

Examining the Servant's Subversive Verbal and Non-Verbal Expression in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*

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Summary

The power struggle between Milla and Agaat in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2006) is one based in language. While the matriarch's perspective dominates the novel, thereby presumably silencing Agaat, the servant-cum-nurse employs alternative methods of communication, or mimetic gestures, to undermine Milla's point of view. Through verbal and non-verbal measures, Agaat attempts to counteract the dying woman's story. While these communicative measures rely on their finely nuanced and insidious attributes to function, they contain an essential ambivalence, as the controlling white woman never understands the full implications of her rejected child's communication.

Opsomming

Die magstryd tussen Milla en Agaat in Marlene van Niekerk se *Agaat* (2006) is gebaseer in taal. Terwyl die matriarg se perspektief die roman domineer, en vermoedelik vir Agaat stilmaak, gebruik die bediende-cum-verpleegster alternatiewe metodes van kommunikasie, of mimetiese gebare, om Milla se oogpunt te ondermyn. Deur verbale en nie-verbale maatreëls, poog Agaat om die sterwende vrou se storie teen te werk. Terwyl hierdie kommunikasiemetodes afhang van hul fyn genuanseerde en verraderlike hoedanighede om suksesvol te funksioneer, bevat hulle 'n essensiële teenstrydigheid, aangesien die wit vrou nooit die volle implikasies van haar verstote kind se kommunikasie verstaan nie.

Introduction

In a recent interview with *Vrij Nederland*, Marlene van Niekerk states that she is concerned in *Agaat*, among other subjects, with the question: “[Kan] een mens met het gereedschap van de meester het huis van de meester afbreken?” [“Can a person with the tools of the master, break the master's

house down?"] (Paris 2008: 48). Van Niekerk believes "Nee, dit kan niet" ["No, it cannot happen"] (2008: 48).

This question is relevant in relation to the central power struggle between the dying matriarch and her rejected foster child, a struggle Willie Burger believes is fundamentally based in language:

Omdat Milla haar spraak verloor, omdat Agaat as kind nie kon praat nie maar geleidelik taal aanleer, omdat vertelling sentraal staan in die roman, is dit dus duidelik dat die ondersoek van taal, van die moontlikhede wat taal bied om die ander te kan ken, 'n sentrale tema in die roman is.

[Because Milla loses her speech, because Agaat cannot speak as child but gradually acquires language, because storytelling is central in the novel, it is therefore clear that the investigation into language, into the possibilities that language offers to understand the other, is a central theme in the novel.]

(Burger 2006: 179)

Although compelled "to articulate [her] experiences in the language of [her] oppressors" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989: 175), Agaat's story is "explicate[d] ... in a language other than the tongue [Milla] had taught her" (van Niekerk 2006: 554).¹ Among many other cultural "tools" garnered from her masters, the Coloured woman appropriates the dynamics of the Afrikaans language, that which "she got ... from [Milla]" (p. 365) and "makes of it ... the Lord knows a veritable Babel" (p. 365).

We argue that Agaat is a subaltern, "a person without lines of social mobility" (Spivak 2006: 28), who is "speaking" at a pronounced and basic level, in the sense that she attempts to communicate her subjectivity to her foster mother and, ultimately, to the reader. Her unconventional, mimetic narratives include rhymes, fairy tales, songs and allegorical citations taken verbatim from various sources. When she will not speak, Agaat is engrossed in performative gestures, among them an unusual dance, inscriptions upon her peripheral servant's quarters and furtive embroidery projects (the most significant of which is her embroidered cap, a dense palimpsest of embroidered layers). Precisely because the implications of these performances are negotiated neither in the novel itself, nor adequately examined in emerging critical material, they provide new and productive territory for examination. Examples of these expressive methods are many and diverse. Attention is directed at the most peculiar – and therefore the most powerfully dissident – instances. Armed with the culture, or "tools" of her foster mother, Agaat attempts to "break down the house of the master", or to challenge the white woman's dominant perspective and provide another dimension to the story she tells.

1. All subsequent references to *Agaat* will be indicated by page number(s) only.

Communicating as she does, Agaat confronts both Milla and the reader with what Spivak regards as “the ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern” (Spivak 2006: 28), namely the reproduction of the dominant ideology. Since Agaat appears principally through Milla’s focalisation, she does not possess “an effective ‘voice’ clearly and *unproblematically* audible” (Ashcroft et al. 2006: 10) above Milla’s perspective. As Agaat is granted no space to “speak” in Milla’s narration, her tale resides in the fissures of the white woman’s narration. It is indeed as Coetzee points out in *White Writing*: “Only part of the truth ... lies in what writing says of the hitherto unsaid; for the rest, its truth lies in what it dares not say for the sake of its own safety, or in what it does not know about itself: in its silences (Coetzee 1988: 81).

