

Mashudu C. Mashige
Mashudu C. Mashige is Associate
Professor in the Department of Applied
Languages, Tshwane University of
Technology, Soshanguve South Campus.
He holds a D Litt et Phil degree in English
from the University of Johannesburg.
Email: MashigeMC@tut.ac.za

Feminism and the politics of identity in Ingrid de Kok's *Familiar Ground*

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Through an analysis of selected representative poems from Ingrid de Kok's *Familiar Ground*, this article examines the role played by feminist poetry in the quest to address gender-related issues as well as to contribute constructively to South Africa's liberation from patriarchal apartheid. The article further argues that feminist writers desire to (re)negotiate the space within which they can (re)construct and articulate their identities as women and mothers, and that in such a context the politics of identity cannot be detached from other aspects within the struggle for socio-political and economic emancipation. Thus characteristics of apartheid oppression are contrasted with the patriarchal domination opposed by feminist writers. **Key words:** Feminism, gender, identity, phallogocentric, South African English poetry.

In her foreword to *South African Feminisms: Writing, Theory, and Criticism 1990-1994*, Barbara Bowen suggests that South African feminism has a significant contribution to make in the doubled-edged question of examining race and gender (1996: x). This, Bowen contends, is important in developing relevant theoretical underpinnings and practices cognizant of oppression's multi-faceted forms, and in ensuring that such underpinnings and practices do not overlook the historical conditions of oppression. It is crucially important also to understand that different meanings can be ascribed to feminism primarily because feminism in South Africa does not represent a homogeneous category. The differences in understanding and articulation tend to reflect the various strands that have characterised the debate surrounding South Africans's attempt to address gender issues, from historical, social, as well as political perspectives. South African feminism addresses issues of gender in a very particular context that has known the suppression of women as a result, on the one hand, of patriarchy, and, on the other hand, of apartheid's racial segregation which made South Africa's situation unique. It is the uniqueness of South Africa's patriarchal apartheid context that necessitates the need to address what Bowen (1996: xi) calls the "overlap between the institutionalisation of racial 'apartness' and masculinist epistemology".

This article examines selected poems from Ingrid de Kok's *Familiar Ground*, to illustrate that her poetry not only articulates her individual identity as a woman but

further enunciates her attempt to achieve what Hassim and Walker (1992: 84) maintain is “solidarity on the basis of common goals”. This need for solidarity based on common goals is necessitated by the context within which the poetry is produced, a highly divisive context that has seen women being socially and racially separated in terms of ideology, theoretical inquiry, and the balance of literary power relations. This context has unwittingly fed into the process of racial othering where white women generally dominated feminist discourse and the production of knowledge in scholarly matters. Evidence of this can be found, for example, in Sisi Maqagi’s article “Who theorises?”, where she takes up and simultaneously problematises what she sees as inherent contradictions in Lockett’s “concern for the open-minded acceptance of black women’s point of view” (Maqagi 1996: 27). Maqagi strongly warns against white feminists’ unwitting “prescription” to black feminist writers through a “sympathetic discourse” that ignores the fact that black feminists can theorise and also have a special talent to produce. She further maintains, “the very fact that the discourse will be a ‘sympathetic’ one indicates that it will not have arisen from within” (Maqagi 1996: 28). Her argument is, to a large extent, based on the fact that the use of the word “sympathetic” carries within it the implication of tolerance for something that is not up to the mark. Interesting in this regard is the emergence of a dialectical relationship between “within” and “without”, one which mirrors the dialectics of inside and outside, self and other that are integral to the conceptualisation of identity. Thus the feminist struggle also becomes one of contestation where women attempt to (re)claim their suppressed voices and the voices of the other, a struggle that also attempts to articulate a historicity from the various voices submerged under the yoke of difference accentuated by the reality of racial and political oppression. In the end, the poetry attempts to close the ideological and racial chasm as poets venture to illustrate that, historical and interpretative differences notwithstanding, black and white women can create a mutual bond.

