

CONVERSATIONS OF MOTHERHOOD: WOMEN'S WRITING ACROSS TRADITIONS

Ksenia Robbe
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The devaluation of social reproductive labour has taken on unique and insidious forms through the functioning of the 'post'-apartheid political economy of South Africa. In particular, the non-racial and neoliberal ideology of the 'Rainbow Nation' and its various guises of 'freedom' render the forms and mechanisms of racialised and gendered oppression in South Africa increasingly more difficult to make sense of. In considering the reproduction of socially constructed materiality and experience in this country, the history of racial capitalism, and the enduring racialisation of inequality should be taken into account. It is against this context and backdrop that the centralisation of gendered experiences and representations of transcultural motherhoods by Ksenia Robbe in *Conversations of motherhood: women's writing across traditions* (2015) is particularly important to examine. The central thrust of the book is one concerned with representations and experiences of motherhood. What is particularly interesting, is that the book explores the ways in which women understand, write, and speak about motherhood from specific positions, rather than as a homogenous symbolic representation or ideal. From these positions, motherhood

is ambiguous, it is historically and culturally embedded. The author's readings and discussions take the form of critical comparative considerations of books written by South African women writers in Afrikaans and English between the 1970s and 2010. Her contention is that it is possible to think through 'history, tradition and genealogy' differently through the lens of 'de-essentialising visions of motherhood,' and through representations that are fundamentally dialogic in nature (288). Robbe draws extensively on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to (re)conceive of theoretical and literary devices and forms, which she then explores in conversation with the texts.

The task of thinking through South African women's writing that Robbe undertakes is an impressive one. It is made possible only through the golden thread of motherhood, which, according to the author, 'provided a means to unravel cross-boundary dialogues within the narratives and to attempt a cross-cultural reading of South-African literary texts' (291). In chapter 1, the author explores 'the ambiguities and transformative potentials in the imaginaries of motherhood' (32). Drawing on the work of scholars theorising alternatives to 'modernity', she emphasises the idea of 'temporal heterogeneity... and of spatial contingencies between the local and the translocal', positing that the concept of 'alternative modernities enables us to describe and theorise social change beyond teleological scripts of classical modernisation theories' (33). Alongside this consideration, Robbe suggests that we should regard 'alternative maternities' as an idea that opens critical space to discuss the varied locations and temporalities inhabited by female subjects across... (post) colonial times' (33). Drawing on Patricia Hill Collins's concepts of 'motherwork' and 'othermother', she seeks to explore the ways in which women writers have been positioned historically within nationalist traditions as mother figures, particularly within the black South African nationalist and Afrikaner nationalist traditions. She considers the ways in which the invocation of the Mother as an important symbol of the nation reflects a denial rather than an affirmation of the power of women as agent-mothers. In making this point, the author unfortunately blurs and makes tenuous the very important distinction between these two nationalist projects, and brings them together as 'anti-colonial (or postcolonial) discourses of nationalism' (56).

In chapter 2, the author begins her cross-cultural reading with an exploration of the 'vexed' issue of the representation of black mothers by white authors in South African literature. Elsa Joubert's *Die Swerffare van Poppie Nongena* (*The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*) (2001) and Wilma Stockenström's *Die Kremetartekspedisie* (*The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*) (2004) are the texts through which representations 'across lines of race and class' (69) are considered. The critical and important question that is asked in the chapter is 'Do these aesthetic acts [by white women writers] produce any ethical, self-scrutinising impetus beyond mere commodification [of images of 'typical' black women]' (70)? Robbe considers that both authors have already been taken to task for 'their appropriation of black women's "voices"' (71), and lack of reflexivity on their complicity in structures

of oppression (74). The author's position is made clear when she posits that the texts 'should be regarded as both aesthetic and ethical interventions, as literary and political facts' because they 'try and find ways of rendering the experiences of black women as extremely marginalised subjects of colonial systems of oppression' (78). For the author, it is once again the idea of motherhood which enables insight into the suffering of the 'other', and through which 'significant social critiques and an aspiration for change' (83) are voiced. The final word on the matter takes the form of a dubitable contention that it is these representations of motherhood that 'undermine the very system of race and class differentiation that underlie' (111) their historicity and difference.