Milla’s Dominant Perspective and Agaat’s Mimicry

In an interview with Hans Pienaar, van Niekerk identifies Milla’s narrative as the novel’s “main textual device” (Pienaar 2005: 2). The matriarch’s point of view is employed specifically to “complicate matters” (2005: 2) for the reader; “Agaat [is] known to [the reader] only from the perspective of, and therefore in the judgment of, an extremely unreliable narrator, Milla de Wet (2005: 2). This is because Milla is “a self-indulgent, delusional diary-keeper, a vainglorious and self-justifying memory machine, an invalid delirious from lack of oxygen lying powerless on her back in a bed” (2005: 2). The matriarch is always

busy negotiating for herself the psychologically most comfortable position from which to cross the threshold to death. So she needs hope, she needs a place of resolution in order to breathe her last in peace. She needs to be reassured that she has not been all that bad. She ... only has Agaat, a creature of her own making, to help facilitate this position for her.

(Pienaar 2005: 5)

Milla’s dominant perspective foregrounds her “creative processes, perhaps as a model of [her] exercise of language and meaning production” (Hutcheon 1984: 25). The adopted daughter, on the other hand, does not speak except in reported speech and recorded utterings, framed by Milla’s stream of consciousness. Agaat’s thoughts, emotions and creative processes are therefore largely obscured from both Milla and the reader. Consequently, the text is careful to turn many aspects of storytelling, among them its “structure, ... narrative viewpoint, the means of presentation, ... the process of composition and/or recitation as well as of reading or listening – into dramatically relevant emblems of [its] theme” (1984: 52).

Milla insists that she is *not* telling her foster child’s story on her behalf and is even more insistent that Agaat is not telling her own story either: “I can’t tell her story on her behalf, and if she’s too tongue-tied and has too little

pride to do it herself, then it's not my fault" (p. 439). Ultimately, however, Milla must concede – despite her confidence that “I know how Agaat's mind operates” (p. 394) – that the latter remains “a closed book” (p. 517). In wondering “What must it feel like to be Agaat?” (p. 554) Milla implicitly acknowledges that she can “[n]ever find that out” (p. 554). Instead, she is reduced to a life of imagination and inference, and is frustrated by her lack of insight into Agaat's being, except through deduction. She cannot help but wonder whether she is not “[p]erhaps ... imagining her evil. Or her goodness” (p. 394), consenting even that she may have been “delirious all this time because of a lack of oxygen” (p. 394).

A reception study reveals that a common denominator in the critical response to the novel is a debate on Agaat's perceived silence, with critics appearing divided between viewing her as an autonomous character and those considering her a silenced, marginal presence. Andries Wessels states that Agaat remains “die een wat voortdurend gepeil, geïnterpreteer [en] gepaai moet word, [want] die leser deel nooit haar bewussyn nie” [“the one who must be continually fathomed, interpreted [and] placated, because the reader never shares her consciousness”] (Wessels 2006: 40). Wessels identifies this feature as being “gedeeltelik uitgebeeld deur die feit dat Milla en Agaat se komplekse, interafhanklike, sorgsame, wrewelrige verhouding slegs uit Milla se oogpunt aangebied word” [“partly portrayed by the fact that Milla and Agaat's complex, interdependent, caring, resentful relationship is only presented from Milla's point of view”] (2006: 40).

Joan Hambidge presents a contradictory argument and does not draw a definite conclusion regarding Agaat's autonomy. She claims that the Coloured woman, “die ‘bediende’, of Ander, wat konvensioneel stemloos is, ... nou stem gegee [word]” [“the servant or Other, conventionally voiceless, is ... now given a voice”] (Hambidge 2004: 1). Yet she asserts that Agaat remains, in her presentation through Milla's stream of consciousness, “die stemlose” [“the voiceless”] (2004: 1).

Hein Viljoen supports Hambidge's theory. He acknowledges that Agaat is a heteroglossic text, although it is “onvermydelik gefilter deur [Milla se] sensibiteit” [“unavoidably filtered through [Milla's] sensibility”] (Viljoen 2005: 174). Heteroglossia constitutes the “larger polyphony of social and discursive forces” (Holquist 1990: 69) in which any individual's narrative is situated. It is therefore “the situation of a subject surrounded by the myriad responses he or she might make at any particular point, but any one of which must be framed in a specific discourse selected from ... [those] available” (1990: 69). The text's heteroglossia is evident in that Milla speaks both from the present and the past, so that her responses are always contextualised within a set of events. In addition, her voice is persistently “geëggo, nagepraat en nageboots” [“echoed, mimicked and imitated”] (Viljoen 2005: 174) by Agaat, who uses various “tale” [“languages”] or

“discourses”] (2005: 174) to communicate her subjectivity. As a result, Milla’s perspective is continually destabilised by Agaat’s.

This is a contention furthered in Willie Burger’s most productive reflection on *Agaat*’s narratological devices: the seminal paper, “Karnaval van die diere: Die skrywende waterkewer, eerder as die jollie bobbejaan” (2005). Burger contends that Agaat is engaged in numerous communicative measures and discusses central motifs closely related to the dynamics of the novel’s narrative.