Lockett maintains that for feminists “there is a necessary continuum between identification of the self as ‘feminist’ – a primarily political act in which the politics of gender oppression are confronted – and professional practice as critic and teacher” (1996: 4). The preceding contention describes the essence of what feminist writers in general set out to achieve: to challenge, in theory and in practice, social perceptions that have served to bestow upon women the identity of other. This becomes the common denominator that binds different feminists as they articulate the need for solidarity within a deeply gendered and oppressive context that constructs their subject positions as individuals. As Daymond avers, “white women as well as black have to speak and be spoken in the plural; no one here can be adequately scripted black and white. The problem [in South Africa] [has] certainly [been] white supremacy, but all women have a part to play in dismantling it” (1996: xxv). This assertion forms the basis on which an analysis of the selected poems will be made and further to

illustrate how and why poets such as Jennifer Davids, Sisi Maqagi, Nise Malange and Ingrid de Kok, amongst others, have felt, as feminists and / or womanists, able to speak of and for South Africa's women in a manner that transgresses racial boundaries.

Born in Johannesburg in 1951 de Kok grew up in the mining town of Stilfontein, South Africa and has also published as Ingrid Fiske. As part of the then conservative Western Transvaal, Stilfontein had a very strong Calvinist character that, largely, was the base of the Afrikaans culture and apartheid. She received her tertiary education at the Universities of the Witwatersrand (1972) and Cape Town (1974), both of which were characterised by a strong tradition of liberalism, before she proceeded to Queens University, Canada (1984). Upon her return to South Africa, in 1986, she worked at Khanya College, a Johannesburg based institution founded by non-governmental organisations, to "provide education which is relevant to the needs of historically oppressed communities, to contribute to the strengthening of community based organisations, trade unions and non-governmental organisations" (Khanya College) towards presenting a progressive alternative to the inferior training of teachers provided in state-controlled black training colleges. In 1988 she joined the University of Cape Town's Department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies located in the Centre for Higher Education Development.

The blurb on the cover of Ingrid de Kok's collection, *Familiar Ground* (1988), describes hers as poetry that "charts the impact of the state on the individual's psychic and erotic life", and that ranges "across the experience of the girl-child growing into adulthood and explore[s] the complex of identities and positions demanded of women in South Africa today". Such a kind of assertion opens up space for reading de Kok's poetry in this, as well as in her other collections such as *Transfer* (1997), *Terrestrial Things* (2002) and *Seasonal Fires* (2006) with an eye towards examining the various trajectories that inhere in her quest for the reclamation of the feminine voice, especially within the context of a masculinist society. *Familiar Ground* (1988) is divided into three sections titled "In a Hot Country", "Where There Is Water", and "Small Passing" respectively. Each of the three sections represents a gamut of experience in the persona's development, both as a human being and as a woman. The range of emotions, experiences and feelings conveyed by the poems covers anger, fear, love, pain, suffering and eventually hope for the dawn of a new era, one in which there is compassion, sympathy, care and understanding for the other. The poems carry within them an inherent message that exhorts women, in particular, to begin to grapple with the importance of creating bonds that transcend racial differences in the fight against the oppression of women in a typically phallogocentric society in which, as Lockett correctly observes, "cultural meaning [is] attached to sexual identity" (1996: 3).

A poem in which the above finds expression in a more pronounced and deeply nuanced manner is “Small Passing” (61), which is dedicated to “a woman whose baby died stillborn, and who was told by a man to stop mourning, ‘because the trials and horrors suffered daily by black women in this country are more significant than the loss of one white child’”. The dedication is chilling enough in itself and immediately invites racial and gender-based interpretations of the poem. Its implicit message resides in the desire to understand loss, any loss, as such. However, because of the historical and racial contingencies imposed by apartheid, the man referred to in the dedication seems to think that the pain of one woman’s loss of her child is irrelevant compared to the plight of millions of suffering black children. The man objectifies suffering and thereby dismisses the pain of the grieving mother. In the poem, there is, from the very beginning, protest against a society that tends to weigh pain in terms of magnitude and racial overtones. This protest is evident from the opening lines of the poem, where the persona says sadly:

remember the last push into shadow and silence,
the useless wires and cords on your stomach,
the nurse’s face, the walls, the afterbirth in a basin.
Do not touch your breasts
still full of purpose.
Do not circle the house,
pack, unpack the small clothes.
Do not lie awake at night hearing
the doctor say “It was just as well”
and “You can have another.”
In this country you may not
mourn small passings.

