

# “Like the Skin on Top of Boiled Milk”: Allegories of the Abject in Marlene van Niekerk’s Novels<sup>1</sup>

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## Summary

Marlene van Niekerk’s three novels, *Triomf*, *Agaat* and *Memorandum: A Story with Paintings* show a deliberate engagement with the abject and abjection in the Kristevan sense of the word. Kristeva examines abjection and its manifestations extensively in *Powers of Horror* (1982) and this text form the theoretical departure point for this analysis. Following Dovey (1988) my approach will be “drawing attention to the theoretical issues the novels articulate and to the modes of novelistic discourse with which they engage”. I will locate the traces of the abject in Van Niekerk’s novels and demonstrate to what extent the three texts under discussion reflect Kristeva’s viewpoints on abjection, the relationship with the maternal body and related themes within Kristeva’s critical project such as the boundary between the I as subject and the abject object, food loathing and the omnipresent struggle with the maternal hold over the subject.

## Opsomming

In Marlene van Niekerk se drie romans, *Triomf*, *Agaat* en *Memorandum: 'n Verhaal met Skilderye* is daar 'n ooglopende preokkupasie met die abjekte en abjeksie in die sin wat Kristeva dit gebruik. Kristeva ondersoek abjeksie en sy manifestering uitgebreid in *Powers of Horror* (1982) en hierdie teks vorm die teoretiese vertrekpunt vir my analise. In navolging van Dovey (1988) sal my benadering hoofsaaklik konsentreer op die teoretiese kwessies wat die romans artikuleer, asook die romandiskoersmodusse wat daarin voorkom. Ek sal die spore van die abjekte in Van Niekerk se romans nagaan en aantoon in watter mate hierdie drie tekste in gesprek tree met Kristeva se sienings oor abjeksie, die verhouding met die moederliggaam en verwante temas wat deel uitmaak van Kristeva se kritiese projek, soos die grens tussen die ek-subjek en abjekte objek, weersinwekkende kossoorte en die ewige stryd teen die moeder se houvas op die subjek.

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1. The title is from Van Niekerk (1999: 387). This article is mostly based on Crous (2013).

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Interpretation is an essentially allegorical act.  
Frederic Jameson

## Introduction

In this article I will argue that the South African author Marlene Van Niekerk deliberately inscribes elements of the abject into her novels so as to transgress and deconstruct the norms associated with a patriarchal and racist society in South Africa. Van Niekerk also undermines the norms that underpin such a society: religious indoctrination, gender oppression and Othering. The focus is on the English versions of *Triomf*, *Agaat* and *Memorandum: A Story with Paintings* (henceforth indicated as *T*, *A* and *M*, respectively, when passages are quoted from the texts). *Triomf* was translated by Leon de Kock, and Michiel Heyns translated both *Agaat* and *Memorandum* into English.

Following the publication of her first collection of short stories, *Die Vrou Wat Haar Verkyker Vergeet het* [The Woman Who Forgot Her Binoculars] in 1992, there was general consensus that the baroque nature of the language resulted in reader resistance to the text.<sup>2</sup> This explains why she decided to write her first novel in the crude and obscene language of a low-class family, the Benades of *Triomf*.<sup>3</sup> Venter (1994: 17), when reviewing *Triomf* comments as follows: “Die boek daag die goeie smaak en welvoeglikheidsin

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2. Compare Van Vuuren’s (2015) comments in this regard: “In die resepsie van die bundel is daar algemene ooreenstemming dat ’n swakheid lê in die oordadig-barokagtige en intellektueel-swaartillende taalgebruik.”
  3. Van Niekerk’s work poses challenges to her readers and continues to elicit criticism. Visagie (2010) comments on her language usage in *Die Sneeuslaper* [The Snow Sleeper] and is irritated by the use of Dutch words. Burger (2004) has reader resistance towards the “woordrykheid en omslagtigheid” of *Agaat*. Subsequently her most recent collection of poems *Kaar* is also seen as too dense and difficult, prompting Van Vuuren (2015) to suggest that a process of “slow reading” ought to be undertaken by the reader in order to grasp the nuances of the respective poems. Compare the following comment: “Die gebruik van ‘kaar’ as bundeltitel (in sowel sy Afrikaanse as Nederlandse, Friese en Angel-Saksiese betekenisse relevant vir die versameling verse), dui op ’n sentrale kenmerk van die bundel – Afrikaanse woordeskatverruiming teen die verarmende taalgebruik in. Veral uit die Nederlandse en Germaanse woordeskat word woorde oorgehewel, maar ook uit Latyn en Angel-Saksies. Hoewel daar heelwat onmiddellike toeganklike verse is, soos die vader-gedigte of ‘poets of fatherland unite’, kan die verwickelder verse net ontsluit word deur opleeswerk en dus verheldering.”

van die leser uit soos geen Afrikaanse prosateks dit nog vermag het nie.”<sup>4</sup> Buxbaum (2012: 199) is of the opinion that Van Niekerk seems to “relish the coarseness and vulgarity that has perhaps caused the biggest outcry from readers (and also ironically the most admiration and praise).”

Throughout Van Niekerk’s novels under discussion there is a deliberate engagement with the abject in the use of expletives, obscenities and vulgar expressions; the depiction of sordid details and the setting of the texts in dilapidated houses, sick rooms and hospitals, and by placing the focus on the marginalised, as represented by the Benade family in *Triomf*, the sick and manipulative Milla and her servant with a deformed hand in *Agaat*, and Mr Wiid, Mr X and Mr Y, who are all on the verge of dying, in *Memorandum: A story with Paintings*. Kristeva’s extensive essay on abjection, *Powers of Horror* (1982) provides a useful critical tool by which to examine and describe Van Niekerk’s “finely calibrated reportage of the intimately experienced local realities of South Africa” (Van Niekerk 2009: 156).

For her unique portrayal of life in South Africa prior to and after 1994, Van Niekerk relies mainly on metaphors pertaining to what Julia Kristeva calls *abjection*. The novels are either populated by low-class white people talking in a demotic and vulgar language or by a refined landowning class using a discourse filled with references to classical music and the arts in general. A common denominator of all the novels under discussion is a preoccupation with disease: the diseased body and spaces such as a sickroom where a particular character has to die or with the inhumane and clinical hospital ward devoid of any warmth and compassionate care – all facets of a predilection for the abject, the abhorrent and an existence on the periphery of society. In discussing embodiment and corporeality in Van Niekerk’s novels, Buxbaum (2013: 98) comments in this regard:

In both *Triomf* and *Agaat*, the revelation of a tortured past is mirrored by the exposure of the victims’ fragmented bodies. It is only when characters are faced with the irrefutable evidence of trauma as wreaked on each other’s bodies that they are forced to reckon with and recognise the truth of their familial and national narratives and perhaps initiate healing.