The servant’s story demonstrates the “omkering van rolle [en] die ironisering van die idee van beheer, mag en ouerskap” [“the reversal of roles and the ironising of control, power and parentage”] (Burger 2005: 1). The narrative approaches Agaat employs indicate the success with which she has “construct[ed] a language of [her] own” (Ashcroft et al. 1989: 104), one in which her “‘voice’, concepts of speech and silence, and concepts of mimicry” (1989: 175) confront Milla’s dominant narrative. Mimicry, though essentially a defective identity impressed on the subaltern subject; “a flawed identity imposed on colonized people who are obliged to mirror back an image of the colonials but in imperfect form” (McClintock 1995: 63), may also serve as a rebellious anti-colonial resistance strategy for the disempowered. The value of mimicry, according to Gareth Griffiths, is that “the possibility of subaltern speech exists principally and crucially when its mediation through mimicry and parody of the dominant discourse subverts and menaces the authority within which it necessarily comes into being” (Griffiths 2006: 168). Mimicry allows the subaltern the means through which to internally challenge and disintegrate a hegemonic discourse. Consequently, this strategy is imperative to Agaat’s “resistance performance” (Carlson 2006: 310).

Mimicry is perhaps most evident in Agaat’s power to ease or hinder Milla’s narrative. Nowhere is this more evident than in the dying woman’s last, painstaking efforts to spell out sentences on Agaat’s old alphabet chart. The nurse uses a duster stick and systematically works her way through the alphabet. Milla blinks to select the necessary letter, or other linguistic unit, required for her sentence. This system of communication calls a number of narrative concerns into question. Milla is compelled to condense a lifetime’s questions, and all that she desires to say to Agaat by way of an apology, into the smallest possible linguistic unit (while still attempting to make her meaning clear). In addition, Agaat is responsible not only for compiling Milla’s narrative and determining its linguistic construction, but also for assisting its intonation, the very modulation of its meaning. She creates “a skeleton of language” (van Niekerk 2006: 436) on the bedroom wall, comprising not only of the alphabet chart, but various other “auxiliary lists on slips of paper” (p. 435), containing frequently used phrases and words, expletives, pronouns, prepositions and punctuation marks, even a system of “dots to mark an implication” (p. 436). Agaat actively determines the implications of Milla’s narrative, as she “looks at what I [Milla] signal and

she points and she points until there's a word, three words, half a sentence, and then she starts guessing" (p. 436). Indeed, the patient notices that the nurse "can't always keep her voice neutral. She charges my sentences with her own resonances. Disbelief, emphasis, mockery. She adds on her own improvises" (p. 437). When she does this, Milla becomes so enraged that she has to spell out "Don't put words into my mouth, exclamation mark" (p. 436) or "Don't anticipate my meanings, don't impose the wrong stress, wrong nuances on me. Exclamation, exclamation, exclamation!" (p. 436). In these instances, Agaat has the power to dictate Milla's narrative and to impose her own meaning on it.

Speechless and immobile, the dying woman is deeply frustrated by the seeming impossibility of "getting communication going" (p. 9) between herself and her onetime foster child and is adamant that this laborious process will be "the end of me yet" (p. 90). Precisely because Agaat can only interpret Milla's coded language "through the eyes, [and] by inferences, misunderstandings are easy" (p. 517). As her death approaches, the matriarch must concede that "[c]larity is not guaranteed" (p. 438) between the two of them. Language, or rather its absence and the confines it must breach, becomes to Milla's mind "a brutal instrument with which I'm torturing myself" (p. 438); it produces countless misunderstandings between herself and Agaat and "causes complications at a stage when she, and I, had hoped that things would become easier" (p. 438).

Verbal Expression: Song, Rhyme, Fairy Tales and Verbatim Quotations

Agaat's unconventional means of expression (both verbal and non-verbal) are the most overt indication of how she "defies the demands of the discriminatory discourses impinging on her person" (Parry 1995: 40). Tracing a number of these songs, rhymes, fairy tales and verbatim quotations, it is clear that they are often modelled on the traditional, fictional yarns (such as fairy tales and nursery rhymes) with which Milla raised her. Though the two women are never short of what Jak calls their "nonsense-rhymes" (p. 545), when it comes to "a matter of judgement and interpretation" (p. 545) thereof, both remain maddeningly "mute" (p. 545).

Agaat is very fond of inventing songs, especially as improvisations of the FAK songs taught to her as child, and those she learns with her young charge, seeing how she "learns everything with Jakkie from his school-books" (p. 364). The Coloured childminder knows far "more verses of The Call of South Africa than he" (p. 364). It comes as little surprise then that Agaat appropriates FAK songs to improvise her own tunes. She terrifies Jakkie with her rendition of a tune vaguely familiar to Milla from her university days, to the point that he begs her to stop, a sure indication of his

deep, but vague, unease. The song indicates a type of supernatural longevity and multidimensionality to Agaat's being and asserts a profound association with the landscape, with the "wattle", "fennel", "end of the river-bend", "breadth of the Breede" and "blood of the bluegum" (p. 366). In particular, this song (and the many others like it) indicates Agaat's powerful subversion of Afrikaans cultural songs, and their accompanying ideologies, in order to assert her autonomous identity. It is no coincidence that Jakkie, heir to the de Wet farming enterprise, is unsettled.