What becomes even more shocking is the sense of resignation that pervades the stanza as the persona reflects upon events that preceded the stillbirth. It is apparent that attempts were made to save the baby but these proved futile. This is clearly reflected in the manner the persona describes “useless wires”, “cords on your stomach”, “the nurse’s face”, “the walls”, and “the afterbirth in the basin”, all reminders of the painful process of having to face up to the loss of a child. It is also remarkable that the situation as depicted is presented in the form of a second person narrative. This is a stylistic device the poet uses to indicate that the loss of a child is a painful experience to mothers, all mothers, irrespective of their racial, religious and even political origins and inclinations, as the reader is placed in the position of the addressee. Reading the poem one is struck by the deep sense of loss for a mother, not just a white mother. At the level of signification, the universality of the woman’s experience, invariably so, undermines the haughty superciliousness and utterly objectionable tone and

tendencies displayed by the doctor in his arrogant, “It was just as well” and “You can have another”. While an argument can be made that the views expressed by the doctor should be seen as nothing more than “vocational professionalism” from someone who has seen such loss more often than not and may, within this context, be suggesting, a “pragmatic way forward”, it needs to be remembered that the persona has already created a specific context within which to understand the doctor’s statement, in the poem’s dedication: “For a woman whose baby died stillborn, and who was told by a *man* to stop mourning, ‘because the trials and horrors suffered by black women in this country are more significant than the loss of one white child’” (my emphasis). Against the foregoing background such statements coming from a doctor who should be more sympathetic are crass, to say the least.

It is, however, at the level of power relations that the statements assume even greater significance within the context of the discourse of difference, gender and oppression. The statements buttress the already evident male chauvinistic streak in the poem’s dedication, as quoted above, in which the persona explicates some of the reasons for composing the poem. Out of this background arises a situation within which men, at least as represented in the poem, continually exhibit deeply phallogentric tendencies that, in turn, continue to enable them to dominate women in socio-economic and political relations. That men continue to undermine the suffering of women in general and adopt an almost contemptuous attitude as evidenced by the doctor’s words is symptomatic of the skewed nature of gender relations, relations that need to be (re)negotiated so as to factor into the power equation equity, acceptance and understanding towards a more representative, sympathetic, discrimination-free and compassionate society.

The poem attempts a consciousness-raising process through which society can begin to be compassionate about human pain and suffering as represented by the woman’s loss of her child. Furthermore, the poem brings out the importance of gender solidarity towards the articulation of female identity, particularly within a society attempting to articulate new forms of identities based on respect for human dignity and an understanding of otherness. The poem simultaneously envisions a radically new context within which there is a stronger sense of identification amongst women as mothers first and foremost. One cannot help but also detect a subliminal tone of protest against human, in this instance male, insensitivity towards the plight of a female individual, something that evokes the frequently hierarchically skewed nature of male / female power relations. In this situation, one might even speak of a technology of power in which rationalistic and scientific power, as typified by “useless wires” and “the walls”, is linked to male power. This deliberate stylistic association is meant to reinforce the notion of an uncaring male whose power is not helpful to the female when it is most needed. The poem illustrates that, even within this context where there is an obvious move towards female solidarity, the old power relations of

the male as the self and the female as the other have not been totally eradicated.

The subsequent stanzas of Part 1 depict typical South African scenarios starting with a “newspaper boy in the rain” who will “sleep tonight in a doorway”, through to “the woman in the busline / [who] may next month be on a train / to a place not her own”, and the “baby in the backyard” who “will be sent to a tired aunt,” a “Clumsy woman” who “moves so slowly / as if in a funeral rite”. This litany of woes presents the ugly face of social inequalities suffered by women and children, in particular. This is a negative reflection on a society that seems to place a very low premium on women and children, who ironically are the biological basis of posterity. The last stanza of Part 1 depicts how the fate of the majority of women was “sealed and signed for” in a racially polarised South Africa. The persona describes what, at face value, seems to be a mundane conversation amongst the nannies. It is only upon reflection that one realises the very important social and political tone of protest that layers and pervades this deceptively innocuous stanza. Tongue-in-cheek, the persona immediately apprises the reader of the meeting and its legality, encompassed in the following lines:

On the pavements the nannies meet.
These are legal gatherings.
They talk about everything, about home,
while the children play among them,
their skins like litmus, their bonnets clean.