By focusing, in her writing, on what is repulsive to society, Marlene Van Niekerk could be grouped with other African writers such as the Nigerian Wole Soyinka and the Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah, whose fiction about postcolonial Africa “features a striking conjunction of scatology and political satire” (Esty 1999: 22). The two authors use “excremental language to present political and corporate misdeeds in terms of unhealthy digestion” and their grotesque visions of Africa are characterised by what Mbembe calls “aesthetics of vulgarity” (Esty 1999: 23). Kakraba (2011: 306) compares Armah’s use of “inelegant language” and concludes that other

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4. For an incisive reading of the use of language in *Agaat*, see Burger (2006).

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than Achebe for instance, Armah’s satire on the political ills of postcolonial Africa serves as “an electroconvulsive tool. In other words, it is intended to shock the reader to calculatingly draw his or her consideration to the dreadfully shocking and repulsive things and behaviors like corruption, materialism, moral degeneration, filth and the pervasive moral, spiritual and physical decadence in the society so as to effect a change.”

## Theoretical Framework

My interpretive and theoretical framework for each of the sections in this analysis will entail applying particular facets of Kristeva’s theory of abjection. My approach will be similar to that of Dovey (1988), who in her analysis of J.M. Coetzee’s earlier novels, opts for “fiction-as-criticism”. This implies that certain theoretical assumptions are articulated in the text under discussion:

[E]ngaging in the contemporary theoretical debate in a way that circum-vents certain of the problems facing critics who adhere to more conventional forms of critical discourse. My purpose, then, is second degree criticism, of ... criticism-as-fiction within the context of contemporary theory, drawing attention to the theoretical issues the novels articulate and to the modes of novelistic discourse with which they engage.

(1988: 9)

Following this approach by Dovey, my reading of Van Niekerk’s three novels will show that this reading does not constitute Kristevan psycho-analytic criticism but is based on the claim that the novels themselves constitute such criticism. Such an allegorical reading of a text could be regarded as producing mere reductive descriptions of the novels.<sup>5</sup>

It is my view that Van Niekerk’s works show such an acute awareness of the reasoning behind Kristeva’s whole project that one interpretation of her work could be to define it as allegories of Kristeva’s theory of abjection.

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5. Attridge (2006: 67) is sceptical of allegorical readings and prefers a non-allegorical reading of a text. His strategy implies the following: “We might call it a *literal* reading – is one that is grounded in the experience of reading as an *event*. That is to say, in literary reading .... I do not treat the text as an object whose significance has to be divined; I treat it as something that comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding that I, as an individual reader in a specific time and place, conditioned by a specific history, go through. And this is to say that I do not treat it as ‘something’ at all; rather, I have an experience ... that I can repeat, though each repetition turns out to be a different experience and therefore a nonrepetition, a new singularity as well.” (His emphases)

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According to Owens (1980: 69) allegorical imagery is “appropriated imagery”, implying the following:

The allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter. And in his hands the image becomes something other. He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured[.]

For Kristeva, reading is more than a mere application of theory to literature and she opts for the word “implication” (Kristeva 1980: 94) to describe the interrelation between theory and text. Felman (in Becker-Leckrone 2005: 17-18) develops this notion of “implication” further and comments as follows:

The notion of application would be replaced by the radically different notion of implication: ... the interpreter’s role would here be, not to apply to the text an acquired science, a preconceived knowledge, but to act as a go-between, to generate implications between literature and psychoanalysis – to explore, to bring to light and articulate the various (indirect) ways in which the two domains do indeed implicate each other, each one finding itself enlightened, informed, but also affected, displaced, by the Other.

My approach is to locate the traces of the abject in Van Niekerk’s novels and demonstrate to what extent the three texts under discussion reflect Kristeva’s viewpoints on abjection, the relationship with the maternal body and related themes within Kristeva’s critical project.

## **What is Abjection?**

When asked by Baruch what Kristeva implied with the use of a subtitle “Essai sur l’abjection” she observes:

It may be impossible. *L’abjection* is something that disgusts you, for example, you see something rotting and you want to vomit – it is an extremely strong feeling that is at once somatic and symbolic, which is above all a revolt against an external menace from which one wants to distance oneself, but of which one has the impression that it may menace us from the inside. The relation to abjection is finally rooted in that combat that every human being carries on with the mother. For in order to become autonomous, it is necessary that one cut the instinctual dyad of the mother and the child and that one become something other.

(cited in Guberman 1996: 118)

Central to this explanation are the following: the subject is disgusted by “something” and there is a revolt against it – but the real revolt is aimed at

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the mother. For the subject-in-process to become an accepted and autonomous speaking being within the symbolic order dominated by the Father's law, he has to break the ties with the mother and the maternal body. And one way of doing that is to ab-ject the mother, to turn her into the repulsive Other against whom he has to rebel. This conflict is, as Kristeva shows, not only “somatic” but also “symbolic” – as is evident from the different ways in which the feelings of repulsion towards the maternal are manifested. Two key words associated with abjection are thus “fascination and repulsion” (Kristeva 2002: 448) to describe the relation between subject and object – fascination with the mother but also feelings of repulsion towards her.

According to Kristeva (1982: 2), abjection is a reaction to “a threat” and this threat can either be from the outside or the inside. Since the abject is an indefinable object or a thing, it has one quality, namely, that it is “opposed to I” (Kristeva 1982: 2). The abject is that which disturbs the existing system and order and also transgresses boundaries:

The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them.

(Kristeva 1982: 5)

## Abjection and Disruption

The disruption of order comes not only from outside the subject but often there is also an “interiorization of abjection” (Kristeva 1982: 113). In the Christian context, it is associated with the concept of sin, which implies an “unquenchable desire” (Kristeva 1982: 123) within the body to give in to the pleasures of excess.

When confronted with abject language, such as in the writings of Céline, we find that our subjectivity and our boundaries are put to the test: “neither inside nor outside, the wounding exterior turning into an abominable interior” (Kristeva 1982: 135). We are no longer certain of our boundaries and we lose our “prohibiting judging agency” (Kristeva 1982: 135).

