childless woman she reconnected to the experience of breastfeeding. The intimacy between the two bodies, hers and the child's, gave her a sense of connection which she never experienced before:

Still I have a feeling of satiety. Now still [...] I feel it, a tingling fulfilled feeling through my whole body, as I imagine it must feel to suckle a child. Can it be that you feed someone else and feel replete yourself with it? (445)

The language Agaat and Jakkie are speaking, a language she is not invited to listen to nor to understand, is the proof she has failed to develop a similar connection with her children and so to be the nourishing figure she was supposed to become. The lack of this connection is depicted as the reason for her emptiness: being unable to nourish her family and her house, she was unable to nourish herself. Jakkie is perceived as the great absence in Milla's life, the proof that she didn't succeed in establishing a deep

relationship with nor to positively influence another human being:

My child. *The great absence*. What he inherited from me and Jak is definitely recognisable. Slightly melancholy, sometimes quite sharp with his tongue. *Agaat one hears most clearly in him*. The sayings, the songs, the rhymes, in which he has an obsessive interest. (207, emphasis mine)

Moreover, the reference to the common means of expression Agaat and Jakkie share underline Milla's failure in finding a language in which she could communicate with her offspring.

Another way through which Agaat and Jakkie communicate, which once again effectively excludes Milla as an outsider to their special relationship, is their inquiring exploration of the natural world and of its secret language. As Jakkie's main source of knowledge, Agaat is also the one who teaches him how to relate to nature and animals. Her approach underlines mainly the magical, holy aspects of nature which she originally learnt from Milla but which she also reinterpreted in her own ways. What she passes onto Jakkie is not the farm knowledge he is supposed to acquire in order to become a farmer himself. She introduces him to the mysteries of wild nature and to the secret stories of the forest. In so doing, she takes away from Milla not only the emotional connection between a mother and her son, but also the pedagogic task which is required from a volksmoeder.

Agaat is the one educating the male heir on how to relate to the farm environment, according to her own understanding of it. A particularly meaningful moment is when she brings him to look for the giant emperor butterfly. Milla also tried to show it to Agaat, but never managed either to see it herself or to have Agaat seeing it. She described it to the girl as “[t]he jewel of the forest. Apartura iris. The eye that guards the secrets of the soul. *Only good people get to see it.*” (488, emphasis mine). She eventually gets to see it only when spying on Agaat and Jakkie, who actually manage to bring it nearer. This episode not only underlines the failure of Milla in

communicating with her offspring and in being a mother, but also Agaat's different approach to nature. First of all the butterfly is addressed to not with the neuter *it* but with the third person pronoun *he*, which attributes an higher value to the sacred animal. Then, Agaat encourage Jakkie to “bring him nearer with [his] will” (255), which implies a different understanding of human power and a sort of spiritual connection between all creatures. Agaat's second sight – her special understanding – allows her to introduce also Jakkie to a deeper understanding of nature. In fact, Jakkie recollects memories of his childhood with these words:

Do you remember, Gaat? The sound of the sea in a shell? The sound of the wind in the wheat? Do you remember *how you made me listen?*  
And everything sounded like your name. (503, emphasis mine)

Later on, when Jakkie will be living abroad, she will be the one keeping the connection between him and his origins alive. Her description of the farm and of the nature around it are not casually the base on which this connection can be supported. As an answer to Jakkie's direct request, Agaat promises:

Of course I'll write. I'll write even more.  
[...] About the clover.  
About the rain too.  
About the drift, everything.  
I will.  
About the wind.  
About the smell of my fennel, they say it's sprung up all the way to Mossel Bay!  
*I'll give you seeds to take along.* (486, emphasis mine)

Stressing on different aspects, Agaat promises to provide the displaced child with a complete mental image of the farm. Different senses are taken into account to create a vivid representation of the space he left. Moreover, the reference to seeds can be intended both literally, thus referring to seed he could plant where he is now living to remember him of home, and metaphorically, thus underlining his status as a rootless individual who needs to find a place where to settle down. In both cases the necessity to

bring with you part of your past in order to initiate your future life is anyway stressed. Agaat's representation of the farm was however idealistic. Milla defines it a "prettification" (386) of reality, which she herself couldn't have done better.

The way in which she wrote up the tiniest impressions, struck you. A love letter compared to yours.  
[...] to judge by Agaat's letter the Grootmoedersdrift homestead was a model of peace and harmony. (385-386)

Agaat's choice to produce an idealized version of reality is related to Milla's own strategy to recreate reality in order to manipulate people around her, but the difference of intentions between herself and Agaat is also underlined: Agaat's letters are compared to love letters because of the sincere affection they transmit, an affection from which once again Milla is excluded. Noticeably, her feeling secluded and inferior brings her to break the secrecy of their correspondence, as well as of their games and stories. Milla repeatedly tries to spy on them but obtains very poor results: the communication between the two of them cannot be understood nor reproduced by an outsider.

As a result of this confused mother(s)-son relationship, Jakkie is alienated from his identity as a farmer and a Afrikaner. Not exactly knowing who is real mother is, he cannot connect either to the Afrikaans culture nor to Agaat's discontinuous heritage. Milla's behaviour towards Agaat and the consequent revenge it originates prevent him from belonging to one of the two cultures. The Afrikaner ideology, according to which the white mother is the centre of the farm and the stronghold of white values – among which the race-based hierarchy – is dismantled by his experiences. When growing up, in fact, his stronghold and the source of his knowledge is not his white mother, but his coloured one. Even though Milla holds Agaat responsible for having ruined her nest by interfering with the natural order of things – *"Who are you? [...] You are Satan! It's my child! Mine! Mine!"* (471) – it is in fact her ambiguous relationship towards Agaat that generated the consequent problematic definition of identities inside the family. With her

intervention Agaat manages not only to get back at Milla for having refused her, but also to prevent Afrikaner ideology from being perpetrated in the following generation. Jakkie's inability to recognize himself in a fixed identity, as unsettling as it is, finally allows him to doubt the existence of fixed identities themselves and to question the whole race-based hierarchic system he was supposed to support and reinforce.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Animalised humans**

The importance of the farm environment for the structure of the novel is repeatedly brought to the attention of its reader. However, while the value of land has been widely commented upon in this work, the role of animals still has not been exhaustively discussed. As part of Milla's inheritance and object of the farmers' care, they are also food for thought on the power and responsibilities deriving from ownership and on the power dynamics on the farm. Moreover, the frequent metaphorical comparisons between the characters and different animals help us analysing the characters themselves and their reciprocal relationships. In this regard, also the anthropocentric ideological representation of animals as non-human beings will be taken into account.

#### **4.1 Cattle**

As part of her inheritance, the cattle represents for Milla both a connection with her family and the link between a farmer and the farm s/he is in charge of. As previously discussed, the family and the farm are the basis of the Afrikaner pastoral myth and thus of the Afrikaner identity. Being an important step towards successful farming, the well-being of the cattle is directly connected to the skills of the farmer and a proof of his/her capability to accomplish the task of re-establishing the connection with the land.

Unfortunately, the well-being of cattle on Grootmoedersdrift is frequently undermined by highly-damaging and often disturbing diseases. The botulism which destroys Milla's herd of Jersey – animals that she has known since childhood and which she recalls by name – and the tulip poisoning which will later destroy Jak's new herd of Simmentals (218, 219) are presented as tragedies and their description recalls in many aspects the Old Testament plagues sent by God as a punishment:

That October after Jakkie's birth, after the battle with Agaat over the christening

robe, five things happened that changed everything. [...] Five things that preceded that first catastrophe. Five things that helped shape all future catastrophes. (194-195)

After Agaat is outcast from the family and immediately after the very fine christening robe she has produced for Jakkie – sign of her affection – is rejected as not acceptable for the heir of an Afrikaner farm, the farm itself is shaken by some episodes, signs of the future tragedies. Through referring to cattle diseases as catastrophes, Milla stresses not so much the economical disadvantages of it, but especially the psychological damages deriving from the loss of her heritage. Moreover, the macabre death of the cows, intoxicating themselves by eating carcasses, has an understandably shocking effect on Milla:

There against the brambles the pregnant cows were standing and eating white ribs, the carcase of a cow that had been lying there for a long time. The white shards were sticking out of their mouths as they were chewing. You gazed at the drooling and the crunching, too shocked to put one foot in front of the other. To one side the cows' off-colour calves were standing neglected, watching. [...] Blommetjie had already burst open. You could see the dead foetus of her calf. Blommetjie, a great-granddaughter of Grootblom, another of the Grootblom clan from your mother's old herd. (197)

According to critics Rossmann and Stobie, in contemplating the horrifying death of her beloved cows Milla is not only shocked at her loss, but also “marks a confrontation with the 'utmost of abjection', that which erodes the boundaries between ingested and expelled, inside and outside, dead and alive” (Kristeva: 1982, qtd. in Rossmann, Stobie, 21). They further argue that her shock reveals “her uncanny identification with her infected and dying herd”(21). In fact, several evidences of Milla's identification with her cows are present throughout the novel. Cows are particularly important to Milla in so far that they are a symbol of womanhood and maternity; they emphasize both the connection with her female ancestors – the core of her power as a farmer – and her perception of maternity as a fundamental step for her personal realization as a woman.