That these nannies gather in this fashion on the pavement is an indictment of society’s failure to provide them with amenities that would contribute to their physical comfort when they need to rest. Invariably, the nannies find solace in meeting on the pavement. While the meeting initially appears to be an “official” one, further scrutiny suggests that the character of the gathering is an informal one. However, the informal nature of the gathering does not detract from the very pertinent issues the nannies discuss. The depiction evokes a vivid scenario where the nannies talk animatedly about their personal experiences that bind them to identify with one another as women who are worried about what may be happening at their respective homes while they have to take care of their employers’ children as nannies. Equally interesting is the description of the white children the nannies are minding. Their skins are described as being “like litmus” and “their bonnets [are] clean”. Litmus is a paper that turns red in acid or blue in an alkali. Such a description acts as a double-edged sword that cuts both sides of the divide. On the one hand the children have lotion applied on their faces to protect their skins from the very hot African sun. To assist in their skins’ protection they also put on bonnets, which provide some shade for their skins. On the other hand the description shows that the nannies are able to survive even in the face of the harsh African sun, which the children cannot survive without some form of skin

protection. This dimension also helps the reader to realise that for white people to survive the Africa, they need to develop the proverbial “thick skin” in more ways than one. In a very subtle way the persona skilfully brings to bear issues of identity through racial identification and thus creates a background against which gender solidarity is made possible. The persona depicts the above scenario to begin illustrating that, while the cost of solidarity is high, it is a price worth paying to ensure that both black and white women create a mutual bond. Such a bond begins with an enabling environment in which there is space for self-criticism and the acknowledgement that black women in particular have been doubly othered in gender and racial terms.

There is already, amongst the women in the quoted stanza, a sense of solidarity that leads them not only to identify with each other but also to realise that, as women, they are oppressed. Invariably, there is also an underlying comparison between their oppression as women, in an essentially patriarchal society, and apartheid oppression, which, in terms of feminist discourse, is based on a deeply phallogocentric sense of dominance and self-importance. Given half a chance, these nannies would rather be taking care of their own children. However, they find themselves in a situation about which they have no choice, primarily because of the politics surrounding race, class, and even more importantly, gender. The conclusion that one readily accedes to is that these black women resign themselves to the historical imposition of being nannies within a social system that practises multiple forms of oppression, as encapsulated in apartheid. This presents a momentous challenge to white women, particularly within the context of feminist discourse, because within the racial context of apartheid oppression, as Lockett puts it, “the paradigm of power considers whites as the Self and blacks as the Other, which means that white women are subsumed into the masculine Self” (1996: 17). The foregoing assertion crystallises some of the challenges that feminists have to contend with in the quest to redress gender, social, racial and class contradictions in the quest for a more egalitarian society in which the political agenda of feminism will not be suppressed.

The last stanza of “Small Passing” openly propagates the idea that, despite the reality of social, racial, gender and class differences imposed by what Bowen calls “the patriarchalism of nineteenth-century Calvinism” (1996: x) that characterised apartheid ideology, it is possible and, indeed, essential within certain contexts, for black and white women to bond and form their own solidarity. The message of female solidarity in the struggle for survival, within the context of the poem, has to be seen in relation to the superciliousness of men, a relation that inheres in the poem’s dedication and is further typified in the doctor’s insensitive utterances in the first stanza of the poem. The poem concludes thus:

I think these mothers dream
headstones of the unborn.
Their mourning rises like a wall

no vine will cling to.
They will not tell you your suffering is white.
They will not say it is just as well.
They will not compete for the ashes of infants.
I think they may say to you:
Come with us to the place of mothers.
We will stroke your flat empty belly,
let you weep with us in the dark,
and arm you with one of our babies
to carry home on your back.