Milla frequently overhears Agaat's outlandish songs, and often reports that it scares her, "quite gives [her] the shivers" (p. 429), or is disconcertingly "ominous" (p. 429). Agaat regales the dying woman with a production based on her early childhood, abbreviated to a spontaneous song and sung to the rhythm of an imaginary "goosestep with tuba thrusts" (2006: 407). Swinging a duster like a bayonet, and marching to and fro at the foot of Milla's bed, Agaat sings of her experiences. She includes her earliest confinement in the outside room (shortly after Milla takes her from her abusive parental home) as a "Lockupchild/ Without [a] pot" (p. 407), through her systematic disciplining with the "Dusterstick on Agaatsarse" (p. 407), to her position as beloved child for seven years. Her song reaches its climax with the birth of Milla's son, Jakkie. Suddenly, the "Sevenyearschild" (p. 407) is banished to the "Backyard/ [a] Skivvy-room" (p. 407) with a "Highbed" (2006: 407) and a "Brownsuitcase" (p. 407) of belongings. Agaat sings how she goes "Nevertold/ [and] Unlamented" (p. 407). Banished from Milla's home, she feels stripped of the goodness inherent in her name and considers herself "Good-my-Arse" (p. 407) suddenly reduced to "Now-my-Arse" (2006: 407), thereby exposing the extent to which she feels herself the victim of Milla's cruelty.

This song is most valuable since it foreshadows the disclosure of Agaat's childhood, as is revealed towards the end of Milla's life (when the nurse finally reaches the diaries dedicated to her arrival on Grootmoedersdrift). Precisely because her childhood is narrated exclusively from Milla's perspective, as she committed it to writing in her diaries, Agaat's song serves as the only indication of her emotional response to this event – her anger, resentment and the underlying grief which marks the incident in her memory. It is no coincidence that the dying woman believes she is in "the line of fire" (p. 407): the militaristic tune is directed at her and poses an express challenge of her diary entries.

Agaat also frequently entertains Jakkie with "[s]tories and rhymes to make [his food] go down" (p. 581). As with many of her songs, these verses depict the particulars of her sudden demotion from beloved foster child to servant, when she is supplied with her own cutlery, complete with "a capital A [painted] on the underside of the plate, on the underside of the mug, so that they couldn't get mixed up with those of the other servants" (p. 582). Her rhyme chronicles her status as servant: "And when the clock struck twelve,/ her dish was of enamel made,/ her mug of tin, her knife her fork her

spoon. Hidden under the kitchen sink./ Here, your things, in case of need,/ They have their place as you do now,/ You are of another breed (p. 582). Depicting the seemingly inconsequential issue of the cutlery assigned her in the de Wet household, Agaat is keenly aware that her rejection is a racial concern. Her rhyme merges the structure of a traditional rhyme (perhaps *Hey Diddle Diddle*) with a powerful awareness of her marginal status and the racial implications behind her demotion. She effectively subverts the cultural goods (the Western nursery rhyme) inherited from Milla as a form of insurrection.

What is more, Agaat tells Jakkie fairy tales at every bedtime, and ends each storytelling session with what he calls the “last story” (p. 313), the “one story that he always wants to hear last of all & of which he never tires & when she changes one word of it he shouts no! no! that’s not how it goes” (p. 313). Milla can never fully make out what this story is about, because Agaat deliberately whispers when she tells it. All she can deduce is its beginning, which she can barely make out as “once upon a time there was a woman who was terribly unhappy” (p. 313). In addition, she has no hope of further information as Jakkie closely guards the particulars of the story: “it’s his & Agaat’s secret” (p. 314) and “he’s not allowed to tell it [because] Agaat will bewitch him if he does” (p. 314). The “last story” is revealed in its entirety in the epilogue, when the reader shares the recollections of Jakkie, the prodigal son returned to Grootmoedersdrift to attend his mother’s funeral. It depicts Milla and Agaat’s shared history and closely chronicles Agaat’s emotions. In this way, it takes cognisance of how “*Good’s heart was very very sore*” (p. 689; author’s italics) at her rejection, how “[n]obody noticed anything of Good’s mourning because she cried without tears” (p. 689; author’s italics), and how her heart “*grew as hard as a stone and black as soot and cold as burnt-out coal*” (p. 689; author’s italics). The fairy tale therefore serves as a platform for the expression of Agaat’s strongest emotions, although it is masked as the plot of an engaging, frivolous fairy tale for Jakkie’s amusement.

