

**Martina Vitáčková**

*Back to the Roots?  
Forming New Concepts of Women's Identity in Contemporary  
Postcolonial Literature Written by Women in Dutch and Afrikaans*

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The dissertation *Back to the Roots? Forming New Concepts of Women's Identity in Contemporary Postcolonial Literature Written by Women in Dutch and Afrikaans* (2011) by Martina Vitáčková offers a theoretical background combining the insights of postcolonial theories and feminist (literary) theories, and applying them to the characters of a corpus of six contemporary postcolonial writings in Dutch and Afrikaans.

The epigraph: *My sisters, my daughters, my friends – find your voice* by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is indicative of an underlying theme that runs throughout the whole study: a woman's process of individuation and liberation within contemporary postcolonial 21<sup>st</sup> century women's literature.

Both South Africa and the Netherlands are multicultural societies dealing with a colonial past. Women's voices, their experiences, sexuality and motherhood were all marginalised in the discourse of a patriarchal/colonial system. *Back to the Roots?* explores new concepts of women's identities based on a literary corpus which covers various cultural backgrounds, ages, sexualities, beliefs, etc. By interdisciplinary and intersectional methods, Vitáčková looks at six different characters and how they deal with the altered system of binary oppositions on which our (Western) socio-cultural identity is formed, the basic binary: 'self' – 'the other' and whether the notion of identity and female subjectivity has changed in the course of time.

The South African component consists of E.K.M Dido's book: *'n Stringetjie Blou Krале* (2000 – *A String of Blue Beads*, 2000) with Nomsa/Nancy Hendriks as the I-narrator, Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2004 – *The Way of Women*, 2006) where Kamilla (Milla) de Wet is the protagonist and *Die Boek van Toeval en Toeverlaat* (2006 – *The Book of Happenstance*, 2008) by Ingrid Winterbach, with Helena Verbloem as main character.

The Dutch component includes Hella S. Haasse's last novel: *Sleuteloog* (2002 – *The Eye of a Key*, 2002) with the character Herma Warner. Also under discussion are *De Verstotene* (2006 – *Outcast*, 2006) with the protagonist Mina/Amelie, by Naima El Bezaz, one of the first immigrants (Moroccan) to publish in the Netherlands, and Nelleke Noordervliet's *Pelican Bay* (2002), featuring the character Ada van de Wetering.

Vitáčeková provides biographical information of every writer and her work, and after a short summary of every book's plot, stresses that the limitation to women's writings only should in no sense be read as discriminative and/or exclusionist in any sense. Every character's narrative is discussed with emphasis on the shared experience of identity turmoil and confusion. The I-narrator questions her position in society, identified by Vitáčeková as typical of a postcolonial society. All the characters engage in a similar process of remembering, accepting and verbalizing their personal story. Development takes place in three major areas: the bodily element, motherhood and the way of perceiving 'the other.'

The transformation of these characters is discussed and analyzed against the backdrop of various postcolonial and feminist theorists and their works: Jane Fenouillet: *Making the Personal Political: Dutch Women Writers 1919–1970* (2007), Homi Bhabha: *The Location of Culture* (2007) and Pam Morris's: *Literature and Feminism: An Introduction* (1993) are a few of the most prominent references.

The question arises whether fictional characters can be representative of the mindset and outlook of a 21<sup>st</sup> century reality, which brings the reader to the psychoanalytic chapter of the dissertation. Vitáčeková argues:

Without Freudian analyses, sex roles and their social values cannot be seen as ideological, political effects, consequences of the reproduction of power relations. [...] The affects (emotions) the subjects have are in paradigmatic compliance with what we feel and how we experience ourselves (in "our reality"). There is a direct connection between what people do/think and what is being told/narrated, i.e. which stories/plots/narratives are available in the public/mainstream discourse. A subject tries to understand her/himself by identification with an existing story. (Vitackova 2011: 128)

With each character, a three step outline is followed to map their identity: the break-point, the object connected with trauma from the past and the act of reconciliation, and this is read in the context of motherhood and female subjectivity. This interesting correlation between the various characters leaves much room for discussion within this field. Steering away from the Oedipal plot, one could look at Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey* and how Maureen Murdock identifies *The Heroine's Journey*, which describes the contemporary woman's search for wholeness in a society defined according to masculine values. The revisiting of the trauma, the acceptance, and the transformation that occurs on the journey of identity formation also reminds one of the Jungian approach to psychoanalyses.

In her title, Vitáčeková questions whether the solution to the postcolonial identity crisis is indeed to return to one's roots. To which the study answers that through acceptance of the I-narrator's roots, the socio-cultural background from which they came and acceptance of traumas from the past, the characters were able to move further, developing hybrid, fluid and multilayered identities.

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The dissertation answers expands this hypothesis by presenting an alternative narrative structure intertwining 'the other' and 'the self' in order to describe women in a post-colonial society, meeting the targets of feminist and postcolonial theory and providing new insights and development into Dutch and Afrikaans literature.

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