As already pointed out, the stanza envisions a sense of solidarity. This solidarity, I want to argue, is based on the universality of the experiences as mothers and, thus, as women. There is a sharp juxtaposition between the attitude of males towards a woman's loss, and the mothers' compassion. The concept of dream in the first line of the stanza factors into the equation a sense of hope. This hope is reinforced in the third line where the persona employs a pun in "mourning" in the statement "Their mourning rises like a wall". On the one hand, the statement refers to a deep sense of loss that the mothers, naturally, mourn; on the other hand, it engenders a sense of hope and reflects the courage that the mothers have. Mourning in the stanza has echoes of morning, which marks the beginning of a new day, and, thus hope for better things. There is also, within this context, the invocation of religious imagery in the form of the Wailing Wall to which both Jew and Gentile go to express their sorrow to God. The wall imagery is used in a double-edged manner where, on the one hand, it can act as a barrier to access while; on the other hand, it also represents a monument of hope. The significance of the pun on mourning and morning lies in its capacity to inject a sense of hope into the whole situation. Despite the fact that the mothers are mourning one gets a sense that their hope "rises like a wall", a wall of hope on which they see possibilities not only for new beginnings, but simultaneously the threshold for passing on to a future. It is in this new situation that they will pledge solidarity primarily as mothers and human beings, in "a place of mothers" which is soothing and presents a possibility of new forms of identification. The poem projects a vision of a just society in which women are united in articulating their identities on the basis of shared experiences, experiences that are seen as harrowingly painful, something that Bowen agrees with in her contention that the persona's "voice expresses a vision, not an actuality. Against the tenderness in these lines, de Kok's work is often ruthless in its analysis of the brutal history of oppression that has also constructed her "white subject position" (1996: xxvi).

In its examination of the role of motherhood, the poem represents "the place of mothers" as one imbued with qualities such as compassion, comfort, racial harmony

and empathy, in short, a place where mothers console each other and thus form a solidarity that helps in articulating their identity as women irrespective of their racial and class origins. Here one detects tension between the old and the “new”. Motherhood has often been used as a way of confining women to conservative roles as minders of the household. That the persona projects a vision in which women come together in solidarity, almost in open defiance of their conservative, socially constructed roles of domestication and racial difference, is a sharp departure from the apartheid construct of white “madam” / black “nanny” power relations. As a result of her determination to see a more just society, the persona envisions a society in which white women enter a “place of mothers”, stripped of the pretensions of their assumed power and superiority over their black counterparts, rather than accept as holy writ the condescending and guilt-inspiring utterances of her male speaker in the poem. The persona’s determination to envision such a society is evidence of a desire to (re)construct and articulate new forms of female identity, in a transforming society, based on equity and acceptance. It is, furthermore, an attempt by the persona to move away from a paradigm that divided women in terms of their race, social status and class origins to a new paradigm predicated on common goals and experiences. This “new” paradigm of female solidarity must not be construed as a monolithic quest for homogeneity amongst women, but rather as an essential political weapon within feminist discourse to prioritise the elimination of racial and gender oppression in a changing society attempting to move away from racial compartmentalisation, and from political and socially constructed notions of difference and otherness.

The poem “Woman in the Glass” (38) examines the role and status of women in a prejudiced society. The examination is presented in a defiant tone through which the persona portrays the different states used in a phallogentric society to define women and their roles. Right from the beginning of the poem, the persona adopts a radical stance in her self-representation. Of interest is the way in which the persona defines herself in terms of what, in a typical phallogentric society, she is not. This is a skilful poetic device successfully employed by the poet to project her feminist stance and foreground women’s demand for their right to define and name themselves as opposed to their being categorised into otherness:

I am not the woman in the train
who pulls your hand between her legs
and then looks out of the window.
I am not the woman with the henna hair
in a city street, who never says a word
but beckons you, beckons you.
Nor am I the woman in the glass
who looks at you look at her

and the glass smokes over.
 Nor am I the woman who holds you
 whilst you call out the names of lost lovers
 as you will call out this one.
 Nor am I the woman in the dark
 whose silence is the meteor
 in the sky of your conversation.
 That woman:
 bent over, offering her sex to you
 like a globe of garlic, asking for nothing;
 the one without fingerprints,
 hiding in the amulet of your protection;
 the one surrounded by photographers
 printing her supple smile, her skin:
 that woman.
 I stand to the side and watch her,
 widow-virgin, burn on your pyre.
 Acrobat falling into a net of ash,
 in the flames her mouth drips wax,
 her eyebrows peel off,
 her sex unstitches its tiny mirrors.
 Your woman: cousin, sister, twin.
 You want her burning, distant, dumb.
 I want to save, and tear, her tongue.