Based on this considerations, Rossmann and Stobie state that the cow is Milla's

totemic animal (20). As a religious symbol, a totem is a highly meaningful object which also expresses one's reverence to one's ancestors and one's connection to nature. Both aspects are present in the novel. As mentioned above, Milla recalls her animals by name and is able to reconnect each of them to their own ancestors, thus metaphorically establishing a connection between herself and her foremothers and once again stressing the matriarchal line which is predominant in the family. Moreover, her grief at their death – “You wept by your cows” (199) – recalls the mourning of a mother who lost her kin. The maternal motif is further stressed in the labour scene, when Milla compares herself to a calving cow in order to explain to Agaat how to help her – “we've caught lots of calves, you and I, haven't we? It works in the exact same way, you know it by heart” (151). Moreover, she can recognize in Agaat's encouragement words the “language of women” passed on by Milla's father to her: “Now you must, now you must, Agaat coaxed. Softly, rapidly, urgently, the language that you spoke to the Simmentals that had such trouble calving. You heard yourself, your voice was in her” (155).

Jak's herd of Simmentals and Milla's opinion about it further develops both the maternal motif and her traditional idea of farming, according to which natural processes have to be followed and nature itself has to be respected. In fact, she finds Jak's approach to breeding criminal: “[t]o milk cows, help them crave and then after a few years to sell them for slaughter, felt to you like a treason” (215). Where Jak found that “dairy cows were just a nuisance, the slaughter-cattle were far less trouble and maintenance” (299), Milla focuses instead on the suffering of animals and on the need to treat them with respect, while also stressing the higher value of cows if compared to the “almighty Hamburg”(300) bull, which she suggests they should get rid of:

It's very hard for the cows, they suffer unnecessarily, but what do you do? [...] You don't see how we have to damage the cows to deliver the almighty calves, one should have respect for the animals, one should assist them as much as one can. (301)

Interestingly, it is now Jak who makes the connection between Milla and the cows calving explicit by perceiving Milla's speech as an accusation to him for having left her alone when she was also having trouble giving birth to the "almighty" male heir (301).

Milla's metaphorical connection with her herd does not always support a positive nor a caring representation of herself. While some episodes underline her attachment to the animals and thus to her heritage, others problematize her relationship with her own family and her role as the master of the farm. When Jak accuses her of overreacting to the situation only because "the world as it is is not enough" (325) to satisfy her need for drama, he says: "You're like the hungry cow in that children's book of Jakkie's. You bring misfortune down upon yourself, and upon me, upon us all here [...]" (325). Through these remarks, Milla is reconnected to her ill cows, described by the veterinarian as suffering from a "degenerated appetite" (214). As botulism did bring misfortune upon the farm, it is conceivable that Jak's accusation could in fact be substantial. Moreover, when criticizing Jak's decision to start breeding the Simmentals, Milla states that "if you put new animals from a different environment with old herds that had multiplied for generations on a farm, it always caused problems" (216). In so doing she unconsciously criticizes her choice to bring Agaat, a new woman coming from a different environment, to Grootmoedersdrift, the farm where the women of her family "had multiplied for generations".

In this regard, the scene when Milla finds the half-rotten head of a cow in the ditch is also remarkable:

It took a while for you to make out what it was. The head of a cow, half-rotten, with white maggots writhing in the eye sockets and the ears and in the bloated-open mouth and muzzle in which nothing was visible of the gentle expression of the Jersey. (436)

Once she gets back home, still shocked by the horrifying image of the putrefying head, dirty and stinky, she finds Agaat wearing a clean apron and working with milk, which

then Jak tastes and immediately spits out. “Sour milk on Grootmoedersdrift, he said, I wish you'd marked the bottles” (437). Then, while Milla points her finger at Agaat to push Jak to question her about the milk, he bursts out: “No, Milla, not she, you, you stink something dreadful” (437). When Milla finally tells him about the cow he simply says: “Yes, the stupid cow, walked where she shouldn't have walked, fell and broke her leg. I had to shoot her” (437). Through his utterances not only does Jak defend himself saying the cow (or maybe Milla) deserved her fate because of her silliness in wanting to reach what she wasn't supposed to; he also shifts the attention from Agaat to Milla and to her unpleasant smell, thus implicitly suggesting her responsibility for this and many other bad moments on the farm. Milla's negative characterization is further stressed by her being compared by the maggots crawling on and inside the head:

[...] you know everything about maggots don't you, you know they enter by the soft spots, under the skin and devour you from the inside until one fine day you simply disintegrate and then everybody says, hey, that's funny, she was never even sick. (438)

Jak's accusation is clearly uttered: Milla is presented as the one who, entering under the skin and devouring the individuals' personality, recreates them as she wants them to be. Even though Jak's character has been depicted as the villain throughout the whole novel, we cannot forget he was always described by Milla's perspective which, being highly predominant in the novel, cannot be entirely trusted.

Milla's failure to create Grootmoedersdrift as a nurturing environment and herself as the maternal figure in charge of it is further stressed by Agaat's success in raising her own animals. Her personal breeding farm is born when Milla decides to increase Agaat's salary by giving her some animals which she can handle as she wants:

I leave her free to decide for herself when she wants to have animals serviced or dipped & sheared & so forth so that *she can feel she has a bit of independence here what else does she have?* She takes very good care. See her often inspecting her animals. Her cows yield more milk than mine & her sheep's wool is better. [...] *Only her bunch of goats is a nuisance half domesticated the creatures & sometimes escape from their pen & eat my plants in the garden.* (334, emphasis mine)

In this passage Agaat is clearly represented as a better farmer than Milla. Since she takes good care of her animals, they appear to be not only healthier, but also more productive. Her healthy livestock, and her relationship to Jakkie as well, demonstrate her superiority to Milla both as a farmer and as a mother. Milla, on the contrary, seems to believe Agaat is missing on everything. In fact, she cannot perceive Agaat does have some independence, and that her power is just not as evident as her own. Interestingly, Milla herself produces an evidence supporting a reality she seems incapable of seeing: Agaat, as her goats, it's only half domesticated and occasionally “eats her plant in the garden”, that is, she endangers the illusion of the farm being a pastoral Eden.

#### **4.2 Speciesism and racism**

The possibility of referring to the half domesticated goats mentioned above as being a metaphorical reference to Agaat is far more than a speculation. In fact, subjugated individuals have traditionally been associated with animals in order to underline their lack in terms of 'humanity' and civilization. Therefore, it cannot come as a surprise if the civilization of 'inferior' human beings has often been presented as the taming of a wild animal. The discrimination based on species and the consequent anthropocentric assumption of human superiority have been referred to as speciesism. Speciesism is one of the many ideological explanations of western culture used to justify its presence and power on colonized spaces. According to critic Val Plumwood, various “forms of institutionalised speciesism [...] continue to be used to rationalise the exploitation of animal (and animalised human) ‘others’ in the name of a ‘human- and reason-centred culture that is at least a couple of millennia old’ ” (Plumwood, qtd. in Huggan, Tiffin, 5). Based on the species boundary, both animals and animalised subalterns are thus marginalized in order to make their exploitation ethically acceptable. Moreover, the presence of a non-human counterpart has always been fundamental to the western – or

human – definition of the self: the presence of “the uncivilized, the animal and animalistic” (Plumwood, qtd. in Huggan, Tiffin, 5) are equally necessary in the identitarian process in so far as they embody 'the other' you need to relate to when trying to establish who you are and in what you differ from who you are not. In analysing this process, Huggan and Tiffin give examples of how the representation of both animals and subjected individuals have been affected by an anthropocentric ideology. First, they stress the role of the categorisation of others as animals in human genocide and slavery. The definition of others as 'animals' has been a justification to treat them 'as such':

The history of human oppression of other humans is replete with instances of animal metaphors and animal categorisations frequently deployed to justify exploitation and objectification, slaughter and enslavement. (Huggan, Tiffin, 135)

Moreover, they reflect on the fact that by endorsing and condemning exploitation based on such characterizations we implicitly support the idea that animals are in fact inferior to human beings and can thus be treated accordingly. “And in so doing we are also colluding in the fiction that the species boundary is a fixed one” (Huggan, Tiffin, 135). As is the case with race, speciesism is a culturally determined concept which depends on different representations which changed according to time, space and culture. However, its naturalization generated and still generates an apparently unquestionable hierarchy among living beings which is not only supported by our knowledge but also integrated in our language through the use of derogatory animal metaphors.

