# Ruth in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat**


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## Summary

Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2006), which was translated from the Afrikaans into English by Michiel Heyns, examines the relationship between a dying white woman and her Coloured carer. In the course of the novel it becomes clear that the themes of (post)colonialism, race relations and gender dynamics are being explored; however, the means through which they are conveyed are through the complicated, distressing and moving relationship between the two protagonists, which exemplifies the relationship between white Afrikaners in particular (and by extension whites generally in South Africa) and Coloureds in particular (and by extension the racial other). Religion is a crucial aspect of the changing dynamics between these two representative characters. In this paper I examine the striking parallels between the novel and the Book of Ruth, particularly with regard to the relationship between the two female protagonists. I analyse van Niekerk's critique of supremacist religion, especially during apartheid, and her representation of the necessity for ruth, or compassion, in contemporary South Africa. I employ concepts raised by a number of feminist postcolonialist scholars of theology to illustrate the radical nature of van Niekerk's representation of religion and spirituality in the novel. In particular, I examine the implications of applying Marcella Althaus-Reid's controversial concept of the Bi/Christ to the text.

## Opsomming

Marlene van Niekerk se *Agaat* (2006), wat deur Michiel Heyns uit Afrikaans in Engels vertaal is, beskou die verhouding tussen 'n sterwende wit vrou en haar kleurlingoppasser. Deur die verloop van die roman word dit duidelik dat die temas van (post)kolonialisme, rasseverhoudinge en geslagsdinamika verken word; die manier waarop dit oorgedra word is egter deur middel van die gekompliseerde, onrusbarende en aandoenlike verhouding tussen die twee protagoniste, wat veral die verhouding tussen wit Afrikaners (en in 'n uitgebreide sin dus ook wittes in Suid-Afrika in die algemeen) en kleurlinge (en in 'n uitgebreide sin dus ook die rasse-ander) beliggaam. Godsdiens is 'n kritieke aspek van die veranderende dinamika tussen hierdie twee verteenwoordigende karakters. In hierdie artikel beskou ek die treffende parallelle tussen die roman en die Bybelboek Rut, veral met betrekking tot die verhouding tussen die twee vroulike protagoniste. Ek analiseer Van Niekerk se kritiek van heerssugtige godsdiens, veral tydens apartheid, en haar uitbeelding van die noodsaaklikheid van weemoed, of medelye, in kontemporêre Suid-Afrika. Ek gebruik konsepte wat deur 'n aantal feministiese postkolonialistiese teologiekenners



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aangevoer word om die radikale aard van Van Niekerk se uitbeelding van godsdiens en spiritualiteit in die roman te illustreer. Ek ondersoek veral die implikasies van die toepassing van Marcella Althaus-Reid se kontroversiële konsep van die Bi/Christus op die teks.

## 1 "Analyses of the Sacred"

A flurry of correspondence polarised around the existence of God, as denied by Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* (2006), recently appeared in Pietermaritzburg's local newspaper. The tone of most of these letters to the editor was heated, with each side accusing the other of ignorance, intolerance and disrespect. The most interesting contribution to this debate was an article by a retired Head of the Unilever Ethics Centre at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Professor Martin Prozesky. In this piece Prozesky wrote two letters to imaginary interlocutors, one an agnostic and a rationalist, the other a fervent believer who had responded from a fixed position to *The God Delusion*. In each of his replies Prozesky (a Christian believer himself) adopted the midground between the polar extremes posited, arguing that the book, while flawed, provided stimulating food for thought (2007: 11). Significantly, Prozesky used fiction, from more than one perspective, to respond to a critique of religion.

Another letter-writer in *The God Delusion* debate quotes Scott Atran, who points to the general importance of religion in people's lives, despite the arguments of secularists:

> Ever since Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, scientists and secularly-minded scholars have been predicting the ultimate demise of religion. But, if anything, religious fervour is increasing across the world. An underlying reason is that science treats humans and intentions only as incidental elements in the universe, whereas for religion they are central. Science is not well suited to deal with people's existential anxieties, including death, deception, loneliness or longing for love or justice. It cannot tell us what we ought to do, only what we can do. Religion thrives because it addresses people's deepest emotional yearnings.
>
> (Atran quoted in Deane 2006: 12)