The reader experiences Céline's narrative of suffering and horror in order to familiarise himself with “the necessity of going through abjection, whose intimate side is suffering and horror its public feature” (Kristeva 1982: 140).

The boundaries are indeed tested in the following passage from *Triomphe*:

“Go get yourself ready, Ma, I want to see you in the back room as soon as I'm finished here.” ... His mother's already in the back room. She knows her place. Now he'll first have to throw out that stinking dog of hers, 'cause she always sit there and looks. He doesn't like dogs looking at him when he's busy. And his mother better keep her mouth shut. Nowadays, she screams like someone's slitting her throat or something. Well, she'd better watch out

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or he'll squash her fucken voice-box to a pulp. They mustn't come here and treat him like he's a fucken idiot.

(T: 67)

The order is disrupted by Lambert as the child subject's demand for sexual gratification, and the only way in which he can try to satisfy himself is to use his mother as his object of sexual gratification. Not only does this deed violate the incest taboo but it disrupts the order within the household. The two paternal figures in the text are also fascinated by the body of the female because she is their object of sexual gratification too, but when the violent child subject rapes the mother, they both refrain from intervening and the one literally “sat there with his fingers in his ears” (T: 67). This passage illustrates the silencing of the female, suggested by the thought of “squash[ing] her fucken voice-box”. Moreover, the voice-box is also symbolic of the violated sexual organs of the maternal body: just as the subject is violating her sexually, he also wants to violate her orally by hurting her and silencing her in the process. This echoes the ancient Greek tale of Philomela, used by Shakespeare as the basis for Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* and for Lucrece in *The Rape of Lucrece*. Philomela has her tongue ripped out after she is raped but tells of her rape by embroidering a tapestry. Lucrece is raped and she contemplates a tapestry wall hanging depicting the fall of Troy, an event which was also prompted by a rape, then stabs herself to death. After Lavinia is raped by Demetrius and Chirion, in *Titus Andronicus*, they cut out her tongue and cut off her hands to prevent her communicating.

### **Abjection and Emotionality**

The second key element associated with abjection is the emotional reaction that it evokes within the subject. The subject, when confronted by the impure, the rotten or the smelly threat to his or her existence is disgusted and reacts accordingly, either by throwing up or being repulsed by it.

### **Food Loathing**

One of the most archaic forms of abjection according to Kristeva (1982: 2) is food loathing and she uses the example of the skin on the surface of boiled milk as a metaphor for the abject. The somatic responses to the abject come in the form of spitting or vomiting and can be seen as an attempt by the body to expel the abject.

Food, and specifically food loathing, play an important role in *Triomf* since the staple food of the Benade family is polony, white bread and golden syrup, swallowed with either Coca-Cola or with a mixture of Klipdrift

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Brandy and Coke. This strange diet (with its mixture of processed meat of a lesser quality, white bread and sweet syrup, washed down with alcohol) results in severe heartburn for Treppie and he is often the one who complains about Mol’s lack of domestic skills. She does not represent the traditional homemaker figure responsible for nutrition, as is evident from the following satirical take on her by Treppie:

Yes, Mol, meals, like the food you cook in this house. Fit for a king, isn’t it?  
Bacon and eggs for breakfast. Pill. Rice, meat and potatoes for lunch. Pill.  
Wors and baked beans for supper. Pill.

(T: 246)

Treppie alludes to proper meals and proper planning of balanced meals with meat and vegetables and not the hastily prepared sandwiches which they eat regularly. In doing so, he wants to inscribe the female into a gendered position of care-giver and provider of nourishment for the family. We know, however, that she is also the provider of libidinal satisfaction to the male objects in the household.

In contrast to this, we find references to the “old food” and “vrot food” (T: 222) eaten by the people living on the rubbish dumps; one reads about the exquisite fruit salad prepared by the lesbian couple across the street (T: 188) and about their transgression of the racial divides in the country by “[giving] their garden-kaffir a knife and fork to eat his bread and wors with” (T: 189). Whereas the Benades’ meals are appalling, to say the least, the white farmer and his wife in *Agaat* are always sustained by large meals with several courses. Not only does this create the image of self-sufficiency and wealth but it also underpins the notion of living off the fat of the land. Special occasions such as weddings, birthdays and even funerals are planned around an excess of food and drink. Consider, for example, the following description:

A line of hired waiters with big trays full of dishes of dessert brushed past you on the garden path. The smell of baked chocolate pudding and date pudding and brandy tarts and liqueur sponges in your nose, Agaat’s puddings for Jakkie’s birthday.

(A: 613)

Once all the partygoers are fed, then the servants are allowed to come and share in the leftovers.

During her illness, Milla is no longer able to eat by herself; she is fed mashed food as if she is a baby and her meals now consist of spinach or stewed prunes. Both Milla and Wiid, in *Agaat* and *Memorandum* respectively, are patients and as a result they have to eat processed baby-like food. Wiid’s description of the unappetising meal in the hospital calls to mind what Kristeva (1982: 100) calls “dietary abomination”:



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On my plate was a piece of grey steamed fish, a clod of pumpkin and a runny helping of spinach. Custard and red jelly for dessert.

(M: 16)

The diseased body has to be nourished but since it is inactive, it receives small portions of food as part of its new dietary regimen so as to sustain the bodily functions. Abject diseased bodies are fed abject-looking food as a form of sustenance.

The ultimate abject object is the corpse since, according to Kristeva (1982: 4), it is regarded as “without God and outside of science.” The dead body with its seeping fluids and its rot disrupts the biological order of life and fills us with a sense of terror.

In contrast to the dead body, some biological attributes of the living body are also associated with abjection. For this reason, Kristeva (1982: 71) distinguishes two types of polluting objects associated with the body, namely excremental and menstrual. In the pre-Aids era in which she wrote *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva does not associate semen with any “polluting value” but menstrual blood is associated with the abject because it is from “within the body” and is seen to be a threat to the relationship between the sexes (Kristeva 1982: 71).

In the case of food, food only becomes abject when it is “a border between two distinct entities or territories” (Kristeva 1982: 75), for example between nature and culture or between the human and non-human. She refers to the preference for uncooked food in India because the cooking of food on a fire is seen as polluting it. Owing to certain dietary prohibitions, food may also be associated with defilement. In the case of a woman who has given birth and is confined to her bed, food becomes defiled:

Dietary abomination has thus a parallel – unless it be a foundation – in the abomination provoked by the fertilizable or fertile feminine body (menses, childbirth).