One of the most peculiar ways in which Agaat expresses herself, is through the strange answers she provides to Milla’s final questions as they are spelt out on the alphabet chart. Her answers comprise quotes delivered verbatim from various sources, among them the authoritative farmers’ handbook. Her answers comprise quotes delivered verbatim from various sources, among them the authoritative farmers’ handbook and the embroidery book, presumably *Borduur Só [Embroider Like This]* Milla gave her. Indeed, Milla realises that Agaat “will recite all her texts to me rather than talk to me openly” (p. 432). Such recitations exaggerate the “ventriloquism” (Spivak 2006: 28) of the speaking subaltern, the proposal that Agaat’s means of expressing herself is taken at second-hand from the dominant Afrikaner discourse and can be but endlessly reproduced. Among Milla’s many questions, two are particularly pressing: what Agaat did with

the brown suitcase in which Milla packed her belongings with the move to the outside room and whether Aagaat really breastfed Jakkie. These questions elicit the most fascinating responses from Aagaat.

When Milla asks “for the how-manieth time, [what] happened to your brown suitcase that I put on the half-shelf of the washstand in the outside room, on the day of your birthday, twelfth July in the year of our Lord nineteen sixty, when you moved in there?” (p. 444), Aagaat replies with a perfect recitation of “[t]he cutting-up of an ox” (p. 444). Her recital of the slaughter recollects many issues. It recalls the day of her moving into her new room, when Milla made her slaughter a lamb in order to teach her the skill. The lamb turned out to be Sweetflour, Aagaat’s much-loved hanslam. Being forced to slaughter Sweetflour, Aagaat is done a great injustice; it recalls the destruction of all that she values, as is the case when Milla replaced her beloved toys with Afrikaner cultural goods. Essentially, Milla’s rejection, and patent acculturation of Aagaat, suggests that the child’s identity, like Sweetflour, dies in that moment. Indeed she informs Milla, “The two of them, skivvy and lamb, both cut up much better than an old tough cow, let me tell you that!” (p. 444).

In response to the white woman’s burning question, “D·I·D Y·O·U R·E·A·L·L·Y H·A·V·E M·I·L·K W·H·E·N Y·O·U L·E·T J·A·K·K·I·E D·R·I·N·K F·R·O·M Y·O·U?” (p. 490), Aagaat responds by baring her “small crooked shoulder” (2006: 491) to Milla and chanting a “kind of song-speech” (2006: 491); a lecture on the care of sheep from the *Handbook for Farmers in South Africa*. This word-perfect narration is a concise recollection of Aagaat’s banishment from the family home and her subsequent nursing of Jakkie when his mother is unable to do so. It explains the best method of separating ewes and their lambs (suggesting Aagaat’s brutal separation from her même Milla), the necessity to ensure that weaned lambs “do not suffer over-much” (p. 491) because “once marred in their development, they never mend again” (p. 491), and the care that must be taken, after separation, to ensure that the ewes are kept far away for “their bleating not to be heard by their lambs” (p. 492). In effect, Aagaat’s recitation not only chronicles her own brutal separation from Milla, but recalls her removal from her own family, both of which caused irreparable damage, symbolised in Aagaat’s disabled arm. In farming practice, it is necessary to “milk out the bereaved ewe” (p. 492), especially if you “have been blessed with an abundant season” (p. 492) and to supply newly-weaned lambs with “a few old-ewes” (p. 492) to distract them and lead them to grazing and water. Since Milla cannot breastfeed Jakkie, Aagaat becomes his surrogate mother. She supplies him with the care she feels she did not receive either from her biological mother or Milla.

Non-Verbal Expression: Dance, Embroidery and Inscriptions on Physical Spaces

Agaat frequently employs non-verbal communicative methods and regresses into a witch-like figure. She engages in mysterious practices, which may be seen as an attempt to free herself from the oppressive, superficial order forced upon her, and to accomplish a powerful reconnection with “die Onbewuste, ... ’n kragtige natuurlike lewe, [en] ’n natuurmistiek” [“the Unconscious, ... a powerful natural life [and] the mysticism of nature”] (van der Merwe 2004: 2).

As a non-verbal, performative and highly symbolic method of self-expression, Agaat often engages in a strange, almost ritualistic form of dance. Milla first identifies this activity shortly after the child’s move to the servant’s quarters. She finds Agaat on the mountain, occupied in “odd steps & gestures against the slope” (p. 150) and is perplexed by her strange movements, by the “[s]ideways & backwards knees bent foot-stamping jumping on one leg jump-jump-jump & point-point with one arm at the ground. Then the arms rigid next to the sides. Then she folded them & then she stretched them. Looked as if she was keeping the one arm in the air with the other arm waving” (pp. 150-151). This odd dance is repeated, in similar form, during the de Wet’s holiday at Witsand. Milla follows Agaat to the ocean and soon notices that she makes “the same odd gestures as that evening on the mountain with her arms extended in front of her as if she’s indicating points of the compass or explicating the horizon” (p. 315).