Unrelated to the Dawkins debate, writing particularly within the field of postcolonialism, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin have recently acknowledged a previous lacuna in their work, and have argued: "Analyses of the sacred have been one of the most neglected, and may be one of the most rapidly expanding areas of post-colonial study" (2002: 212). Existential anxieties such as those referred to by Atran, specifically situated in a postcolonial South Africa, are central to Marlene van Niekerk's novel, *Agaat*, yet an analysis of the significance of the representations of religion and spirituality in the text has not yet been attempted. The novel was published initially in

2004, in Afrikaans, and in 2006 appeared in English, having been artfully translated by Michiel Heyns. This ambitious work is 700 pages long, and its chronology is the second half of the twentieth century, from a short time before the apartheid era to shortly after its demise. It is set in the south-western Cape on a farm called Grootmoedersdrift, translated as Grandmother's Ford, or Grandmother's Passion, which is near a mountain pass called the Tradouw Pass, an indigenous name meaning the pass of women. The novel is written in the tradition of the *plaasroman*, which historically sought to establish Afrikaner identity and dealt with such topics as landownership, tradition, white self and black other, and the lost son. Marlene van Niekerk approaches the subgenre subversively, specifically from the viewpoint of women, both white and Coloured; she is critically examining Afrikaner identities, revealing, as Nicole Devarenne points out, "the relationship between colonialism, racism and misogyny" (2006: 106). The novel therefore lends itself to a feminist postcolonialist interpretation, which I will apply to the text. More specifically, however, I am interested in van Niekerk's representation of religion as an unethical practice used in consolidating a narrowly nationalist Afrikaner ideology, her representation of good and evil, and her representation of alternative forms of spirituality syncretically associated with Christianity. My main focus of attention will be van Niekerk's fascinating use of the biblical story of Ruth and Naomi, which, like the *plaasroman*, she adapts to her own ends. I extend my discussion of the parallels between *Agaat* and the Book of Ruth to an application of Marcella Althaus-Reid's radical concept of the Bi/Christ, which provides a challenge to the use of heteropatriarchy and other binaries in the Christian religion.

## 2 The Book of Ruth

The Book of Ruth is one of only two of the 66 books of the Bible named after a woman. It is of interest to postcolonial feminist critics because it illustrates "the intersections among gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality in cultural contacts and border crossings", as Kwok Pui-lan comments (2005: 101). While the Book of Ruth begins and ends with a primary concern with male genealogy (van Wolde 1997: 8-9), the bulk of the narrative concerns the relationship between Naomi and her daughter-in-law, Ruth. Briefly summarised, Naomi's husband and two sons die, and she and her daughters-in-law journey back towards her home, Bethlehem. Naomi urges the two younger women to return to their own homes, and one does, but Ruth clings to her mother-in-law, uttering the unforgettable, incandescent oath of allegiance: "[W]hither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so

to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me" (Ruth I: 16-17). These are words of unconditional love, loyalty and devotion (*chesed*, or loving-kindness in Hebrew), and for some readers the story is heart-warming, comforting and a model of an ideal bond between women.

Yet such readings ignore uncomfortable and ambiguous aspects of the story, such as the sacrifices Ruth is called upon to make, and Naomi's ambivalent attitude towards her. Ruth comes from a despised and sullied line of outsiders, the Moabites, who were descended from the act of incest between Lot and his daughter. In following Naomi Ruth has to forego her own allegiances, culture and religion, and adopt a monotheistic belief system. Naomi instructs her on practical matters of survival, which Ruth obeys. Many will remember how she gleans corn in the fields of Naomi's relative Boaz, who praises her for the good deeds of her devotion to her mother-in-law. Naomi instructs Ruth to uncover Boaz's feet and lie at them as he sleeps on the threshing floor. Boaz marries Ruth, she bears a son, and Naomi "nurses" the child. The term is ambiguous: it suggests breastfeeding, although this is probably not the intended meaning. The women of Bethlehem tell Naomi that the devoted Ruth who has provided her with this "restorer of life" (Ruth IV: 15) is worth seven sons. The Book of Ruth concludes with Ruth and Naomi's son's placing as part of the lineage leading to King David. Seen from a purist perspective, it might be assumed that the lineage of David, that presages the redeeming Messiah, should be unblemished, not containing an ancestor of foreign, shameful heritage. Yet according to Rabbi Nosson Scherman's kabbalistic interpretation of the Book of Ruth,