(Kristeva 1982: 100)

What goes into the body through the mouth is regarded as nourishing or beneficial but what goes out of the body is associated with the impure and resorts under the rubric of the abject. For the body to remain pure and clean, it has to get rid of waste products. According to Kristeva (1982: 108), when the body expels faecal matter, it suggests the “first material separation that is controllable by the human being” which calls to mind Freud’s anal stage of psychosexual development. The child learns to control his or her bowel movements and sees the presentation of excrement as some sort of gift for which it deserves to be rewarded by the parent.

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## The Corpse

The ultimate object of bodily waste, however, is the corpse:

A decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic, a transitional swarming, inseparable lining of a human nature whose life is undistinguishable from the symbolic – the corpse represents fundamental pollution. A body without soul, a non-body, disquieting matter, it is to be excluded from God’s territory as it is from his speech. Without always being impure, the corpse is “accursed of God”.

(Kristeva 1982: 109)

The corpse as the ultimate representation of the abject has connotations of abomination and prohibition and is the opposite of the spiritual and vital living body. To purify the body, it is either buried or burnt. From a religious perspective, the dead body is seen as having no soul. In both *Triomf* and *Agaat*, the reader is confronted with descriptions of the dead body. At the end of the novel *Triomf*, we have reference to an abject corpse; in this case it refers to the dead body of Pop after he has been killed by Lambert. Lambert has discovered the family secret and in his anger kills Pop who, in an almost macabre way, is sitting “under [a] sheet” (*T*: 465), while the painters are working around him. The characters are also confronted with what Kristeva calls “the utmost of abjection”, namely the dead body of Pop. Mol describes it as being “blue” but with Pop’s nose being white (*T*: 467). At the sight of the corpse, the family members are forced to form a united front against the symbolic order that threatens their existence in the form of a possible murder charge, post mortems and the issuing of death certificates. The corpse disturbs the order within the abject semiotic order sustained by Mol, Treppie and Lambert, and it, therefore, has to be disposed of. A decision is taken not to bury Pop but to cremate his body and bury the ashes in the garden.

After Milla’s death, the preparation of the corpse for burial is also Agaat’s task and is described from her son Jakkie’s perspective:

Relieved after all that I was too late. Couldn’t have stomached it. Agaat herself sewing Ma up in the fully-embroidered gown, Agaat lifting Ma into the coffin, placing the hand-splint that she wrote with in the last years in the coffin as well and screwing down the lid. Nobody else was allowed to touch her, according to the undertaker.

(A: 678)

By touching the dead body, the Other, Agaat, has willingly transgressed the taboo associated with dead flesh. This final deed of compassion is also an act of getting rid of the abject body of the surrogate mother object who had reared the Other as her own child. The “fully-embroidered gown” is one of Agaat’s creations, and by wrapping the body in this gown, she ensures that

the corpse, as the ultimate object of abjection, is hidden and her death instinct, as the subject, is fulfilled. The only desire left in the diseased body of the subject is to die, knowing full well that she will never recover. Now she has reached “the border of [her] condition as a living being” (Kristeva 1982: 3) and once buried, she can no longer disturb the order.

In the case of *Memorandum* the reader is confronted by the mourning of the death of the male object through the living one, which is an example of misplaced abjection equating the body of the living object to that of a corpse – most probably because of a fear of losing the object as well. This would inevitably result in a strong hold over the object and hesitance to allow him to enter the symbolic order or free himself from the pre-oedipal maternal hold over him. The subject has to fill the lack that occurred after the death of his twin and is a substitute for the mother’s desire for the lost object. “Lack” or *manque* refers to that which causes desire. For Kristeva (1984: 95), the presence of lack in the subject refers to the objet petit a that he “covets but never reaches”. She avers that “[d]esire will be seen as an always already accomplished subjugation of the subject to lack” (1984: 131). The mother is always searching for the lost object and projects her desire for it onto the living son.

Wiid shares his mother’s macabre obsession with death and dying, and while in hospital, he has a vision of his brother’s “smooth dark headstone under the white angel” (*M*: 87) and even of himself ... lying with [his] twin under the granite cover. Johannes Frederikus and Gerhardus Stephanus. Parrot and Finch. Same age, same height, with the same fly-away ears, dead still hand in hand, in the walled-up hush (*M*: 87).

Wiid’s main problem with the maternal abject is the fact that his mother constantly reminds him of his dead brother and in doing so, she condemns him to an almost corpse-like existence. Her obsession with the death drive is projected onto him and subsequently he is always an outsider figure caught in his own loneliness. Eventually, he decides to liberate himself from his own abject and diseased body by not going for his scheduled operation.

In a religious context, abjection can also be inside the body, especially if the subject ingests foods that are seen as impure by the religious community. Wiid, the main character in *Memorandum*, imposes upon himself a very strict Stoic regime. He prepares himself a meal of food of which he is “the fondest” (*M*: 30), but once it is cooked and a place is set for him at the table, he takes the food to the caretaker and drinks “a glass of weak milkless sugarless rooibos tea” (*M*: 30). In his solitary state, he has created his own type of Stoic ruling regarding the ingestion of food, and in an attempt to punish his diseased body he only ingests medicine and weak tea as a form of bodily control and restraint.

Kristeva (1982: 113) describes this as a type of “interiorisation of abjection” and relates it to her discussion of the Christian notion of sin. From a Christian point of view, sin came into the world as a result of Eve’s

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disobedience to the patriarchal commands of God and as a result, within the context of Christianity, women became associated with impurity, with evil and the abject: “Sin originated with woman and because of her we all perish.”

### **Abjection and the Revolt Against the Mother**

The revolt against the mother is a basic premise of the theory of abjection because the first “thing” to be abjected is the maternal entity even “before existing outside of her” (Kristeva 1982: 13). Once the infant has expelled itself from the close surroundings of the maternal body, it has to repel everything that is defiling and impure, including the body of the mother. However, as Smith (1998: 29) points out, there can never be a total revolt against the maternal body and this impossibility of revolting becomes the very essence of abjection. The revolt against the mother is easier for males because they fear castration, whereas females do not experience this fear. Castration anxiety occurs during the phallic stage of psychosexual development when the male identifies with the father and represses his desire for his mother. Females, because of their association with the maternal body, do not gain entrance to the symbolic realm of language because they do not experience a fear of castration and as a result find themselves closer to the semiotic and the *chora*. Subsequently, the maternal body has come to be associated with pre-oedipal language and incestuous desire by the child for the mother, which has to be repressed. The mother’s body acts as mediator between the subject-in-process and the symbolic order and that explains why she is seen as repulsive – only by disassociating from her, the subject is able to enter language.