An example of the strength of speciesism as an ideologically-formed and behaviour-defying discourse is to be found in Aagaard's own words when dealing with the other black workers on Grootmoedersdrift. The ideology has been so deeply internalized that the coloured – yet 'privileged' – servant refers to the individuals that she considers as inferior to herself describing them as animals:

This is what you get for *shitting in the bushes like wild things!* Open your

porridge-hole! This is what you get from wiping your arses with your hands!  
[...] You're worse than pigs! *They can't help it that they didn't get any brains.* [...] Will you pee on my shoes, you little hotnot! (243, 244, emphasis mine)

Being on the border between self – the daughter of a white Afrikaner family – and other – the coloured subjugated uncivilized servant – Agaat is both promoting speciesism and undergoing it. The following paragraph will focus on the education Milla imposes on her, which is very frequently described as the taming of a subhuman wild animal.

#### 4.2.1 Until you're tamed

After her first encounter with Agaat, Milla decides she will make a human being of her. The fact that she doesn't perceive the little girl as a human being is made very clear both by the way she relates to her and the educational plan she decides to follow. Milla's word choice is the first sign of this attitude: she refers to the girl as her “little monkey”(403) and gives her body animal features: she has a “sly hand, the *monkey paws*, as I [Milla] call it” (442, emphasis mine); “[...] you do your number two nicely and wipe *your tail* nicely and then you get jelly” (414, emphasis mine). Since she considers Agaat to be an animal, she treats her as such: not only is Agaat given worm medications (403), she is also dosed and locked up for many hours a day. She is talked to as if she were a dog to be trained : “Sit, I say. Pee. Poo. Push. I make little moaning sounds to encourage her. Pour water out of a glass for the pee” (405). Moreover, when observing her Milla is also trying to interpret her behaviour and scrutinise her mind. “What would she be thinking in that coconut of hers? How much would she remember? I dosed her so heavily to get her here” (490).

At first Agaat seems to follow only irrational instincts that Milla cannot understand, and which make her adopt animal-like survival strategies:

When I put her up straight, she won't stiffen her legs. Falls over, *play dead* when I

get close. *What wild animals do*, insects, when they feel danger threatening. Fall over. Protective colouring. *Try not to be seen*. Instinct. (402, emphasis mine)

Agaat's trust clearly has to be won by gradually coming close to her, exactly how you would do with a wild animal which never before was approached by a human being. In order to win her trust Milla uses some taming strategies she progressively develops by observing her and her reactions: "Just like a dog. Reward works" (405) and "I now always use fire for special lessons. She learns faster like that" (453). Further, little incidents seem to draw her back: "She's terrified all over again. Ai, it breaks my heart, after all my trouble the last few days to tame her" (408).

Following her plan to have Agaat 'develop into a human being', Milla believes she is allowed to adopt measures she would never feel free to adopt 'if she was human'. The use of physical violence and punishments are considered acceptable if they are the means to accomplish Milla's 'civilizing mission'. "*She must be taught to obey* [...] I've run out of patience [...] After *three days without food* it came at last. 'May I please have jelly with custard'" (447, emphasis mine). Violence is also used to threaten Agaat in order to have her obey to Milla's will:

You're not getting away! you managed to say. I have to look after you. *You're mine now*. [...] I you carry on being naughty and running away I'll tell the kleinbaas and he'll take off his belt and flog you till your backside comes out in red [...] until you're tame. (572, emphasis mine)

This passage in particular underlines that Milla considers Agaat to be her own property, a property she feels it is her responsibility to take care of. She herself defines this task her mission, a very difficult one which she – as a white benefactor – feels called to accomplish. "How long still before she's going to become human? [...] Why do I always give myself the most difficult missions? (408). After having taught her what she considers basic knowledge to civil cohabitation, she further focuses on spiritual matter, once again acting according to traditional colonial ideology. Now that her body is acceptable, her soul needs to not only to be saved through the Christian ritual of

baptism, but also to be awakened in the first place: “Now that the soul is awakening in her and she's outgrown the terror of her origins, at least in body [...] it's time for Agaat to be baptised” (480).

However, the taming of Agaat does not seem to be successful. According to Milla this is first of all caused by the damages the girl underwent in her original environment: “How does somebody make a good heart *in a creature that's so damaged?* [...] *She resists me*, she's long way from being tamed” (493, emphasis mine). While Milla – either consciously or not – uses speciesism to justify her exploitation of and her control over Agaat, Agaat does resist Milla's efforts to tame her, which forecasts that she will find personal strategies to determine herself as a fully human individual.

### 4.3 Sacrificial lambs

While the internal narrator, Milla, compares Agaat to a wild animal which has to be tamed, in the novel Agaat is also reflected upon through another animal-based image; since Milla is metaphorically reconnected to a cow, the several references to lambs and lamb slaughtering in the text cannot be read as fortuitous.<sup>10</sup> After Agaat is outcast from the family hearth, Milla decides to teach her how to slaughter livestock in order to keep her busy. As critic Marijke Van Vuuren points out:

While this is realistically a part of livestock farming, it runs counter to the paradisaical literary pastoral. In a novel with many harsh scenes, this is the cruellest with vivid descriptions of the frightened young ewe, the girl frozen with fear, and the drawn-out, bloody process briskly overseen by Milla. (97)

The violent process of slaughtering is coldly described by Milla, who explains it to the little girl – too small for sheep-slaughtering according to Dawid, one of the coloured workers – step by step. Agaat has to learn her seven lessons in order to become “the slaughter-hand on Gdrift” (82). Even if terrified, Agaat eventually learns how to master

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<sup>10</sup> In this regard, Van Vuuren analyses the possible interpretation of the lamb theme in the novel as a metaphor to reflect on guilt and forgiveness. (Van Vuuren M., 2010)

the whole process and at the end of the lesson she is said to “know meat” (86). The violence of the slaughtering scene is further underlined when we get to know that the slaughtered lamb was in fact Agaat's own hanslam, the discarded animal she had taken care of for months. This information will be given forth only a long time later, when Milla is on her death bed and the communication between the two women is temporarily restored by the use of the alphabet boards once used by Milla to teach Agaat how to speak. Milla inquiries about the past provide her with unexpected answers:

W.H.Y.D.I.D.Y.O.U.D.I.G.U.P.T.L.A.M.B.E.A.R.F.R.O.M.T.H.E.B.I.N., comma,  
W.I.T.H.W.H.A.T.S.U.P.E.R.S.T.I.T.I.O.N.S.D.I.D.Y.O.U.I.N.F.E.C.T.J.A.K.K.I.E,  
question mark.

It was my own hanslam, says Agaat, her voice uninflected. She looks out of the glass door.

What hanslam? [...]

Sweetflour. Discarded. One of a triplet. Full-milk Agaat fed her with extra cream and a teaspoon of clean slaked lime, from the bottle, eighteen times a day, at blood heat as her book says, reduced to six times a day, until she started eating oats and lucerne by herself. She was five months old and she came when Agaat called her. The one we slaughtered that day was a nursling wether with a fat belly. (380-381)

Astonished by this answer, Milla wonders whether she actually had her slaughter her own hanslam, thus underlining the unawareness with which she used to relate to the girl.

It is reasonable to believe Agaat is in some way Milla's hanslam, “a source of comfort taken from her childhood home, the realm of her loveless mother [...]. Agaat is certainly “like a daughter”, though of “another breed” in the eyes of the law and Milla's society (Van Vuuren M., 99). However, the events characterising the lives of the two women reveal that Agaat was actually not so much taken care of by her adoptive mother, but 'slaughtered' by her instead. Moreover, while Agaat can slaughter sheep “clean and fast, with respect for the wool, respect for the membranes” (497), Milla's disrespectful devastation of Agaat's identity took a lifetime.

Milla being able to take care of her animals better than how she takes care of her

foster-daughter, is further highlighted by Agaat's long recitation about sheep's existence in the farm:

In the life of the sheep  
Weaning-time is the most critical time.  
You who are farmers of the future  
Must make every effort to see  
that the little lambs do not suffer over-much.  
That their first growth is good is essential  
Because once marred in their development,  
They never mend again. (419-120)

Even though as a farmer Milla was very conscious that discarded young creatures need special care, she was not able to apply her knowledge to the education of Agaat, which was perceived as dangerous and wild instead; she has clearly been a better pastor than a mother. Agaat represents in some way the lamb that Milla decided to sacrifice in order to acquire her role as mother to her “real” heir. As previously mentioned, this cannot simply be interpreted as a consequence of social pressure or apartheid law. As Van Vuuren points out, even though they “provide a context for her behaviour, she cannot evade imputability”(101).

The sheep-slaughtering scene is reiterated in the narration when Jakkie is also forced to damage his own hanslam:

It was Jakkie's eight birthday. Agaat gave him a knife as a present. [...] A boy who wants a knife, he said, when Jakkie had finished singing and was given his presents, must be able to dock a sheep's tail (274).

Refusing to agree to his father request – one that once again underlines his dominant approach to nature – Jakkie ran away and is finally convinced to obey by Agaat only after he had violently bitten her arm. Much later will Jakkie recall that moment, accusing her 'coloured mother' of having forced him to, still astonished by his father choice to have him cut his own hanslam's tail: “He forced me. You too, Ma too. My own hanslam you selected for it, would you believe” (503). The reiteration of what have been for both of Milla's children a traumatic experience, stresses once again the

tragic effects of Milla's choices on her ' lambs', both the unwanted and the craved one. The slaughtering of lambs corresponds thus to the irreparable damage done to Agaat and Jakkie while they were growing up, a damage that prevent them from feeling truly attached to any fixed place, culture or identity.