The poem raises a number of salient points as regards the power relations between men and women. It is a skilfully wrought public declaration against the domination and oppression of women by men. The persona methodically describes the woman that she is not, thereby indicating that, contrary to popular masculine opinion, she is not going to let her identity as a woman be in constant erasure for the convenience of the male. The persona refuses to be a passive, unassuming and almost witless victim in a process that compromises her identity both as an individual and as a woman. There is a clear challenge to the assumed roles of women being objects of men's subjugation and gratification, sexual and otherwise.

The challenge which is simultaneously a warning to men, is clearly encapsulated in "I am not the woman in the train / who pulls your hand between her legs / and then looks out of the window". The warning directed to men in a male-dominated society signals the persona's determination to assert her sense of self both as a human being worthy of respect and a woman who suffers no fools. The woman referred to in the first stanza is representative of countless women who suffer abuse in silence at the

hands of male prurience and aggression and are complicit in such abuse. The act of pulling the man's hand between her legs and then looking out of the window is an indication that the woman finds herself without control over her own body. Looking out of the window is a psychological attempt to free herself from male sexual aggression in relation to which she is an active participant, which makes her doubly subjugated. The window is significant in this context because it offers a momentary mental reprieve in that she is able temporarily to ignore being violated. Furthermore, it represents an opportunity, a psychological escape route, to rid herself finally of the trauma of being sexually harassed. That the woman gazes out of the window marks the beginning of a self-reflective process that, if taken further, should end with her freeing herself from this phallographic violation. That the incident occurs in a train, a public utility, reflects how debased society has become. It also suggests the anonymity and depersonalisation of the experience. The incident almost becomes an "ordinarily normal" one. One can even hazard to add that men still trapped within a patriarchal construct would see nothing wrong with the act and will probably even condone it. The persona warns these men that she is not one of these women who continue suffering in silence, afraid of rocking the proverbial boat of male dominance.

The description of the woman that the persona is not touches a number of areas still dominated by the politics of phallographic discourse. For the persona, there are no holy cows in the struggle for gender equality as she boldly asserts that she will not allow her female identity to be compromised for the sake of male gratification. The tone adopted by the persona is a radical one for she wants her audience, in this case the readers, to sit up and take notice. What the persona also does is to bring in a fresh perspective and add a new voice in the discourse. Her voice begins the very important process of suturing the feminine identity that has progressively been mutilated through the phallographic discourse of othering. This discourse, as Ruthven correctly points out, "enables men to dominate women in all social relations" (1984: 1). Ultimately, this discourse engenders a sense of inferiority amongst women as it makes them feel lesser human beings whose identity can only be defined and articulated from a male perspective, and renders them objects.

The persona refuses to submerge her identity in a cloak of silence. This way, the persona also begins a very important reclamation process which aims to lay a foundation for the (re)negotiation, (re)construction and (re)articulation of women's identity. Ultimately this sets the stage for a feminist counter-discourse the aim of which is to undermine male hegemony, to reclaim the muted voice of oppressed women, and to affirm females and motherhood. In the poem the persona makes this obvious by cataloguing what she perceives to be the negatives ensuing from the deeply sexist construct of female identity "whose silence is the meteor / in the sky of your [male] conversation", and who offers "her sex to you / like a globe of garlic, asking for nothing; / the one without fingerprints". The highly graphic language

employed is deliberately meant to shock the audience / reader into the realisation that male dominance, if it remains unchallenged, will continue to perpetuate the subservience of women which, in turn, leads to loss of identity as reflected in “the one without fingerprints”. Fingerprints are signifiers that define an individual’s identity. A loss of fingerprints thus signifies a loss of identity and further relegates the woman, within the context of the poem, into oblivion. It is also interesting to note that the persona in the poem acts both as an observer, and later on, participant. She observes the phallocratic power complacency that, within a highly sexist society, confines women to commercial commodities that are objectified solely for the benefit of men.