Kristeva is not only preoccupied with the maternal body but also attempts to focus on the role of the father, and in one of the essays in her book *Tales of Love* (1987) – regarded as the counterpart of *Powers of Horror* – she poses the following question:

It is obvious from the behaviour of young children that the first love object of boys and girls is the mother. Then where does one fit in [Freud’s] “father of individual prehistory?”

(Kristeva 1987: 33)

The beloved mother object is rejected in favour of the idealised Imaginary Father figure representing both parents. Whereas maternal affection is associated with being possessive, passionate and destructive, the love expressed by the benevolent father figure is more ideal. The father as the third party in the relationship between child and parents will provide the child with “a robust supply of drive energy” (Kristeva 1982: 13) to ward off the abject.

On more than one occasion, Marlene van Niekerk has expressed the influence of her father on her writing and, in particular, the way in which he taught her the mesmerising effect of words and rhythms. In an online profile (2007), she comments as follows:

[S]y onthou haar pa het vir haar sulke sinnetjies geleer soos: “Die voëltjies kwinkelier vroeg in die daglumiër.” So was daar daardie soort invloed van ’n pa wat verkneukeld was oor woorde. Sy word dus aan die voete van storievertellers groot met haar pa wat lang “stories” uit die koerant voorlees.

[She recalled some of the sentences taught to her by her father: “Early, at first light, the birds are twittering”. So there was that kind of influence from a father who revelled in wordplay. She grew up at the feet of storytellers with her father reading long “stories” from the newspaper to her.]

Van Niekerk’s father was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, and in several poems in her latest collection *Kaar* (2013) examines the father-daughter relationship.

In Kristeva’s view, the mother becomes the first object of desire to the subject-in-process and the subject wants her to provide all its basic needs. The maternal breast is also the primary love object of the child, and when the child is deprived of the breast, it develops anger and a sense of frustration towards the maternal object.

Arguably, in all three novels under discussion, one finds this triangular relationship of conflict associated with the Oedipus complex. In the case of *Triomf*, Mol (the maternal object in the text) is desired sexually by her son (Lambert) and her two brothers (Treppie and Pop). She is no longer a source of fascination to them since all three male subjects are repulsed by her body: “she’s stretched beyond repair” (*T*: 41). The son’s frustration at his inability to find a female object to satisfy his needs, as well as Treppie’s disgust, are manifested in their anger towards her. One way of expressing this anger is through verbal abuse.

In the case of *Agaat*, the relationships are more intricate. One has the oedipal relationship between the character of Milla, her overbearing and powerful mother and her more docile father, but there is also the relationship between Milla, her husband Jak, and Agaat as a surrogate child of some sort. After the birth of Jakkie, he becomes the third party in the oedipal triangle, but at the end of the novel, we see that Agaat believes herself to be his surrogate mother, which complicates matters even more.

The maternal breast as object of desire plays an important role in the triangular relations in *Agaat*. The mother discovers that the servant girl, as Other, transgresses the boundaries between what is deemed proper and respectable by breastfeeding the young child secretly in her outside room. Milla, as the maternal object, also uses her husband’s desire for the breast to try and seduce him:

“LIKE THE SKIN ON TOP OF BOILED MILK”: ...

You let the straps of your petticoat slip down your shoulders and pressed your breasts against him.

“No!” he said, “no, Milla!” And pushed you away, stood away from you, glared at you until you covered yourself with your hands. At last you could no longer bear his stare.

(A: 347)

Such incidents illustrate two key concepts within psychoanalytic thought that are alluded to by Kristeva, namely “desire” and “demand”. These two concepts, together with “need” occur in the works of two of Kristeva’s precursors, namely Freud and Lacan. According to Evans (1996: 35-39), Freud uses the term *Wunsch*, which is literally translated as wish, whereas Lacan uses the term *désir*. The English equivalent of the latter, preferred by most psychoanalysts, is *desire*, suggesting an on-going force. Lacan is critical of the confusion caused by theorists when using desire, demand and need interchangeably. Whereas need refers to the biological instinct or appetite which the subject wants satisfied, demand implies the articulation of the need in the form of a demand. In order for the infant to draw the attention of the mother, as the Other, to its needs, it screams so as to draw her attention to its demands. Desire, according to Lacan, “begins to take shape in the margin in which demand becomes separated from need” (1979: 311). The need of the subject can be satisfied but desire can never be satisfied. The only object of desire is the objet petit a, and this object is also the cause of desire. Lacan also sees desire in relation to a lack rather than an object per se but points out that the “fundamental desire is the incestuous desire for the mother, the primordial Other” (1979: 311).

During his theoretical exploration of the Oedipus complex, Freud also paid attention to the “infantile, perverse, polymorphic sexuality” (Kristeva 1982: 38) of the subject and linked it to “desire and death”. As a result of the mother’s absence and the paternal prohibitions that set in during the Oedipal phase, the subject constantly experiences aggression, which calls to mind his primary aggression towards the maternal object. The child then tries to verbalise such aggression but in the process, the mother also becomes associated with fear. Representative of infantile sexuality, the character of Lambert in *Triompf* reacts only to his mother’s rubbing of “his thing” (*T*: 41) to pacify him. The only way in which he expresses his anger is by “squealing like a pig” and then the mother calls him into her bedroom and rubs “his little thingy” (*T*: 41):

She would rub his thing until he was finished and then everything would be fine again. But after a while that was also not good enough anymore. He wanted to put it in. He wanted to do it himself. What could she do? She lay down for him. She went and lay herself down. Housecoat and all.

Eventually, as an adult, he continues to abuse his mother as his sexual object, confirming his phallic power over the maternal body. Unlike other

maternal figures who are associated with the breast as the primary object of desire, in her case she is associated with providing phallic pleasure to the subject-in-process.