The horrifying description of the abattoir that Jak will later build on Grootmoedersdrift underlines not only his lack of respect for animals and his greedy attitude towards farming, but also the hideous fate of all creatures grown up on the farm in particular and in the whole nation in general:

You stood back out of the cool-room. The dull light over the rumps, the ribs and legs, the headlessness, the disgrace. [...] You couldn't watch the fear of the animals [...] See, now *somebody with one hand can slaughter all on her own*, Jak had shouted [...]

The logic of his sightseeing tour escaped you. (505-506)

As mentioned above, the several horrific scenes of violence carried out on animals clearly undermine the pastoral myth of the farm being a safe and pure refuge in nature. The over-realistic descriptions of animals being killed in order to provide food for the farmers, painfully recall both the fate of Jakkie and Agaat – whose identities have been metaphorically slaughtered by the discrepancy between their reality and their cultural heritage – and that of the black people exploited by colonial masters.

## Chapter 5

### The lost paradise

#### 5.1 Dream gardens, living hells

The Dutch settlement on the Cape of Good Hope was originally created as a trading post, with the specific purpose of providing fresh vegetables to travellers reaching Asia. In this regard, J.M. Coetzee tries to analyse the reasons why “the garden myth, the myth of a return to Eden and innocence, fail[ed] to take root in the garden colony of the Cape” (2). His answer to this question is quite simple: the Cape colony, being in Africa, could not be perceived as a new, promising world that could raise the colonizers' expectations: “it was a Lapland of the south, peopled by natives whose way of life occasioned curiosity or disgust but never admiration.[...] the future promised by the Cape seemed to be less of the perfection of men in a recovered original innocence than of the degeneration of men into brute” (Coetzee, 2). Huggan and Tiffin also support the idea that the Cape colony was more of an anti-pastoral space, where humanity and civilization were actually endangered (98). However, the topos of the garden seen as an “enclosed world entire to itself” (Coetzee, 3) was extensively exploited in the *plaasroman*, which described the farm as a separate world where the farmer and his family could find shelter from the corrupted urbanized outer society.

The garden metaphor is also developed in *Agaat* as part of its rich narration, both to underline Milla's desire to create Grootmoedersdrift as a earthly paradise and to stress its anti-pastoral nature. Milla's expectations about her farm are metaphorically referred to through her dream of planting a garden as her mother also did. “Ma's garden that she used to live for” (6). When first planning her future with Jak, she makes him promise that he will help her make a garden “like a paradise” (28). At her arrival on Grootmoedersdrift, the garden was “untidy and overgrown”, but her affection for the “old-fashioned plants growing there” made it seem like “a paradise already” to her (38-

39). These passages once again stress the importance of re-establishing connection between the family and its land not only by farming it, but also by taking care of previously planted roots. As it is the case with the farm, Milla appears to have a very clear plan for her garden, which is to outdo all previous attempt of bringing paradise on earth:

There had always been a garden on Grootmoedersdrift [...] but you wanted more [...] a park in which you could lose yourself [...]. Formal of design you wanted the garden to be, but informally planted. Like a story you wanted it, a fragrant visitable book full of details forming part of a pattern so subtle that one would be able to trace it only after a while. (392-393)

As it is, her plan about the garden, as well as her plan about her life, does not come to an easy realization: the book is there but the details result unclear and the pattern far to difficult to trace. When Agaat will be reading Milla's diaries to her, partly to recall a happier past and partly to have her face what she actually did to her in the past, the garden plan appears to be only an empty page: "It says 'paradise' at the top and then it's just a list of plants" (50). The unfinished garden, which Milla recurrently tries to complete, becomes at a certain stage of the narration a temptative solution to her dissatisfaction with the actual realization of the plan. War images are brought into the picture to underline the far from paradisaal nature of the colony: the violence generated by an armed conflict unites with the threat deriving from the collapse of a fictional separateness of the closed garden-farm from the outer world:

Those sounds, that silence [...], *all those black sounds* to which you were listening in your room lying on your back, they were the opposite of music, they were *the sounds of damnation*.

Is that what's become of my paradise here this side of the Tradouw? you thought?

Is that why you wanted to create the garden? Was that *your response to the war stories* with which Jak entertained Agaat evening after evening? A spell, a safeguard against the distant war and its hurt? Or to gain Agaat for yourself? *To win back something of your dreams?* (390, emphasis mine)

The making of the garden is evidently represented as a desperate attempt to reinforce

the image of the earthly paradise even when it means negating the obviousness of facts, hoping in vain to “win back the dream”. Jakkie's war stories, which could be the means to establish a connection between the illusory peace of the farm and the current political situation of the country, as well as the means to reflect on the socio-political matters which led to a conflict in the first place, are perceived by Milla as “black sounds”. She does not know how to relate to them, as she is not ready to deal with the devastating effects of a war aiming at “the preservation of country and nation” (388). The fact she refers to them as the sounds of damnation implies that she subconsciously perceives Afrikaners as deserving to be both morally disapproved and metaphorically condemned to be punished.

The idea of hell is further confirmed by the several passages referring to it throughout the novel. Jak, for instance, refers to Grootmoedersdrift both as a concentration-camp (193) and an internment camp (196), the places that more than any other recall the image of hell on earth, where rights are denied and individuality is shattered. Further, Agaat is often compared to a serpent, symbol of a contamination inherent in the paradisaal garden. This could be regarded as a sign of the troubling “incorporation of blacks into white pastoral”(Huggan, Tiffin, 98), due to the fact that, as Coetzee argues, it is very difficult for a black person to see the farm as a pastoral retreat when it was his/her pastoral home just short before (Coetzee, 5). The silenced presence of the coloured maid can thus be perceived as evil because it represents a disturbing element in the creation of the pastoral heaven. Interestingly, also Milla is compared to a snake by the critical voice of her husband:

You haven't forgotten, have you, that you promise it to me, my paradise?  
Don't think I can't see through you, he said, you're more wily than the snake.  
That's the only bit of paradise that there'll ever be on this farm. (77)

Through this comparison Jak suggests that the only part of paradise present on the farm is the tempting and manipulative presence of Milla, an embodiment of the biblical

snake tempting Adam and Eve in Eden. To Milla, however, hell is the military ceremony where she must be separated from Agaat and later cannot find her any more: “this is what hell is like, you thought, this is the temperature, this is the sound of hell. *Just so do you search there for someone you've lost*” (432). The military ceremony effectively works as a reminder of the political-ideological circumstances which brought to the separation between the two women. While wandering in a deserted parking lot, Milla realizes her hell is to be separated from the beloved person she has lost. This is particularly interesting when considering that she was actually partly responsible for the hell she is living in and that Agaat is less of a lost person than a rejected one.

## **5.2 Agaat's empowering gardening**

The above discussed interpretation of farming as a metaphor for colonization can also be applied to gardening. The gardener does in fact give his own imprint on an alien land and creates it as a individualized space. He/she brings the wilderness under control, replanning a chaotic space into a space he/she has personally designed, made and named. The removal or transplantation of some unwanted elements, considered as no one's possession and thus basically as non-existent, is also part of the procedure. In this sense, the garden can be considered as the expression of a specific individuality, which creates it according to his/her own geography and regardless of any pre-existing one. When recalling Milla's making of her garden, the second person narrator describes it as follows:

You did most of the work yourselves[...]. And now and then *transplanted a thing that wasn't in the right position*, or grafted a little struggling tree onto a stronger trunk. (399, emphasis mine)

In this contest, Agaat's choice to grow her own garden in Milla's plotted space comes out as both a claim of independence and space. This is even more true if we consider

the very peculiar nature of Agaat's garden, which is in fact not even easily definable as such. She chooses to grow only one kind of plant – her favourite, the fennel – with which she experiences a very close connection. She first gets to know about it when, as a little child, she helps Milla plant the kitchen garden: “Our herbs that we planted are growing lush and beautiful. Agaat picks slips of everything and tastes everything [...]. Fennel still her favourite” (489). Later, when Milla first realizes she now and then disappears, it becomes evident that Agaat started to plant fennel seeds all around the farm, in fact colonizing Milla's place with her own garden, which may seem irregular or disordered but is actually the consequence of a very well designed plan:

What do you do when you run off, *what kind of mischief do you get up to?* I dig she says. [...] What do you dig! I ask. Little furrows she says. [...] For seed, she says. Then a great idea dawned for me about the *fennel that's shooting up everywhere* in the garden & in the yard & next to the irrigation furrow & the orchard all the way to beyond the dirt road in the dry-land I noticed the yellow heads of fennel in flower. *You're infesting the place!* I say, you're making work for yourself, you'll pull up every last bush! *I won't she says, they're my plants.* (537)

The yellow flowers shooting up everywhere on the farm are the evidence of Agaat's resisting Milla's attempts to be the one creating the farm as her own space. What the foster-mother perceives as a mischief is in fact the daughter's claiming her right to give her own imprint on it. Agaat's presence on the land is less clear but still very visible. Since Agaat is invading her private space, it is not casual that Milla sees it as an infestation endangering not only her land but also her power to control it. Agaat's will to bring her own 'chaotic order' on the farm does not directly imply a desire to overcome her mistress; in fact, her garden seems to naturally gain its space inside and all over a pre-existing geography. In order to defend her garden, she is ready to confront Milla: despite the direct order she receives, she refuse to pull up her plants, which years later will still be there as an evidence of her imaginative appropriation of a personal space: “hand height the fennel - her fennel!- in flower next to the road (once

she opened the window to smell it & smiled with me in the mirror) [...]” (175).