Helen Gilbert states that any form of dance is a “focalizing agent” (Gilbert 1995: 341), encompasses a number of “signifying practices” (1995: 341). This makes the “human body ... a verbal signifier that encodes movement iconographically” (McDougall 2006: 298). Consequently, dance has the potential to function as narrative.

The potential for resistance in Agaat’s dance becomes evident once her mysterious fairy tale is revealed and the disappearance of her brown suitcase is explained. She buried it on the mountain, “piled black stones on top of it [,] ... trampled it with her new black shoes and cocked her crooked shoulder and pointed with her snake’s-head hand” (p. 689). This activity is accompanied by the proclamation “Now, Good, you are dead” (p. 689).

Agaat’s dance is not only “encoded as the expression of savage or exotic ‘otherness’” (Gilbert 1995: 342), but is directed at the suitcase full of her own cultural goods, her beloved moleskin, stick and wheel, her clothes, the natural items she collected with Milla in the veld, and even the old hessian sack which originally contained her possessions: all of which Milla desires her to categorically reject. In burying the suitcase, Agaat bitterly discards her much-loved toys. Hence, her dance, in which she vehemently points to, and tramples on, the location where the suitcase is buried, is at once a resentful abandonment of her cultural goods and a powerful “cite of

potential resistance to [the] hegemonic discourses" (1995: 345), among them the authority of her Afrikaner "mother", which force her to do this. By "bringing the body into focus, dance ... spatializes... [and] foregrounds proxemic relations between characters" (1995: 341), thereby depicting the unequal power relations between the two women. Agaat, though ostensibly neglecting her cultural heritage, actually challenges Milla's attempts to tamper with her cultural identity, and subverts her power.

Agaat's dance also "de-naturalizes ... signifying practices by disrupting narrative sequence/and or genre" (1995: 341). It exposes the essential fabrication of Milla's biased interpretation and reveals the extent to which she is at a loss to comprehend the dance as an illustration of the Coloured woman's potent resistance. The dance therefore operates as "a method for deconstructing the illusionistic devices of representation" (1995: 342). The "foot-stamping" (p. 151), "rigid" (p. 151) performance is near tribal, and contains strong elements of ritualistic, discordant movements so that it denotes terrible anger. It is in every respect a form of dance entirely at odds with accepted dance genres in Western culture. Milla is utterly perplexed by it, by a performance "[s]o weird ... I can't put the images out of my head [and] think of it all the time" (p. 151). She can resort only to her imagination in order to envision its meaning. Swept away by an imagination she believes is "too fertile for [her] own good" (p. 151), Milla comes closest to the implications of the dance when she imagines that Agaat is "separating the divisions of the night. Or dividing something within herself. Root cluster" (p. 151). In having a new identity imposed on her, Agaat effectually creates a double identity, in which her subjectivity is split between her autonomous identity and that imposed on her by Milla. The matriarch can, however, never know how accurate she is in imagining that her servant is "dividing something within herself" (p. 151) and separating the "[r]oot cluster" (p. 151) of her identity. She dismisses this idea as utterly [f]arfetched" (p. 151) and considers the only "simple explanation" (p. 151) that Agaat is "working herself up to running away" (p. 151).

Agaat's servant's room also provides many interesting clues as to her subjectivity. Here, her "defiance is not enacted [merely] in a small and circumscribed [physical] space appropriated with the lines of dominant code, but is a stance from which she ... constitutes a counter-discourse" (Parry 1995: 40). Opposing Milla's feeble attempts to create a homely environment, Agaat decorates her room in a feral style. In particular, she embeds what Milla considers "strange things" (p. 268) in the plaster of her fireplace, among them quartz pebbles, shells and sea urchins, a lynx skull, a hare's-foot fern, a horseshoe and marbles. As Milla found Agaat in a hearth, the fireplace holds the closest identification with the Coloured woman's cultural origins. Agaat employs this "half Romish & creepy" (p. 268) decoration in order to recreate "her unkempt self ... in low relief" (2006: 461). Consequently, the fireplace houses her "secret other self, [her]

concealed feral energy” (2006: 556), which is at complete odds with her role as compliant servant.

Of all the non-verbal communication methods Aagaat exploits, embroidery is most significant. Milla introduces Aagaat to the art of embroidery, decorative needlework, knitting and crocheting as an initiation into the “age-old arts & rich traditions from the domain of woman” (p. 169). The craft is intended to instruct Aagaat in the ways of a good Afrikaner woman and to act as “proof that I [Milla] haven’t wasted my time with you” (p. 169). Aagaat spends a vast deal of time embroidering and is exceptionally secretive about every project she undertakes. Chris van der Merwe believes her embroidery is indicative of “die ontwikkeling van ’n eie individualiteit en ’n eie skeppingsvermoë” [“the development of an own individuality and own creativity”] (van der Merwe 2004: 5). Yet her embroidery has a representative quality and symbolic substance that belies its perceived frivolity. Indeed Willie Burger, in his article “Deur ’n spieël in ’n raaisel: Kennis van die self en die ander in *Aagaat* deur Marlene van Niekerk”, calls attention to the importance of embroidery as a means of story-making (Burger 2006: 182). The most important projects through which Aagaat continually expresses herself, is her ever-changing cap, always impeccably starched, and the shroud she embroiders for Milla. In addition to Burger’s careful examination of the shroud as the visual representation of “die lewensverhaal, die herrangskikking van herinnerings van ’n lewe” [“the life story, the re-arrangement of memories of a life”] (Burger 2006: 181), Aagaat’s cap offers productive terrain for an investigation of her embroidery’s symbolic function.