In chapter 3, the thread is extended through the author's use of Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* (1998) and Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2004) in exploring how 'the relations between women of different races and classes are imagined through metaphors of motherhood and via references to the historical experiences of mothering in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa' (117). The chapter questions understandings of maternity as a homogenous sphere of experience and identification by 'focusing on the multifaceted and dialogic expressions' (122) of maternity, and the ambiguities and '(mis)understandings' in which the mother-child relationships in the two texts are embedded. Chapter 4 offers an interpretation of the ways in which the temporalities of mothers and daughters both clash and inform and effect each other. Using Zoe Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987) and Pamphilia Hlapa's *A Daughter's Legacy* (2006), Robbe suggests that '*concepts of the maternal as a changing set of ideas [cuts] across the identities of mothers and daughters*' (181, original emphasis). The author explores compellingly the ways in which continued legacies of colonisation and apartheid effect the 'emergence of gendered political subjects within a changing social environment' (189). Her image of 'two colliding temporalities – of being and becoming, of a colonial and an emerging postcolonial' (193) personhood – is one which captures, with particular salience, some of the delicate tensions in understanding gendered realities in South Africa.

The connecting thread of motherhood is simultaneously the book's weakness and strength. While the yarn of maternity allows for transcultural readings of South African literature, these readings necessarily require some unfortunate reductions of interlocking mechanisms of power towards comparison and parallel interpretation. For example, in chapter 5, Robbe reads Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call me woman* (1985) together with Antjie Krog's *A Change of Tongue* (2003) using 'the idea of sharing in the events of co-being' (229) as their common thread. While this allows for novel ways to explore the 'collective dimension of "being mother"', it requires that both Kuzwayo's and Krog's writing be understood together as 'contributing... to the cause of national liberation and transformation' (262). The effect is an impression of the activism of both women as non-racial and relatively homogenous, and requires that white participation in the project of national liberation in South Africa

be glossed over with an uncritical eye. Who is Krog supposedly liberating? What position does she occupy that she can liberate them? What is she liberating them from? These important questions are absent. In this way, the idea of the 'new' South Africa, in which new and emerging affinities which transcend historical racial inequalities between women are possible, is consolidated as an unproblematic ideal. The implication is that reproductive labour is similar for all women, despite earlier claims of social and historical constructedness, and can therefore serve as a sort of common identity or 'transcultural' thread. Evelyn Nakano Glenn suggests that by 'not recognizing the different relationships women have had to such supposedly universal female experiences as motherhood' we risk fixing, naturalising, and eternalising gender (1992: 31). Through its extraction from other, interlocking, systems of power, such as race, and its use as the primary category in understanding experiences of motherhood, gender is rendered static. This is precisely the function of Robbe's analysis, which fails to show the ways in which racialised experiences of motherhood are not only '*different* but connected in *systematic* ways' (Nakano Glenn, 1992: 34, emphasis added). By centring gender in her analysis, Robbe is unable to move from a liberal feminist impasse, and fails to note the importance of the effect of historical racial inequalities and material realities on experiences of motherhood.

The crucial task of the book is one concerned with a 'focus on issues of difference and communality in the analysis of cross-cultural interactions' (16) in South African women's writing. It is curious, then, that the texts used are ones written in Afrikaans and English, languages of the two major conquering powers in South African history. It might be argued that an engagement with the 'intersections of cultures, languages and traditions' and the 'reading both *along* the lines of 'traditions' and *across* them' (3, original emphasis) cannot be carried out *without* meaningful engagement with and reference to experiences and representations of motherhood written and spoken about in the indigenous languages of South Africa.

REFERENCES

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