In the ongoing battle with the object, there is a radical phase in the constitution of subjectivity when the subject is able to see himself in the place of the object. Kristeva alleges that the result of this is “syntactical passivation” (1982: 39), which serves as an indication that the subject is now entering that phase. Should the subject use the word “horse” as a metaphor for his phobia and say, for example, “I fear horses”, that serves as an illustration of passivation, which “displaces by inverting the sign (the active becomes passive) before metaphorizing”.

(Kristeva 1982: 39)

A good example of the phobic subject in Van Niekerk’s novels is the character of Johannes Wiid in *Memorandum*. As a municipal administrator involved with city planning he has always been very meticulous and structured. However, when he visits the Parow Public Library he is confronted with disarray, disorder and is particularly shocked by “the unkempt person of the chief librarian” (*M*: 139):

Barefoot and clad in a faded T-shirt and low-slung jeans, with a ragged beard, unwashed hair in a ponytail, three shark’s teeth on a thong around his neck, a match between his teeth, a collection of silver rings around his ankles, and not overtly fresh as regards personal hygiene.

What upsets him most, however, is the disorder in the public library which resorts under the municipality, which he associates with structure, discipline and order. His overall impression is that there is “a total lack of administrative systems” (*M*: 139) in the library.

Significant is that this abject space entered by the phobic subject eventually plays a major role in his decision to make some life-altering changes. The subject has eavesdropped on his fellow patients in the hospital and has compiled several lists of words (in the novel, they form part of Addendum 2 (*M*: 132)) which, in accordance with Kristeva’s theory, can be associated with orality – and the mouth in particular as organ of speech – which now begins to play a major part in the subjectivation process. The subject imitates the phrases overheard in the hospital (e.g. “yew-roo-pigeom”, “passer-cal-yer”, “Goo-gun-hime”) which suggests that he is not yet familiar with the language of the Symbolic Order and the librarian has to assist him by acting as a sort of guide or father-like figure. The father-like figure is able to provide the subject with the correct pronunciation, supply information on the concepts overheard in the conversation, and refer the subject to other sources for further elucidation. The latter is mostly relegated to the 36 footnotes included in the novel.

Discussing the connection between phobia and language, describing the case of a young girl, Kristeva (1982: 41) points out that the more phobic the child, the more verbal she became:

“LIKE THE SKIN ON TOP OF BOILED MILK”: ...

Through the mouth that I fill with words instead of my mother I miss from now on more than ever, I elaborate that want, and the aggressivity that accompanies it, by saying. It turns out that, under the circumstances, oral activity, which produces the linguistic signifier, coincides with the theme of devouring.

(Kristeva 1982: 41)

Whereas Wiid, as the phobic subject, is initially very critical of the appearance of the librarian as Other, he is forced to use language to express his desire for knowledge and in the process the librarian becomes his “obsessive father” (Kristeva 1982: 43) who has to guide him on entering the world of language. Just as Kristeva had theorised, the subject only recalls lexical items and not complete sentences because syntax and the formation of complex sentences are associated with the Symbolic Order.

The reclusive Wiid benefits from reaching out to the object as Other to such an extent that he has a complete change of heart and even decides to “invite him over one evening this week” (*M*: 122). The benevolence towards the object not only assists the phobic subject to overcome his preconceived ideas but is life-affirming, as he decides not to go for his operation (*M*: 121). When the subject retreats into the self, one finds that there is a definite collapse of the border between inside and outside. The phobic subject believes that his skin is no longer able to guarantee “the integrity of one’s own and clean self” and he believes there is “a dejection of its contents” (Kristeva 1982: 53). The only “object” of sexual desire left for the subject is his emitted bodily fluids such as urine, blood or sperm:

... a true ab-ject where man, frightened, crosses over the horrors of the maternal bowels and, in an immersion that enables him to avoid coming face to face with an other, spares himself the risk of castration.

(Kristeva 1982: 53)

The task of the analyst is to divert the subject’s desire towards “the good object” (Kristeva 1982: 48), which, according to the heterosexist “normal criteria of the Oedipus complex”, is the desire for someone of the opposite sex. In the case of Wiid in *Memorandum*, there is no desire for someone of the opposite sex but he finds fulfilment of his desire for knowledge and acceptance in his intellectual pursuits, namely his daily routine of visiting the library and talking to the librarian and writing his memorandum, which will be discovered posthumously. The fear associated with desire no longer preoccupies the subject’s existence and is replaced by a recognition of needs and pleasures, such as drinking wine or eating “green-fig preserve” (*M*: 122).

Kristeva engages with Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1998[1913]) as well as with *Moses and Monotheism*. Freud bases his discussion in *Totem and Taboo* on the myth that the archaic father as leader of the horde is murdered



by his conspiring sons and links this to two major taboos when looking at the morality of man, namely, fratricide/matricide and incest (Kristeva 1982: 57). According to Kristeva, Freud’s fear of incest is overshadowed by “the woman- or mother-image”, which incidentally also forms the background of Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* too.

The incest taboo is related to the danger that religion has to ward off and, according to Freud, the paranoid side of religion is always aimed at exorcising danger and evil through certain rituals. Several anthropologists have studied the field of prohibition and defilement amongst different religious groupings, but Kristeva is more interested in “the weakness of prohibition” (65) as well as the role played by a matrilineal order in primitive societies.

It is suggested in *Triomf*, for instance, that the transgression of the incest taboo in the relationship between Lambert and Mol is a continuation of the incestuous relation between the female child and her two male siblings:

Little Pop’s dick could already stand up nicely by then. He showed Treppie and Mol how to rub it. They killed time on those mornings by rubbing Little Pop’s dick. It took away the hunger.

(T: 127)

In all three novels under discussion, the body serves as metaphor for the socio-symbolic ills of racial segregation, of oppression and of repression. In the case of *Memorandum*, the subject, Wiid, suffers from an incurable form of cancer, which could be viewed as a manifestation of the repressed life he has led. Throughout his life, he has repressed any pleasurable activities and focused only on his structured and ordered job as an administrator. Similarly, in *Agaat*, Milla’s diseased body serves as a metaphor for the suffering endured by the white female subject who has oppressed her servant Other and who, in the end, has to relinquish all power to her servant.

In the case of *Triomf*, the monstrous body of Lambert is an overt indictment of the old regime’s obsession with racial purity and forms part of Van Niekerk’s “implicit critique of the family’s racial isolation” (Botha 2011: 209). Similarly, Rob Nixon (2004) believes that the novelist is “pulling us inside their racist minds, each distinctive in its own way”.