Aagaat’s white servant’s cap, “[f]ull of embroidery holes ... [and] densely edged with shiny white thread” (p. 55) in the style of white on white embroidery, is an important means of expression, for it is shrouded in great secrecy and menace. An adult Jakkie claims that “every time he sees her [Aagaat] the point of her cap is longer” (p. 389). Soon, Milla notices how “all the caps are indeed higher on top & more pointed & completely filled with embroidery[,] complicated patterns overlapped at the top with little holes and scallops” (p. 389). The dying woman is dismayed by the shadows cast by the cap, reminiscent of “a horn it looks. Or like a shadow of an old stringy snakeskin, semi-transparent in spots with the elongated shadow-patterns of the weft visible here and there” (p. 371). It is not altogether surprising then, that she considers Aagaat an ominous individual. Aagaat’s cap indicates her identification with her status as servant. When Jakkie gives her a red silk headscarf as a gift before taking her on a short flight at his birthday party, she refuses to replace her cap with it. He is adamant that “You are not your apron and your cap, Aagaat” (p. 609), but she simply replies that “I am” (p. 609). Aagaat thus considers her apron and cap (indicative of her vocation as servant) central to her class and race-bound identity. However, her cap also works to conceal her hair. When Milla

walks in on Agaat one morning, she is surprised to discover her without a cap, for the “first time in twenty years” (p. 461) and she feels uncomfortable as if she had discovered Agaat “naked” (p. 461). She is stunned by “[t]he unkempt hair mass [that] made her look feral” (p. 461) and that “filled the otherwise tidy room like a conspiracy against everything in league with daylight and subordination” (p. 461). The subservience inherent in Agaat’s cap is therefore at odds with the unruliness of her hair and suggests that she has a binary identity, split between her role as compliant servant and bold dissident.

The cap is the tableau on which Agaat is continually “writing” and “re-writing” her story into a dense palimpsest of white on white embroidery. Jakkie reveals that the cap contained “white sheep, white flowers, [and] mountains and trees” (p. 683) when he was a child, but Milla later notices a different design altogether. The significance of white on white embroidery, or shadow-work, lies in its use of texture rather than obvious adornment. This style presents an interesting feature of Agaat’s narrative, as it is very subtle, and not easily discernable from the fabric of the text. Similarly, Agaat’s account is one that must be searched for among the layers of Milla’s focalisation, with which it merges to such an extent that it is not easily observed, though its presence is very real. In this manner, Milla often squints at Agaat’s cap in order to make out what is embroidered there. She is annoyed by the fact that “[n]obody, nobody except Jakkie when he was small, was allowed to look at it straight on” (p. 371), that it became “ever more forbidden, that zone above [her] forehead” (p. 371) and that whenever Agaat caught Milla staring at her cap, she “made [her] feel as if [she] were peeking through a transparent blouse” (p. 371).

Milla’s only opportunity to study Agaat’s cap up close is when she awakens to find her nurse sleeping at her feet. In the mid-afternoon, sunlight reaches it “from the side, from behind and from the front [so that Milla] can make out the embroidery distinctly. From the back, it is darkly lit in silhouette, and from the front etched in relief. Negative and positive simultaneously” (p. 371). While her cap is thus the negative sign of Agaat’s servitude, it is simultaneously a positive space of personal and well-guarded creativity, for Milla discovers a wealth of images depicted there. She discovers “a design of musical notation ..., notes and keys and staves” (p. 372), while depictions of wild animals playing musical instruments abound. The dying woman notes that “the trumpet-player has a pig’s snout. And the beak of the harpist is that of a bat. A wolf, grinning, beats the tambourine. A baboon with balloon-cheeks blows the syrinx, a rat with tiny teeth hangs drooling over the lute (p. 372). The significance of the embroidered scene is suggested when Agaat wakes up to discover Milla staring intently at her cap. Immediately “[e]mbarrassment steals over her face” (p. 372), followed closely by “[d]efensiveness” (p. 372) and anger that the woman “saw her like that” (p. 372).