Interestingly, the mirror will also later be the lens through which the garden is observed. When Milla is forced to remain in bed, that is also when her agency is limited at most and she feels she needs to find a way to reconnect to her land, Agaat generously decides to carefully arrange the mirrors in Milla's bedroom to let her contemplate her 'last garden'. The old garden, which they originally planted together, is now been remade by Agaat. The plants that she had “sowed and had planted in the late spring, in the early summer, so that I [Milla] might still experience it” (112) make a glorious and rich view, an explosion of life and colours, a “bower of beauty” (113). When observing the garden in bloom, Milla wonders whether Agaat did or did not have a plan about it:

Would she have done it free-hand this time? Somewhat more carelessly, extravagantly, more higgledy-piggledy than usual? [...] Agaat knows how to make a garden [a paradise?] grow (113).

Or could she have been planning for a long time? [...] So that I, as I am drained of myself, can fill up with what is outside myself, as the poet says? (132)

When speaking to the doctor, Agaat explains it was her attempt to find a solution to her mistress's restless mood, that is to try to relieve her from her sense of immobility:

I thought she felt trapped in here, she wanted out, outside, so I turned the mirror so that she could see the reflection of the garden. It's better than nothing. (178)

Moreover, it is interesting to notice the importance of the garden as reflected images: while the mirror “reveals a perfect result, the best I [Milla]'ve experienced the garden” (132), thus underlining Agaat's own role and ability in the creation of the earthly paradise, it is also stressed that through the mirror she can only access a reproduction of the paradisaal garden: “The fragments of green in the mirror are a reproduction, a repetition of another plan, in another format. As a map is of a place” (114). The actual physical garden remains only to Agaat.

Now that Milla is dying, the actual possibility for the paradise being brought on

earth is finally contemplated. On this regards, critic Jamaica Kincaid reflects on the possibility for a garden to outlive its creator, concluding that it will actually vanish if the gardener it's not there:

While you're gardening, you can't imagine your absence from it, just as you can't imagine your absence from the world itself. So you make this great effort to claim it, to make your imprint on it, but when you're not there the lawn creeps back, and it goes back to itself. It's interesting that nothing is ever said about Eden once Adam and Eve leave. There's no one to tend it. It's quite possible it went back to the jungle, to the chaos from which it came. (2002, 794)

In this case, though, the garden is not disappearing: it is in fact taking a new shape under Agaat's hands. In this regard it is interesting to notice Agaat's remark when finding in one of Milla's diaries the above mentioned empty page on which the plans for the garden were supposed to be written:

Perhaps I should write it up in here myself. But perhaps we should finish furnishing my paradise before we start on yours, don't you think? we're right in the middle of it now. Hr little rm that you fixed up so nicely for hr in the back here, remember? (50)

While provoking Milla by reminding her of the outside room she carefully prepared for her, believing it would have been a sort of private paradise, Agaat also gives voice to the possibility for her to start her own story. Neither Milla's paradise nor the one she planned for Agaat were realized, but her approaching death gives place to a rebirth.

### **5.3 Dystopian gardens**

Milla's pastoral fantasy and the very real anti-pastoral environment she ends up dominating are signs of a very typical South African literary mode. In fact, South African literature has often developed both the pastoral myth and its opposite, widely exploring anti-pastoral motifs (Huggan, Tiffin, 97). As mentioned above, J.M. Coetzee argues that the Cape colony has mainly been perceived as an anti-Eden, where the colonizers were likely to be engulfed by barbarism. The land was seen as resisting

human civilization: “Africa is a land of rock and sun, not of soil and water. What relation is it possible for man to have with rock and sun?” (2, 3). The struggle to find a language in which to communicate with the land – a vain search for reciprocity (Huggan, Tiffin, 98) – results in the developing of a ‘literature of failure’. In the words of Huggan and Tiffin, the postcolonial sense of failure experienced by white settlers derives from:

The crisis of belonging that accompanies split cultural allegiance, the historical awareness of expropriated territory, and the suppressed knowledge that the legal fiction of entitlement does not necessarily bring with it the emotional attachment that turns ‘house and land’ into home. (82)

In fact, when relating to the land they possess, colonizers have, first of all, to reflect on their own past, increasing their awareness of the fictional sense of belonging on which their identity is based. When confronted to a postcolonial historical reconstruction of events, the descendants of white settlers are forced to admit that their genealogical claim on the land is not enough to obscure the fact that other genealogical claims on that same land were previously silenced in order to make space for theirs. While the legislative mechanism of entitlement, “confirmed by historical continuity of association” (Griffiths, 1997, qtd. in Huggan, Tiffin, 82) may fictionally create an affective connection to land and place, it is not enough to guarantee a true sense of belonging. Huggan and Tiffin further argue that entitlement in fact includes the tension between two different aspects: on the one hand the legislative aspect and the laws that govern ownership; on the other hand the “imaginative and/or emotional possession of a place based on a perception of belonging” (82). In this sense, the anti-pastoral can be regarded as the means through which this tension can be processed.

The failure to which anti-pastoral writers relate derives from their awareness that the pastoral fulfilment white settlers are searching for is unavoidably corrupted by experiences of unsuccessful attempt of communication or dispossession. Not only are

the white settlers incapable of communicating with the land they perceive as their own, their search for reciprocity also fails in regard to their attempt to establish a connection with other human beings, both inside their family and out. “Pastoral [...] is a spectral form, always aware of the suppressed violence that helped make its peaceful visions possible, and always engaged with the very histories from which it appears to want to escape” (Huggan, Tiffin, 85). As Milla points out, “Paradise is lost when its boundaries [its utopian nature, the damages it actually caused, its inner corruption] comes into sight” (500):

[...] everything suddenly felt too much for you. The ambiguity of the place, your farm, where you were passing your days, the destitution of the people around you, your inability to act rightly and justly, the catastrophes that beset you day after day, the eternal squabbles with Jak, your child who with the new fine grip of his little fingers was picking lucerne stems, and around whose head all these things raged without his understanding any of it yet. (250)

When reflecting on his origins, Jakkie also shows his uncertainty, being incapable of describing the place where he was born:

A very heaven, the time of my childhood. How could I tell anybody in this city?  
Heaven is a curiosity here. (1)

And:

What's like, where you grew up?[...] took me years to fashion my own rhymes to  
bind the sweetness, the cruelty in a single memory. (3)

The overwhelming ambivalence of the farm, which proves to be both paradise and hell together (578), transmits no comforting image to the reader. Once “the borders are lost”, that is, once the utopia is confronted with reality and cannot be described through the well-known pattern of an ideological construction, it is not possible to deal with the space of the farm any more. The discrepancies between the imagined land and the non-ideological one are simply “too much” and the utopian image of a paradisaal garden is replaced by the representation of a dystopia, one of those “imaginary spaces in literature which are clearly worse than contemporary society” (Stobie: 2012, 368).

In analysing dystopian places, Stobie underlines the positive effects of dystopian text in terms of social awareness and the possibility of social renovation. The so-called 'social dreaming' is described as the effect of several techniques developed within dystopian texts. "The character typically becomes progressively more disaffected and alienated, leading to a counter-narrative of politicised resistance to the hegemonic structures of the society" and "the conflicts in critical dystopias enable social critique and the seeds of hope for a more just, progressive society" (2012, 369). Since they leave no illusion to the reader by presenting him/her the worst possible world, they also bring him/her to reflect on the necessity for social change. Moreover, dystopian novels are generally free from "the tyranny of closure", leaving thus certain possibilities for individual who choose to live outside the "mainstream" (Stobie: 2012, 369). Stylistically, they often develop according a productive combination of different genres, which gives space to different voices and thus allows "resistance to a hegemonic ideology that reduces everything to a global monoculture" (Baccolini and Moylan, qtd. in Stobie: 2012, 369). Reporting Moylan, Stobie further argues that "as dystopian fictions criticise socio-political systems from the perspective of disaffected outsiders, the reader becomes infused with a 'militant pessimism', and, further, the characteristically open endings foster 'focused anger' and 'radical hope'" (370).