Being racist and acting out such racism is not regarded as a taboo by the Benade family, yet the most flagrant taboo, namely that of incest, is acceptable to them. In her analysis of *Triomf*, Viljoen (1994) points out to what extent the text is a reflection of the Oedipal relationship between parents and child, set against the background of the incestuous desire for the female object by her brothers and her son. At the end of the novel, when Lambert learns the truth about his real father, he fulfils the oedipal desire to kill the father when he beats Pop to death.

This leads one to ask the question: Why, if we are all part of an Oedipal triangle during our development as subjects, do we not blind ourselves then,

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to fight against our feelings of maternal incest? Kristeva maintains we have to acknowledge that, “like Oedipus: I am abject, that is, mortal and speaking”. We do not have to gouge out our eyes but we need to acknowledge to ourselves that we are subjected to language and through language we can comprehend Oedipus’s lament. Or, we could suppress our feelings and accept our perversity. However, as the next chapter suggests, we now enter the domain of religion and religious prohibition.

### “Those Females who can Wreck the Infinite”

This is the title of a chapter in *Powers of Horror* in which Kristeva focuses on the role of the female body in Céline’s work and the central position played by the mother figure. The mother object, in the case of Céline’s women, is a Janus-like figure: on the one hand she is tender, affectionate and praiseworthy but on the other she is represented as someone causing suffering in her capacity as a repulsive and masochistic figure. He has an ambivalent view on birth, probably as a result of his study of post-natal fever, and the feminine ideal to him is the sublime body of the ballerina, whereas prostitutes and nymphomaniacs due to their “wild, obscene and threatening femininity” (Kristeva 1982: 167) are seen as manifestations of abject power and ready to plot the downfall of men. For Céline, the woman who sells her body for sex is far more dangerous than the mother or the career woman, because she possesses “a dark, abominable, and degraded power.” (Kristeva 1982: 168)

Both *Triomf* and *Agaat* contain female characters that could be categorised as possessing this “dark power”. In the case of *Triomf*, the character of the prostitute, Mary, is an example of what Céline feared: a threatening femininity. From Lambert’s perspective, she is described as follows:

Jissis. Now she’s on the bed, legs and all. Loosening buttons. Yes, that’s what she’s doing, she’s unbuttoning her blouse. Lots of buttons. What’s that underneath? A bow, a fucken little red bow. In the middle. Between the tits. The tits are in a see-through bra. Black net-stuff with holes in it. Sit, she motions to him, he must come and sit here next to her on the bed. Jirre, please! Those long red nails!

(*T*: 398)

The male subject is presented here as a voyeuristic observer fascinated by the object he desires. Throughout the novel, Lambert is associated with voyeurism. Not only does he spy on the neighbours when they are having a braai (chapter 6 of the novel) but is also fascinated by the two lesbian women across the road. In the scene with Mary, he is preoccupied with her body hidden under her clothes and the reader is given a very specific description of her clothing. He is over-anxious to see her naked body which

is veiled under the layers of clothing, acting here as the signifiers of his concealed and repressed desire. The red bow (in the middle of her bra “between the tits”) acts as a deterrent because the subject has to untie that first, before he can fulfil his desire for the sexualised female

The character of Agaat also represents this Janus-like feminine figure. On the one hand, she is the caring and subservient nanny to Jakkie, but on the other she is a devious almost shamanic witch-like figure who comes between mother and son and is inscribed into the role of the surrogate mother. One realises right from the outset that she is quite a manipulator, but it is only when reading the nursery tale type of story at the end (A: 684- 691) that all of this is confirmed. Consider the following excerpt from this tale:

And Good takes a knife and she takes forceps and scissors and she takes a deep breath and she cuts open the woman’s stomach from top to bottom. And when noon struck in the church towers on both sides of the mountain, then she took the child out of the blood and the slime and she cut the string and she cleaned him and she covered him in cloth and she gave him the name that only she knew about.

You-are-mine she called him.

And he grew up on her breast and she washed him when he was dirty and gave him milk when he was thirsty and rubbed his tummy when he had winds and cooled his forehead when he had fever, and cradled him and comforted him when he cried ....

I am a slave but You-are-mine, she always whispered in his ear before she handed him over to his mother. (A: 690-691)

The speaking subject refers to herself as “Good” and “I am a slave” in this passage, which not only emphasises her Otherness. She also associates herself with being good (Ds Van der Lugt named her Agaat and tells Milla *Agathos* means Good), which is ironic in the context of the novel at large, because, despite her performing the role of the carer and the slave, she is manipulative and cunning and devious. The subject’s ego-ideal is that she represents everything that is good. From her perspective, she claims the child object for herself and envisages a future for herself as the real mother to the child, thus replacing the biological mother as the child’s object of desire. By breastfeeding the child and whispering into his ear that she is its real mother, she assists with the child’s revolt against and abjection of the mother.

Not only women are depicted as grotesque in Céline’s fictional world and one example of Céline’s abjection is what Kristeva calls the representation of the “bankruptcy of the fathers” (Kristeva 1982: 172). The father figure is associated with disease, nightmares, exhaustion, delirious states and, right from the start, he depicts the father as “a mixture of childishness and ridiculous manhood” (172). Pop in *Triomf*, Jak in *Agaat* and Wiid Senior in *Memorandum* are the three examples of such ridiculous manhood in Van Niekerk’s novels. They are depicted as either spineless laggards with no real

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opinion or, as in the case of Jak, as an egocentric narcissist who is merely preoccupied with improving his own physique and body image.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

Writing and the process of developing a text is linked to the notions of abjection and catharsis and presupposes that all writing is a product of the obsession with the abject and the horror of being, particularly since the latter forms part of a resistance against the moral ideological codes dominating our lives. More so than in her novels, Van Niekerk has opted in her more recent work, and in particular in her play, *Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W* [The Short Shelf-Life of Anastasia W] to challenge the lack of morality in contemporary South African society. The focus of this play is the rape of innocent women and children in South Africa and her attack is predominantly against the lack of moral leadership on the part of the South African government. Following this play, Van Niekerk has written several poems aimed at criticising the government for maladministration, corruption and for a lack of moral focus. These poems deal with the attack on the mineworkers at Marikana, the unwillingness of the ANC-government to act against dictators like Mugabe and King Mswati of Swaziland, as well as the superficialisation of contemporary culture. In her recent collection *Kaar* (2013) several poems in section 7 deal with similar concerns, ranging from a night watch for the deceased Andries Tatane, a ballad for an abused and murdered child, ecocriticism aimed at Shell and fracking in the Karoo and a poem remembering the miners killed at Marikana.