The symbolism of sheet music, of what “Agaat could compose” (p. 649), is central to her cap. In “Classical Instrumental Music and Narrative”, Fred Everett Maus argues for “analogies between instrumental music and discourses normally understood as narrative” (Maus 2005: 466). If music may be conflated with literary narrative, Agaat’s embroidery may be considered a written narrative, which, like opera, offers an interpretation of, or elegy on, death. Milla’s love of “Romantic German Lieder” (p. 345), those “impossibly beautiful melodies” (p. 345) which so powerfully seduce her, function as a powerful “death-obsessed ... narrative” (Hutcheon & Hutcheon 2005: 444). In embroidering base animals playing musical instruments, Agaat composes her own musical work, one in which the chaos and confusion of Milla’s death (associated with the hideous animals) is transformed into the precise order of a musical composition (the animals create music as composed by Agaat) and thereby rendered manageable. Indeed, the project serves as “fuel for herself [Agaat] to carry on nursing [Milla] every day” (p. 236), as she is affected by the emotional strain of nursing the dying woman, who despite her cruelty remains her “Même ... [her] only mother” (p. 633). Through embroidery, Agaat fashions a staged narrative of death in which she transforms the inevitability of Milla’s demise into a concern that she can “handle, as she had handled all illness and death in her life” (2006: 236).

The Impossibility of Breaking the Master’s House Down

To assess whether or not Agaat succeeds in subverting Milla’s dominant perspective, armed as she is with the discourse learnt from her foster mother, is to ask “whether or not the possibility exists for any recovery of the subaltern voice that is not a kind of essentialist fiction” (Ashcroft et al. 2006: 10). In “The Myth of Authenticity”, Gareth Griffiths argues that “[e]ven when the subaltern appears to ‘speak’ there is a real concern as to whether what [is represented] ... is really a subaltern voice, or the subaltern being spoken by the subject position [s/he occupies] within the larger discursive economy (Griffiths 2006: 167).

Agaat’s mimetic means of expression, whilst unquestionably subversive, do not ultimately succeed in collapsing Milla’s narrative authority over her. The Coloured woman’s individuality is indicative of the paranarratable. It is that which “wouldn’t be told because of formal convention” (Warhol 2005: 226), because it would transgress “a law of literary genre” (2005: 226). Indeed, Warhol has argued that the rules of “literary generic convention are more inflexible ... than laws of social convention, and have led throughout history to more instances of unnarratability than even taboo has led” (2005: 226). Milla’s stream of consciousness disallows Agaat the space to narrate her story, because it can be concerned only with her individual psyche.

Agaat's personality is further consigned to the peripheries of the text as that which "can't be told because it's 'ineffable'" (2005: 223). These are events that "defy narrative, foregrounding the inadequacy of language or of visual image to achieve full representation, even of fictitious events" (2005: 223). In this way, it constitutes the supranarratable. The servant's being is obscured because Milla cannot interpret it, as the very lexicon available to her to do so is wholly inadequate. Though she tries desperately to "write" Agaat accurately in her diaries, to "write how I found her otherwise I'll forget how it was" (p. 517), Milla is plagued by what reveals itself as an impossible assignment, for "it seems too much, I'm scared to commit it to writing. Would I find the right words?" (p. 517). Such an absence of linguistic representation results from the reality that Agaat's subjectivity is created chiefly through non-verbal means; her actions are seldom if "ever accompanied by words" (p. 511). "If she didn't say [anything], her crooked drawn-up shoulder said it" (p. 460). Hence, Milla requires consistent interpretation of Agaat's subjectivity, wondering, "How would [I] understand her [Agaat] then? Who would interpret for [me]?" (p. 554). For the most part, Agaat's communicative measures are left to the reader's interpretation. They are all but lost on Milla, who in the absence of a competent "interpreter", can only begin to fathom their true complexity.

Conclusion

Agaat is an amazingly resourceful, and a decidedly creative, communicator. Armed as she is with a "white" Afrikaans upbringing, she is equipped with the cultural goods (among them song, story, rhyme and embroidery) with which to finely symbolise her subject position as rejected child in the de Wet household and Coloured individual in apartheid South Africa. While these communicative means rely on their insidiousness in order to function in the midst of, and against, the dominant discourse in which she is positioned, they are not without their disadvantages.

The individual, Milla de Wet, to whom the Coloured woman mostly directs her commentary, remains largely ignorant of it, thus somewhat reducing its efficacy. While Milla is forced to acknowledge that she will *die* without gaining access to Agaat's innermost thoughts and emotions, she is simultaneously aware that she has *lived* with this reality all along. It is ironic that she is so deeply distressed by the limitations of language only when all avenues of expression (speech and later the blinking of her eyes) become inaccessible to her. To her dismay, she becomes keenly aware that she has in fact always lacked "the right words" to articulate her experience of Agaat's mimetic and performative communication and has never been "able to figure out what she [Agaat] was saying". For Milla, language is indeed a "brutal instrument" of torture entirely insufficient to interpret Agaat's communication. The Coloured woman therefore remains a misinterpreted and

enigmatic figure. The implications of her communication may be meaningfully explicated in symbolic “language” only, and it remains a communication medium totally different from Milla’s. Nevertheless, there remains tremendous scope for further investigation into the matter.

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