Although *Agaat* partially belongs to that group of texts defined by Stobie as dystopian, it also presents some characteristics which actually fall outside of it. As far as its style is concerned, it is true that it is written through a mixture of different genres, but the four narrative voices are all from Milla's perspective (apart from the prologue and the epilogue, whose value shouldn't be underestimate<sup>11</sup>). Moreover, its main focalisator, Milla, is not a disaffected outsider but the main source of power in the novel. Nevertheless, she is not even decisively defined as the "villain" of the story: she

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11 In this regard, see chapter 6.

does care about her farm and Agaat; and Agaat cares for her enough to attend to her her whole life. Their relationship is vitiated by its ambiguities, by Milla's ideological perception of reality and by her incapability to find a language in which to communicate with her foster-daughter. The character which strongly supports the issue of social change is instead Jakkie, who eventually chooses to leave the country, being also unable to relate to it and its critical situation.

On the contrary, it does have an open ending, which gives the possibility for a social change, but which does not involve a “focused anger” nor a “radical hope”. Instead, it presents the “seeds of change” as already existing and it requests those seeds to be freed from the weed suffocating them. The way in which an emerging future is imagined in the novel and the means to achieve its realization – if possible – will be further discussed in the following chapter.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion: Emerging futures?

*Agaat* can be interpreted as a metaphor of the complex process of healing from a social trauma such as the apartheid. Whether this healing is achievable or not is hard to say. While some aspects of the novel seem to suggest that a recovery is possible, others underline the complexity of such a process and apparently deny it can be successful. This chapter will take into consideration different critical texts in order to try to untangle this enormously complex issue, proposing different interpretations while at the same time acknowledging the unattainableness of the task.

#### 6.1 A new matriarchal, colour-blind order

The open ending of *Agaat*, with the coloured servant inheriting the land she has been farming her whole life, suggests the beginning of a new course both for her and for South Africa. Her taking over, instead of the legitimate male heir, represents the possibility of deconstructing the two strongest ideologically-constructed hierarchies, the one based on gender and the one based on race. When expressing her will about the future of the farm, Milla not only consigns to Agaat her land, but also herself:

*all at last cleared up the dominee the doctor the attorney attests now my last will  
and testament my farm on leasehold and also the homestead go to agaat until  
when she reaches eighty she has to hand it over to my son who must make further  
provision for her up to death here is her funeral scheme [...] my life I give into her hands [...] I'm her sick merino sheep her exhausted soil her  
fallow land full of white stones her blown-up cow and acre of lodged grain her  
rusty wheat her drift [...] because she know what it is to be a farmer woman [...] (362)*

Milla and Agaat are brought together by their experience: they both know “what it is to be a farmer woman”. Milla identifies with her land once more by comparing her sick body and her life itself to Grootmoedersdrift, and by leaving everything to Agaat, who comes to embody Milla's truest connection with her heritage. Agaat will be the one re-

establishing the connection of the family with their land and reinforcing the matriarchal line she is also carrying on. In fact, when listening to Agaat preparing their metaphorical last supper, Milla stresses once again her role in 'giving life' to the farm:

I was in the knives, I was in the peels, in the drawers, in the enamel bowls, I was the rich black compost, I was the soil, and nothing would ever go without me. *Nothing, to the end of time, without me having farmed here, and none of the people remaining here and living off the land.* (496, emphasis mine)

In giving Agaat the farm, she is also giving up her creative power both on the land and on the people inhabiting it. Milla's people are going to become Agaat's people. This handover is stressed by the scene in which the workers are gathered in Milla's room to pay their respect to their dying mistress:

Ounooi, Agaat says, your people have come to say goodbye to you. [...] Come! Come! The dogs? [...] Who's there? [...] So there are all the ones I'll be farming on with her on Grootmoedersdrift, Ounooi, says Agaat. [...] She shows I'm now moving on. [...] We will, we will...stay here under Agaat. The message is clear. I see how they look at each other, how they assess it, the new order. (556)

This passage also underlines that Agaat herself will become a mistress to the workers. It is thus true that a new order will be established, and that it will invert traditional hierarchies, but we need firstly to be aware of the fact that the reversal is intended to be only temporary – the farm will return to the legitimate black heir when Agaat is old – and secondly ask ourselves whether this handover will also mean a modification of the social structure of the farm.

As a doubly subjected individual, Agaat acquires an enormous and unexpected power when she eventually becomes not only her own master, but also the master of the farm and of the other black workers.<sup>12</sup> While before she didn't have the ability to openly modify the power dynamics on Grootmoedersdrift from above and was forced to adopt less visible strategies that would act on the farm 'from inside', she is now invested with a power she has never had. But which shape will the new course take? According to

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<sup>12</sup> In her essay *Can the Subaltern speak?* (1988), Gayatri Spivak defines the coloured woman as the object of a double oppression, occupying the very bottom of social hierarchy.

Alpers, the pastoral is characterized by strategical “coyness in the face of social injustice”, which would prevent it from being a “catalyst for the active transformation of established social structures” (Alpers: 1996, qtd. in Huggan, Tiffin, 83). The novel reflects this in so far that Agaat's taking control on the farm does not automatically mean anything will change.

Agaat plans her own intervention on the farm based on economical interests, not on social one:

Now there are too many of you, I'm not building more than two new houses [...]. Everything is going to get smaller here now, that you've known me for more than a year now, if I need people for big jobs, I'll hire kaffirs on contract [...], *all the farmers are doing it like this now.* (282, emphasis mine)

Her acting as all the other farmers indicates the new order will not divert from traditional farming nor will take into consideration a modification in the social status of workers. Moreover, her using terms such as “kaffirs” underlines her internalization of Afrikaner ideology. This aspect is further stressed by Jakkie, who states his renounce to his claim on the farm as following:

At least my will has been lodged with the attorneys in Swellendam, the farm made over to Agaat. [...] Is man enough, will battle through the rest. With hand-plough and mules, with churn and sickle and harsness-cask and threshing-floor if need be, *like the first farmers on the land.* She's part of the place, from the beginning. Calloused, salted, brayed, *the lessons of the masters engraved in her like the law on the tablets stone,* deeper and clearer than I could ever preserve it. She knows the soil. She knows the language. She knows her place. (583)

Moreover, he notes how Agaat's attitude towards the workers reflects quite accurately the way in which they were treated before. While commenting on Milla's funeral, he says:

The funeral food made me sick, the quantities, and then after that *a whole week's recycling till Gaat had it put out in enamel dishes for the workers.* The children falling upon it before the adults could even get to it. Agaat *letting fly with a cane among them.* (579, emphasis mine)

As noted by Rossmann, she still serves them with enamel dishes and use a cane to control them (Rossmann, 39), thus equating them to the courtyard animals to which

one would give his leftovers. Moreover, the abundance of food, symbolizing richness and prosperity, is once again a privilege of the 'white' master. As Van Niekerk herself put it, Agaat is an “enlightened dictator”, “a saviour ... maybe, but not a savoury one”. Agaat is actually perpetrating the same ideology she could have ultimately disrupted. According to Rossmann, “Agaat has sublated herself from slave to master (from object to subject in the symbolic order) through Milla’s death”, but nevertheless “master and slave still remain mutually authoring in their sado-masochistic bond” (39-40). Agaat continues to take care of Milla by “maintain[ing] her shrine inviolate” (583). As Jakkie notes when reflecting on Agaat's future on the farm, “the promised land is hers already, her creator is keeping remote control. Six feet under” (583). Agaat may be the innovative element in a patriarchal white society, both both her non-democratic governance and her unresolved bond with Milla's power, together with her age, prevent her from becoming “a favourable symbol of socio-cultural regeneration” (Rossmann, 40).

## **6.2 Sacrifice and reconciliation**

In their article “*chew me until i bind*”: *Sacrifice and Cultural Renewal in Marlene van Niekerk's Agaat*, Rossmann and Stobie argue that the novel “can be read as a metaphor for the desire for social reconciliation and cohesion in contemporary South Africa” (17). According to their analysis, the premises for a social reconciliation are given by Milla's sacrifice, who consign herself and her life to Agaat in order to make her the means for a rebirth. Milla's death – representing the sacrificial death of the master – is interpreted as giving life to a new, different future in which the dominant ideology will be reversed. In their analysis, the two critics focus mainly on one passage, “written in the style of a prayer or lament with its mournful meditation on the onset of disease and decay in the soil and farming stock that Milla regrets not having saved from abuse and

denigration” (17). Milla's lament is considered as a pray to a “beneficent successor” which will be able to generate a rebirth of the decaying farm. Through her plea “who will chew me until a bind” (31), Milla presents herself as “a *pharmakos*, ritual sacrifice or scapegoat”(Rossmann, Stobie, 19), with the purpose of restoring social harmony. Milla's ritualistic death appears to have “nutritional value” (199) in so far that it represent “an alternative to entropy and annihilation” (Rossmann, Stobie, 23), that is to the death of society itself: what is ill – both Milla and the national racist ideology – need to be sacrificed in order to make space for a new life and a new future. Milla is seeing as offering “the greatest sacrifice for reconciliation: herself, and by extension the Afrikaner (agri)culture she comes to represent” (25). Rossmann and Stobie further stress that Milla's death should not be perceived as annihilation but as an expression of “Milla’s desire to make reparation and be reconciled with the daughter she has cast out” (27). However, Milla's desire is not sufficient to achieve reconciliation, since Milla cannot express her remorse to Agaat and her confession remains only mental. Moreover, the two critics note that “it is necessary to critically assess Milla’s partial and essentialised view of Agaat, especially since Agaat’s suffering remains eclipsed by Milla’s narration” and that true contrition will not be possible until Milla does not admit her abjection of Agaat.