The penultimate stanza of the poem presents a symbolic volte-face in terms of signification. There is a dramatic turn in which the ostensibly faceless, “distant” and “dumb” woman is represented as a “widow-virgin” burning “on your pyre”. The poetic effect of the “widow-virgin” interplay is to bring forth the pervasive influence of sexism and its insidious power of objectifying women and thus compromising and corrupting their identities. Furthermore, it shows that “victims” of sexism are branded from an early age, as represented by the progression from virgin to widow. The disintegration of the “widow-virgin” into “a net of ash” represents the totality of the othering process, where the woman is sacrificed to the fire of male lust. The “widow-virgin” image derives from a practice in India, where widows immolate themselves after their husband’s death. In this instance, because of the nature of pre-arranged marriages and the polygamous nature of patriarchal society, the widow would still be a virgin at the time of her husband’s death. The image is presented in the poem within a universal context where the poet wants to show that women have been reduced to mere appendages of their male counterparts. Not only is the woman in the poem reduced into a “net of ash”, but “her mouth drips wax”, “her eyebrows peel off,” while “her sex unstitches its tiny mirrors”. From this context one cannot help but reflect that the only way to the restoration of the woman’s identity is through rising up, phoenix-like, in a new form of identity that is much stronger.

The final stanza of the poem drives home a very uncomfortable point about the dynamics inherent within sexist discourse conveniently ignored in patriarchal societies. The commodified girl-woman is some man’s daughter, cousin, sister, twin. Here the persona brings reality closer to home to illustrate that society tends to apply double standards for as long as the problem remains at a distance. When the persona draws the audience / reader closer to the girl-woman, she attempts to prick the male dominator’s conscience, if he still has any. By so doing the persona hopes that society will wake up to the reality of male dominance over women and not continue to consistently sweep the issue of equality under the carpet or, worse still, treat it just like a footnote of social discourse. When the persona finally highlights the contrast between the phallocentric and feminist conception of a woman, she brings to bear a

reality that still has to sink into the consciousness of a male-dominated society. Thus she declares:

You want her burning, distant, dumb.

I want to save, and tear, her tongue.

The irony that in order to save the woman the persona has to cut the woman's tongue cannot escape one's attention. One becomes mindful and is simultaneously discomfited that such a drastic step as the tearing of the tongue is presented as inevitable. The tongue is a very potent organ in the articulation of identity. In the context of the poem, the woman had been silent and, by extension, had given in to a process of othering. The persona sees the tearing of the tongue, not as an act of muting, but ironically as an empowering one that should result in the articulation of new forms of female identities independent of male prescription, definition and dominance. As far as the persona is concerned, the woman should have no tongue at all but continue to represent the emerging identity of a strong woman, rather than have a tongue but remain dumb in a phallogentric world that thrives on silencing women in more ways than one. That the woman retains her tongue no matter how torn, split or divided it may be is symbolically representative of the multiplicity of subordinate roles that society imposes on women. It further highlights the split between the phallogentric and feminist conceptualisations of the role of women and the way women should articulate their identity in a society that is characterised by sexism.

It is germane also to point out that de Kok's poetry adopts a radical stance in her attempt to conscientise the reader to an understanding of the debilitating effects of the phallogentric othering of women. Through this stance, she simultaneously sets out, through her incisive poetry, to challenge pre-given notions of female identity as projected within a deeply sexist society in which women are generally defined almost as "children of a lesser God". Through her poetry de Kok sends a message of solidarity to women all over so that they begin a process, which aims to batter down the socially imposed and psychological manacles that inhibit the articulation of female identities. However, de Kok the poet is also aware of the dangers inherent in the feminist project of reclaiming identity. She is mindful of the dangers of essentialist tendencies like the description of women as a monolithic entity. Such essentialisms may vitiate the feminist project of ensuring that women have the right to name themselves and that the word 'woman', within the hierarchical and oppositional man / woman power relationships in society, is stripped of all sense of inferiority. For de Kok and other feminist poets, female solidarity and its articulation are seen as important weapons in the struggle for women's liberation. It is important further to highlight that while feminist poetry focuses on the important aspect of liberation, it is also correct to

observe that the poems herein examined have their own conceptual matrix that informs the manner in which identity is constructed and articulated. It is such a matrix that opens up the space for feminist poetry to focus on identities denied as a result of the very phallogocentric nature of society.

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