

**Conversations of Motherhood. South African Women's Writing across Traditions.**

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Ksenia Robbe embarks on a daring and very relevant undertaking with her analysis of women's writing from South Africa in both English and Afrikaans. Her comparative cross-cultural reading is inclusive and intersectional, taking into account race, class, cultural background and, naturally, gender. The author herself describes her approach as "reading both *along* the lines of 'traditions' and *across* them" (3). Engaging in a dialogue with pro-inclusive theorists of South African literature, such as Ena Jansen or Michael Chapman, Robbe argues for one body of South African literature, while taking into account the differences along the possible axes of oppression. The main emphasis of the author's reading is, as the title suggests, the notion of motherhood in the broadest sense of the word, concentrating on "representations of experiences of mothering" (4), while tracing the changes in mothering practices, such as childbirth, nurturing, childcare etc., or, as she mentions, the process of "remoulding motherhood" (15).

Robbe's analysis of shifts in gender-based practices, based on the notion of textual translocation, both at transnational and transcultural levels, questions sociocultural boundaries and image-forming notions such as "culture", "nation" or "tradition". Hence the emphasis on motherhood and mothering as practices often manipulated within both colonial and anti-colonial patriarchies on the basis of their crucial role in the creation of imagined communities. In her critical inquiry Robbe departs from the claim that, especially in socially highly unstable times such as the shift from an oppressive system towards democratic statehood, motherhood can provide "necessary points of identification to man-

oeuvre between discursive locations" (37). She adds: "The issue of special interest here is how and for what ends women writers have participated in the creation of 'mother of the nation' images and how they have written against them" (56).

At the same time Robbe is, however, fully aware of possible theoretical weaknesses of such an essentialist assumption, and provides theoretical argumentation supporting these choices. This also applies to her decision to shift attention from a Eurocentric to an Afrocentric perspective, backed by the notion of Spivak's strategic essentialism, or, "shifting the centre" as proposed by Collins (41). Ksenia Robbe considers motherhood as a phenomenon that is both locally grounded and inter-subjectively constituted. Motherhood "is not locked in a space of a single cultural identity but, rather, is open, whether in alignment or juxtaposition, to other cultural imaginings of motherhood," she argues (43). As an example Robbe uses the case of Lauretta Ngcobo, who in her essay *A Black South African Woman Writing Long after Schreiner* (1991) places her own writing in relation to Schreiner's. Ngcobo makes herewith a very accurate point, which Robbe fully supports. Irrespective of divergent views on gender, race, ethnicity, religion or tradition, every woman writer in South Africa is located within a larger, even though very heterogeneous, textual heritage. The void between own writing and existing literary traditions, claimed by other black South African writers (e.g. Miriam Tlali), is present and absent at the same time. Its existence depends on how broad, far and open-mindedly we are willing to read, i.e. how do we imagine the community in the frame of which we are reading.

Robbe's transnational dialogic reading of women's literary texts in English and Afrikaans from the 1970s to 2010 confirms the above-mentioned statement: "Until recently, literary and cultural production by South

African women of different backgrounds was predominantly seen in terms of parallel currents, rather than influences or confluences. Although in many cases literary processes take place within reading and writing communities set 'apart' and it is therefore difficult to speak of different influences, a consideration of intersections and relations between these currents is of primary importance." (61).

Robbe's innovative inclusive approach to women's writing from South Africa is anchored theoretically in Bakhtinian dialogics and its postcolonial interpretations, which she uses for her "dialogic critique of motherhood" (13). Bakhtin's epistemology is brought into dialogue (sic) with recent postcolonial (and) feminist theoretical frameworks. Dialogics are also present in the author's approach to the analysed texts, departing from the assumption of an interaction between the author (and her characters) and the reader. Robbe motivates her choice for Bakhtin's theories as follows: "By placing Bakhtin's theory of speaking and textual practice in a broader socio-anthropological perspective, I mean to emphasise that his writing, with its focus on language and literature (as social and political acts), provides a suitable conceptual framework for investigating dialogic patterns of subject production through narrative" (119).

Robbe illustrates her theory with three case studies, each of them providing a comparative reading of motherhood as subjectivity and agency. The comparative studies follow a chronological development, but also shifts in themes and/or narrative approaches. The first case study, including readings of Elsa Joubert's *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena* (*The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*) and Wilma Stockenström's *Die kremetartekspedisie* (*The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*), concentrates on the representation of black mothers by white women authors. This is followed by a comparative reading of *Agaat* by Marlene van Niekerk and *Mother to Mother* by Sindiwe Magona which

untangles the relations between women (mothers) of different races and the processes of mother- and/or child-making. The last case study, based on the analysis of *A Daughter's Legacy* by Pamphilia Hlapa and *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* by Zoë Wicomb, emphasises daughters as "emerging subjects" (173) and reads the texts as literary processes of "writing back/against". The narrative strategies addressed in the three case studies could be summed up as "writing about", "writing with" and "writing to". Robbe shows that the analysed texts, irrespective of the race of the authors and the dates of publication, are "deeply implicated in collective experiences and the histories of social relations in South Africa" (126) and all, in their own ways, illustrate shifting racial relations in the development of colonialism to decolonisation to post-colonialism.

The analysis is successfully and very sensitively placed at the intersection of its various contexts, such as South African literature, Afrikaans literature, English (Commonwealth) literature and literatures in native languages. History of colonisations and major migratory movements are also taken into account, as well as the multiplicity of feminisms one has to consider for such an undertaking. Ksenia Robbe, probably due to her personal history, handles her analysis with necessary caution, fully aware of the potential "traps" associated with her chosen reading strategies. The feminist informed author positions herself in relation to her research as a mother and transnational subject and, in so doing, creates "strong objectivity" providing her reader with innovative interpretations. This book is a wonderful example of how valuable and informative transnational and/or transcultural readings can be for an existing scientific discourse in a particular field of research.

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