On the other hand, when discussing the possibility of healing of the trauma, critics Marijke Van Vuuren focuses on forgiveness, seen as the only way to leave the past behind and thus restore first the soul of the discarded maid and then the community itself. Her article, “*It was my ... hanslam*”: *Agaat as a Pastoral Evocation of Guilt and (Possibly) Forgiveness* provides an interesting analysis of the concept of forgiveness according to Ricoeur's definition, which describes it as “a form of labour – almost of travail – that 'begins in the sphere of memory and proceeds into that of forgetting'” (Ricoeur 2000, qtd. in Van Vuuren M.: 2010, 92). Van Vuuren notes how the process of

forgiving begins in the novel with Agaat reading to her mistress her early diaries in order to “confront her with the damage she has done and the denial of her true motives” (92). It is interesting to notice how Milla recurrently underlines her inability to write down the beginning of the story, which suggests she is in fact incapable of dealing with or critically observing her arbitrary choice to take Agaat from her hearth and turn her into a different person, a copy of herself. Milla's real motives will only later be uncovered by Jakkie's destabilizing narrative intervention. When looking through old papers after his mother's death, he finds the dedication she added to one of her diaries:

To the history of Agaat Lourier [...] so that there may be a record one day of her being chosen and of the precious opportunities granted to her on the farm Grootmoedersdrift of a Christian education and of all the privileges of a good Afrikaner home. (582)

At the same time Van Vuuren stresses the fact that, since the two women undoubtedly love each other, Agaat is also “confronted with her own grief at the loss” (101). The critic also notes how Milla herself expresses her grief for Agaat, who will be left alone once her mother-mistress is dead (461). While Milla's remorse is evident, it is not clear whether Agaat perceives the unspoken message Milla is trying to communicate to her and whether she forgives her: “she remains the unknowable ‘other’ and the novel resists closure” (Van Vuuren M., 103).

Van Vuuren further argues that Agaat's actions can be regarded as evidence of an unconditional forgiveness, “needing neither repentance nor confession”(103). In this regard, Agaat's going back to the mountain and digging up the suitcase in which she had metaphorically buried her childhood the night she was outcast from the family, suggests a symbolic resurrection of the child, representing a partial reversal of “some of the damage done to her that day” (Van Vuuren M., 104).

The final stream-of-consciousness passage where Milla, in dying, is accompanied by the hand of the small Agaat suggests a final reconciliation between the two women,

which according to Van Vuuren is made possible by Agaat's recovering her “divine capacity for grace” (105) by recovering the child she had been:

*Where you go there I shall go  
your house is my house  
your land is my land  
the land that the Lord thy God giveth you  
[...] in my overberg  
over the bent world brooding  
in my hand the hand of the small agaat (576)*

However, Rossmann and Stobie forewarn the reader from believing in a “dangerously seductive closure and synthesis to a dialectical relationship between self and other that is felt in the novel as a whole to be far more fraught and equivocal” (29). While they anyway believe that the strength of such a poignant scene does in fact “override any feelings of scepticism (if only temporarily) and offers the utopian ending that is so deeply desired by the reader who sees this reconciliation as an allegory for reconciliation between the races” (29), we should not forget that the possibility for an utopian ending – for as much as it is craved – should not divert the reader's attention from the futility of seeking refuge in utopian dreams of an (easy) reconciliation.<sup>13</sup>

When analysing the textual passages suggesting that forgiveness and rebirth could be possible, it is also interesting to notice that the author decides to have Milla die on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December, the annual Day of Reconciliation, two years after the official end of apartheid. As noted by Hunter, “Van Niekerk inserts an ironic echo here, as Milla 'rescued' Agaat also on 16 December and has chosen to see her task of raising the child as a divinely appointed one” (78). At the time, that same date was known as the Covenant Day and it celebrated the battle at Blood River, where the Afrikaner trekkers migrating from the south-west, away from British control on the Cape Colony, had defeated the native population thus “confirming their status as God's chosen people” (Hunter, 78). 1996, the year of Milla's death, is also the year when the Truth and

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<sup>13</sup> The role of Jakkie's frame narration in warning the readers about the effective value of Milla's fantasy for reconciliation will be analysed in the following paragraph.

Reconciliation Commission began to unveil the abuses perpetrated during the apartheid era in order “to enable South Africans to come to terms with their past on a morally accepted basis and to advance the cause of reconciliation”.<sup>14</sup>

Through this extra-textual connection to historic events the novel could be read as a metaphor for the healing process the whole country has to go through in order to be able to ride over the enormous social trauma that apartheid has caused. In this sense *Agaat* reflects both on the difficult position of Afrikaners – who need to learn how to cope with a past of violence and segregation that they have been universally held responsible for having promoted and supported – and on the ways in which the country could go ahead from now on, imagining possible future(s). According to the fundamental principles of the TRC, the way out apartheid is to be found in the admission of all past guilts, based on the idea that the past can be coped with only through the unveiling of every secret, even the most atrocious one;<sup>15</sup> the reality of past abuses mustn't be forgotten, but need instead to be brought on the foreground as the base for a rethinking of the concepts of identity and race. However, such a rethinking has proved to be less obvious than it was supposed to be. As the frequent episodes of post-apartheid violence demonstrate, episodes of which the author is well aware<sup>16</sup>, exposing the truth about segregation didn't lead so easily to the desired reconciliation.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of Milla's fantasy, the process of forgiveness and the possibility of a rebirth are still far from being achieved.

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14 Dullah Omar, former Minister of Justice, introduction of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, No 34 of 1995

15 The same principles are at the base of South-African museum policy, according to which monuments and buildings celebrating Afrikaner's culture need not to be eliminated but to be rethought.

16 It's important to remember that the novel was written in 2004, ten years after the official end of apartheid.

17 Jakkie's remarks about the newspaper he left at the airport anticipates those future episodes: “Remarkable journalism. Rugby players on the front page and the back page and the centre pages, lawlessness and corruption, child rape, political denial of AIDS, middle class sex-scandals, letters from indignant creationists” (583).

### 6.3 A critical frame narrator

Even though Jakkie's textual space is rather limited – 22 pages out of 591 in the edition we are referring to in this analysis – his role in the structure of the narration cannot be underestimated. As Rossmann argues in her article *'There's another story here': Skewing the Frame in Marlene van Niekerk's Aagaat*, the narrative frame formed by the prologue and the epilogue, which are both from Jakkie's point of view, reminds us to read the novel critically, without being swallowed in Milla's powerful narration. As previously mentioned, Jakkie is the main explicit critical voice of the novel. This is true in many ways which will be further analysed in this paragraph. First of all he is the alienated figure which according to Stobie's dissertation on dystopian pastoral will lead to a “counter-narrative of politicised resistance to the hegemonic structures of the society”(2012, 369). Then, as mentioned above, his voice represents “an essential narrative tool that disrupts the powerful mythologies presented in the mother-daughter story”(Rossmann, 35). Lastly, he introduces through his own struggle towards personal identification the more pervasive issue of identity in post-apartheid South Africa. In this sense, Jakkie's alienation, resulting both from the crisis of belonging inherent to colonial entitlement of land and from his personal refusal of the structural violence promoted by apartheid, allows him to introduce an outer perspective. He can observe the 'imagined paradise' with new eyes, from outside its borders, and thus try to analyse it without falling under the Afrikaner ideological frame.