Van Niekerk does not refuse to come face-to-face with the abject, and she sees it as her task as writer to confront this sublimated sense of horror and to write about it. Kristeva (1982: 208) explains the rationale behind the writing of *Powers of Horror* as follows:

I have sought in this book to demonstrate on what mechanism or subjectivity (which I believe to be universal) such horror, and its meaning as well as its power, is based.

Furthermore, literature, she believes, represents “the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and most serious apocalypses.”

The latter description fits in with Marlene van Niekerk’s writing project. Her writing is an exploration of how to survive the apocalypses of contemporary life in South Africa, particularly as a white woman living in a violent male-dominated society. When contemplating the reason for writing her novels, she observes:

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6. For an analysis of Jak’s masculinity and its relation to the hegemonic masculinity of patriarchal South Africa see Pretorius (2014).

“LIKE THE SKIN ON TOP OF BOILED MILK”: ...

Het gekke is dat ik er achterkwam, toen een kritisch stuk over mijn eigen werk schreef. Ik ontdekte dat er altijd een “achterkamerkind” bestond. Het heeft een gebrek en het houdt zich schuil in een achterkamer met geheimzinnig gedoe. Zo’n ontdekking is een onluisterende ervaring, maar daarna moet je jezelf heroriënteren. Als ik nu begin te schrijven, zie ik het binnen de kortste keren. Oh! Daar heb je hem weer. De zwerver. De boemelaar. De marginale. En o jee, en hij praat niet en hij doet geheimzinnig. ... Winterslaap, In een land met zoveel verschrikkelijke vormen van ellende zijn er nuttiger dingen dan kunst bedrijven. Iedereen die dat toch doet, weet dat het een luxe is. Als kunstenaar werk je in de schaduw van je eigen bevoorrechtting. Je bent medeplichtig aan het systeem. [I realised whilst writing a piece of criticism on my own work. I discovered that there is always some or other child in the backroom in my writing. The child has some defect and hides in the backroom where he or she keeps themselves occupied. Such a discovery is a debunking experience but afterwards one has to re-orientate oneself. Now when I start writing, I recognise that figure immediately. The drifter. The bum. The marginalised. He does not speak yet he acts very mysteriously. ... Hibernation, in a country with so many different terrible forms of suffering, there are more useful things to do than being creative. Everyone involved in it knows that it is a mere luxury. As an artist, one labours in the shadow of one’s own privileged existence. You are an accomplice to the system.]

(Provost 2009)

By giving preference to writing about the marginalised characters of society, the deformed and the silenced Others, Van Niekerk positions her writing within the realm of the abject. Furthermore, she is self-reflexive and critical of the viability of writing in a society characterised by the divide between rich and poor. Her focus on the marginalised could also be interpreted as an attempt to mimic the conflict between the written subjects as characters in the different texts and herself as the author, the maternal figure.

Van Niekerk relies on the abject to protest against a patriarchal society, an erstwhile racist society and a society in which Calvinist inspired religious prohibition has indeed played a major role. Take, for example, her novel *Triomf*: it is written in the language of the abject, it deals with topics such as mother-child incest, it comments on the issues of nationhood in a postcolonial society and it focuses on the writing of the body into the prevalent discourse, be it the body of the mother, the sick, the servant – all abject figures, usually Othered by society. Van Niekerk’s use of language fluctuates between the demotic and obscene and the poetic and expressive. She creates her own revolution in poetic language with her exploration of both patriarchal and semiotic language the writing subject “slaughters a few holy cows” and becomes a spokesperson for the abject. Perhaps the predilection for the abject in Van Niekerk’s writing is based on her assumption that writing is a solitary act and the writer herself needs to be surprised by the text she produces (Van Niekerk 2009: 152). Possibly the

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reason for this fascination with the abject lies in the fact that Van Niekerk feels that, while writing, she has to be entertained and amused, as is evident from the following remark to Colleen Higgs:

My problem is I always feel I must still achieve the thing I am after. A vain writer inside oneself is a difficult fish to harbour; it always yearns to swim behind the waterfalls. The thing I am after is to write something that confounds me, that I have not thought up or planned ... if I am not laughing, crying or shuddering with excitement or grimacing with perverse sadistic imaginings, or shocked beyond belief by what I come up with, while I am writing, I know that I have lost the reader. Writing like this, behind the waterfalls of rational considerations, one must forge into the deep, there where the old fears and desires and fantasies are playing' ... it takes many hours of patient effort before the wall of ordinary language and boring assumption gives, and one is out in the open and running in the bounteous milks of surprise.

(Colleen Higgs 2011)

All three novels are allegorical treatises on abjection: In *Triomf* the emphasis is on horror, suffering and defilement, whereas in *Agaat* the inescapable power of the abject mother is symbolised in both the relationship between Mother and Milla, and between Milla and Agaat. In the case of *Memorandum*, the boundaries are opened and we are amidst the sanitised, yet dehumanising world of the hospital. *Memorandum* is also, as Roux (2009) points out, a study on dying and how to prepare for death.

The discourse of abjection is associated with spatial crossings, boundaries, transgression, the maternal and the feminine, with death, decay and a fear of the unknown. These discursive elements are all encoded in the novels of Van Niekerk under discussion, as I have argued above. Diane de Beer (2011) when reviewing a production of Van Niekerk's play, *Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W*, writes:

It is not an easy show to watch and many left the auditorium because they simply couldn't weather the storm, but in many different ways, if you have the stomach, it blows you away. It is relentless in its message and its tone. And if I could wish for anything different, it would be that Van Niekerk's anguish about violence takes me on a journey of some kind.

This captures, to my mind, the essence of Van Niekerk's writing, especially the reference to the “anguish about violence” in all its forms, since this anguish constitutes, “that of being opposed to I” (Kristeva 1982: 1), “a brutish suffering that [the] ‘I’ puts up with”, a reality that annihilates the subject. Like Armah with his aesthetics of vulgarity, Marlene Van Niekerk's iconoclastic aesthetics of the abject, also serves to protest against “the vulgar behavio[u]rs in society” (Kakraba 2011: 312).

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