Jakkie's taking part in military actions and his relationship with his two mothers represent two elements of disturbance which finally help him to escape an ideological perception of both history and race. After having experienced a double sense of guilt, caused both by his complicity with the apartheid government and his abandonment of Aagaat, left alone on the farm to look after 'their' mother, along with the family land, he also experiences an identity crisis, well underlined by his referring to himself in the

third person. In fact, when putting notes behind the pictures portraying him as a soldier, he refers to himself as “de Wet”(225). Milla's reaction to this, her wondering what could have caused the third person reference, brings the reader himself to reflect on the matter. We believe that only one answer is possible: Jakkie is alienated from himself and is not able any more to connect the image he sees on the picture to the person he is. His refusal of army life not only leads him to leave the country, but also to see the faults of the Afrikaner community and criticize it:

Killed hundreds of people, more than I'll never know. Jesus, what a disgrace! how must I live with it for the rest of my life? I'm ashamed of it, that it happened to me, that I didn't see it sooner[...] The whole community here intoning their anthem, peep, squeak the little wives, bu-urp croak the husbands, they with their stud farms breeding bulls for the abattoir and babies for the army, they with their church steeples and iron fists towering towards heaven. Who do they think they are? (504)

His criticism further develops in regard to the treatment his 'second mother' underwent because of Milla's decision to pursue her 'mission as white woman', which results in Agaat also being alienated from her people, both the coloured and the white ones: “They hate her. They mock her. It's you how made her like that, Ma, you and Pa. She's more screwed up than Frankenstein's monster”(520). His reaction to Milla's diary's dedication also stresses his critical view of Afrikaner ideology and of the mission his mother believes she has undertaken: “Could she really have written that? My sentimental, hypochondriac mother with her head full of romantic German melodies? So force-fed with the insanity of this country?” (582). Then, when he tries to have Agaat realize she may have an existence outside of the role Milla has attributed her, the only answer he receives is Agaat's denial: “you are not your apron and your cap, Agaat, Jakkie said, and turned round her. I am, Agaat said” (520).

His blunt criticism of the white society causes different reaction in his parents. While Milla seems to notice for the first time the smallness and arrogance characterizing the society she lives in (515), Jak's rage at the betrayal of his son, the

male heir he used to be so proud of, explode in a car accident which will be the cause of his death (530). As Rossmann notes:

The inimical eyes of the community are obviously meant as an indictment against this putative heir who has not only renounced his sacred birth-right and abandoned the fatherland, but is also a bachelor who reveals no inclination to secure the perpetuity of the family name and by extension the Afrikaner *volk*. (38)

At the same time, Jakkie does not entirely reject his heritage. He does not cut any connection with his birth-place, but instead chooses to become an ethno-musicologist, studying the culture and folklore of the nation he has decided to leave. Even as an expatriate, he keeps listening to the voice of his country as an outsider listener. His choice to rethink himself as an ethno-musicologist after the experience of the war may suggest he is actually revising the way in which the Afrikaner farmer is supposed to be the guardian of the traditional culture, proposing an innovative approach based on comparing and cherishing instead than defending and imposing. However, “he attempts to free himself from the homogenising and restrictive narratives of nation, yet realises the difficulty in maintaining the balance between objectivity and empathy when he asks: ‘But who can play the ethnographer at his mother’s deathbed?’” (Rossmann, 37).

Apart from doubting his own capacity of finally escaping the cultural and social implication of his heritage, Jakkie also puts under scrutiny Agaat's capacity of “subverting Milla’s dominant discourse and becoming a vitalising force for Afrikaner culture” (34). At the beginning of the chapter, we have seen how Jakkie notes that Agaat's governance of farm is far from being egalitarian. Moreover, she defines her as the “Apartheid Cyborg. Assembled from loose components plus audiotape” (579), which underlines her mimicry of Milla. While it is generally argued that mimicry is never only an imitation and that it always implies a critical difference, Rossmann “that Jakkie’s observations challenge the extent of her difference” (39). In particular, the reference to the audiotape would annihilate Agaat's possibility to escape the ideologies

installed in her by Milla and develop a personal discourse. However, the fact that in the epilogue it is finally given space to Agaat's own narration – in the shape of the fairytale she was used to tell Jakkie when he was a child – underlines the ambiguity of Jakkie's textual space.

Jakkie represents the ironic voice which typically shadows the possibility of a mythic pastoral fulfilment (Huggan, Tiffin, 85). Comparing him to Socrates in Plato's *Dialogues*, Rossmann states “he uses irony to play ‘upon his interlocutors’ discourse in order to draw it out, to develop its possibilities in a dialogue destined to end in aporia’ (Lang 1988, quoted in Rossmann, 36). Jakkie is the narrator breaking the comforting master plot, which is often difficult to question because it constitutes ‘the mythological structure’ of society ( Frank Kermodé, qtd. in Rossmann, 34). According to this analysis, the importance of Jakkie's intervention is precisely to dispute the appealing myth of reconciliation which forms the central plot of the novel. It is interesting to notice that, as it was the case with Socrates, the aim of the ironic interlocutor is not to come to an answer, but to begin a dialogue: Jakkie's inconclusive and allusive intervention does not produce any definitive or fixed alternative definition, but “is potentially the realm for ‘broaden[ing] the view’ of Milla’s narrative monopoly” (Rossmann, 37).

Jakkie's ambiguity towards the possibilities of an ultimate reconciliation between the two women and at a national level finds a correspondence in his attitude towards his own identity and the identity of Afrikaners taken as a group. Paraphrasing Melissa Steyn, Rossmann states that “Afrikaners in post-apartheid South Africa perceive themselves as marginalised in relation to the dominant culture of ‘both the African Other, who possesses demographic power, and the English Other, whose brand of whiteness comes with a powerful global backing’” (Steyn: 2004, in Rossmann, 36). Deriving from this, Afrikaners have to face a crisis of identity which would require a

profound analysis of the self and a consequent reconfiguration of it in the light of the new socio-cultural dominating discourse. Obviously, this is a far than easy task; when coming back to his home-country for his mother's funeral, Jakkie widely expresses the difficulty of a possible re-elaboration of his identity as an Afrikaner. In so doing, he states his ambiguity toward himself and his cultural heritage, embodying a feeling which is common to all – or many – Afrikaan-speaking white South Africans. The passages in the text underlining Jakkie's displacement are numerous. On the one hand he is aware that his identity has been shaped by his birth-place and by its cultural values – “how can Grootmoedersdrift determine my idea of myself? Unavoidable” (538) – on the other hand he apparently believes a reconfiguration could be achieved through distance. “And yet, the meaning of my existence is elsewhere, always and in principle elsewhere, [...] the region where you always listen at a distance” (583). “Listening from a distance” is presented as a necessary step to be able to re-elaborate one's own identity in a new cultural and ideological contest. Him realizing the existence of ideological borders which helped define the fantasy of a paradisaal garden-farm, and him acknowledging the perishable nature of those borders, once they are confronted with a dismantling reality of racism and exploitation, form the basis of a re-elaboration. Nevertheless, the whole process is presented as extremely troublesome: even though his moving abroad emphasises his refusal to support the apartheid system and bring its inner discrepancies on the foreground, it does not make his processing his identity any easier:

Discrepancy, a gritty feeling ever since I set foot on land. [...] When and where did my romantic yearnings originate? Deserted farmyards, neglected buildings, rusty bits of machinery. My standards have shifted, of civilization, of human dignity [...]. (578)

And:

I don't belong here. Have been away for too long. More than a decade. Perhaps too short. (578)

Both in presence and in absence, the process seems unending, if not impossible. In fact, Jakkie's being physically distant from his birth-place does not avoid him being emotionally close to it: he is and remains "in two places at once, as always" (1).

As previously noted, Jakkie's displacement and ambiguity in regards to his own country can be interpreted as a reflection of Afrikaner's troublesome definition of identity in the post-apartheid South Africa. After a racially-justified past of economical and political domination of coloured individuals, Afrikaners have been doomed by history as colonial masters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Afrikaner's perplexity are explicitly uttered by the voice of Jak, when he says that:

He thinks the world find us whites in this country interesting only for what we're supposed to have done to the hotnots and the kaffirs. And then they're going to hold it against us all over again because we dare write down on behalf of the so-called victims what we did to them [...]

The Afrikaner women, they who should be carrying the torch, they're useless, the Afrikaner youth, characterless, without ideals, even the Afrikaner skivvies are struck dumb! Is this what our ancestors tamed this land for with their muzzle-loaders, with the clothes on their bodies and their wagons against the barbarian hordes? (510-512).

Even though they come from Jak, the bluntest uncritical nationalist character of the novel, those words in fact introduce a very real problem. Now that those ideologically-charged speeches don't make sense any more, now that ideology has fallen apart, now that the pastoral dream is finally destroyed and Afrikaners are confronted with its futility, how are they to recover? What is left to white Afrikaners now that the apartheid era is over? In the epilogue, Jakkie clearly expresses his difficulties in imagining a possible future for his country: "how in God's name is it to carry on from here? [...] I just want to cauterise it all neatly now" (583). However, no short-cut is available; what he must learn to do is to:

Mourn my mother, my mothers, the white one and the brown one. Mourn my country.

[...] What remains? Grieving. Grieving till I've mastered the hat-trick. (584)

Both the difficult family relationships and the complex race relations in the country are

presented as a source of grieving, which would be solved only with a trick. According to Rossmann, “in his brooding and suffering, Jakkie offers some hope – not unqualified or immediately foreseeable – for creative production and cultural reinvigoration through his obsession with fantasy and his continued allusion to symbols of plenitude and inspiration” (43) . But the trick still has to be mastered, just as a language still has to be found in which the national sorrow could be re-elaborated. Van Niekerk leaves the reader with many questions and no definitive answers. The novel ultimately expresses both the Afrikaners' and the coloureds' uncertainty about the future, underlining the complexity of a social, political and cultural situation which will be unravelled in a very long time – if ever.

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