> good and evil are not stored in separate compartments in God's world. On the contrary, the divine sparks of goodness are entrapped in outer shells of evil. This is why the righteous souls who are called upon to rescue the divine sparks must be willing to penetrate evil and understand its ways. They can do so and remain unblemished since this seemingly circuitous path is part of a divine plan culminating in redemption.
>
> (Torn 1994: 338)

Several issues are pertinent in using the story of Ruth and Naomi to comment on *Agaat*. From a postcolonialist feminist perspective, it is noteworthy that the outsider woman is "used as the boundary marker to define difference in the contact zone of different cultures" (Kwok 2005: 107). Illustrating that the relationship between Naomi and Ruth is not fully reciprocal or egalitarian, the very name of the book in omitting her name "implies a criticism of Naomi" (Gitay 1993: 186). Phyllis Trible finds, however, that "*together* they work as paradigms for radicality … *together* they are women in culture, women against culture, and women transforming culture" (1978: 196; my italics). Yet while Ruth is an ideal figure, revered for her goodness, she also poses a threat to the nation, signalled by her

disappearance at the end of the Book. Bonnie Honig argues that the Israelites, as the chosen people, have to construct their own identity in opposition to an Other, and in giving a home to the foreign Ruth the boundaries of that identity are called threateningly into question (Honig quoted in Kwok 2005: 112-113). Regina Schwartz controversially critiques monotheism, arguing: "Through the dissemination of the Bible in Western culture, its narratives have become the foundation of a prevailing understanding of ethnic, religious, and national identity, as defined negatively, over against others" (1997: x). With specific reference to the Book of Ruth, she finds Ruth's conversion as a precondition of acceptance into the nation problematic, and maintains that Ruth's vow of allegiance to Naomi's God "binds kinship with monotheism by linking a people with one God and excluding other identities" (Kwok 2005: 115).

## 3 Ruth in *Agaat*

Key elements of the ambiguous story of Ruth are used in *Agaat*: there are a woman, her husband, a shared boy-child and a younger, outsider woman who is instructed by the older woman. Imagery of sleeping at the feet of another is used, and reference to Ruth and Naomi is made at a crucial stage of the novel. The journey is the path to death; questions of sacrifice, good, evil and redemption are raised; and while centre stage is occupied by the problematic, intimate relationship between the two women, the narrator of the prologue and epilogue is male.

Aside from the prologue and epilogue, there are four narrative strands being developed in each of the 20 chapters of the novel. The first is set in the present of the text, 1996, and is recounted in first-person narration by Milla de Wet, a 70-year-old white Afrikaner woman who is dying of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS; also known as motor neuron disease), a progressive paralysis which leaves the mind unimpaired. She is being nursed by a Coloured woman, Agaat Lourier, who is 48. The second section of each chapter consists of Milla's memories of significant events from earlier times, recounted in the second person. Each chapter also contains a poetic, dreamlike stream-of-consciousness account of Milla's state of mind, as well as her diary entries from the 1950s and 1960s, which Agaat is reading to her.

The reader gradually assembles a sense of the chronology of Milla's life. As a young woman she chooses a handsome young man to marry so that she can claim her birthright of land, the farm Grootmoedersdrift. The marriage is not a happy one, and plays out sadomasochistic tensions. In addition, contrary to social expectations, and to her distress, Milla does not fall pregnant. Six years after Jak and Milla's marriage, in 1953, Milla is told by her mother about an abused Coloured child, the daughter of her childhood nurse. As Zoë Wicomb observes, Coloured identity in the South African

context has been ideologically associated with shame resulting from the perceived taint of an originary act of sex across the colour line (1998: 92); this understanding discursively marks the child in a similar way to Ruth's shameful heritage. Milla goes to find the little girl, who is cowering in a fireplace, filthy, neglected, and having been multiply raped. Her abject status is further emphasised by the deformity of one small hand and arm, and by her not having been given a proper name. On the Day of the Covenant, a sacred day for Afrikaners when God's help in defeating the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River is commemorated, Milla removes the child from her home, and takes her to Grootmoedersdrift. Although Milla's motives are mixed and not purely altruistic, and although her subsequent actions are sometimes horrifying according to today's humane values, the act of taking the little wild stranger into her own home enables Milla to see her community and its hypocrisies from a fresh perspective, in the ways suggested by Trinh Minh-ha:

> The moment the insider steps out from the inside she's no longer a mere insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that indeterminate threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition, her intervention is necessarily that of both not quite an insider and not quite an outsider. She is, in other words, this inappropriate other or same who moves about with always at least two gestures: that of affirming "I am like you" while persisting in her difference and that of reminding "I am different" while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at.
>
> (Trinh 1997: 418)

Despite the Christian community's lipservice paid to charity, generosity and loving-kindness, Milla is alone in "taking the Word … literally" (van Niekerk 2006: 561); in taking this leap of faith she finds herself alienated from her family and friends. She pours immense time and effort into her project of saving the child who can't speak at first. Milla teaches her to communicate initially by expressing herself through a private language, a code of the eyes. On the advice of the *Dominee* Milla names the little girl Agaat, which translates as "agate", a semi-precious stone, and which is derived from the Greek word meaning "good". The *Dominee* says: "If your name is good … it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. Like a holy brand it will be, like an imminent destiny, the name on the brow, to do good, to want to be good, goodness itself" (p. 487). This idealistic, sanctimonious and arrogant viewpoint is shared by Milla, who considers herself an agent of divine providence. (Later, in the present of the text, however, Agaat is visualised as a representative of a vengeful God, when Milla thinks: "God … has become a woman. He is now named Agaat" (p. 270).)

So the young Milla feeds Agaat and clothes her, she teaches her to speak, read, write and draw, and she has her baptised (in a small, private ceremony, not in front of the whole congregation, as she's Coloured). Yet she also treats her more callously than a caring mother would her child. Milla punishes the child to ensure good behaviour, despite her initial promise that she wouldn't ever hurt her. Milla comes to love the little girl after a fashion, saying she feels "[a] kind of motherhood even" (p. 519), and claiming, "We are one, Agaat and I, I feel it stir in my navel" (p. 521). A very young Agaat puts her arms around Milla's neck and says, "[M]y Même you're my only mother" (p. 633). Yet the child's pain occasionally comes to the fore, and significance can be derived from the first drawing she does on her own, in which she portrays the farm with Milla sporting wings: "You have wings because you are my angel she says" (p. 623). Milla, however, is not satisfied, and makes Agaat practise drawing wings, as "[o]nly Lucifer the rebellious angel has such spindly black wings" (p. 623). The drawing of Milla ends up with patched-up wings, the corrected, "good" ones over the original "bad" ones. In this portrayal van Niekerk reveals that although Milla convinces herself that everything she does is perfect, her actions and their effects are a human mixture of good and bad. The child is not only loving, but intelligent and quick to spot discrepancies in what Milla is teaching her and her actual experience, leading to a certain degree of insight and sympathy from Milla: "What is holy? She asks … I say everything that's wild everything that's free, everything that we didn't make ourselves, everything that we can't cling to and tie down. Your soul is holy. Wouldn't she gaze at me: But you caught me and tamed me. So I pressed her close to me, shame" (p. 627).

Milla teaches the intelligent girl from key texts, one for each aspect of knowledge which she is expected to learn, allowing for no deviation from the one authority (van Niekerk's point here being similar to Regina Schwartz's critique of monotheism that excludes difference). Agaat's four master narratives are: the Bible for spiritual matters, a handbook for farmers for agricultural matters, an Afrikaans folk-song book for cultural matters, and a book on embroidery for a practical – and appropriately feminine and domestic – form of aesthetics. Embroidery becomes Agaat's lifelong art form. While Milla enjoys instructing the child, she restrains her love within strictly observed limits, advising herself as she grows that "[t]oo much intimacy not a good thing now. She must learn to know her place here" (p. 563). Indeed, her place is anomalous and scandalous in the community. Milla has to caution her to refer to her as "nooi", and she automatically calls Jak "baas" (p. 629). Agaat's ambiguous status on the farm is pointed out in an exchange between Milla and her friend, Beatrice, who acts as the mouthpiece of the community, telling Milla that there is no use

> for an over-educated servant on a farm. She's not a servant I say & then B. said well she hasn't noticed other people's children of the same age

> sweeping stoeps & feeding chickens & serving tea to guests & calling their mothers Nooi. I say A. & I understand each other it's play names & play work it's a special relationship. B. says what's the use the two of us thinking it's a game & it's special & everybody else in the country thinks it's abnormal & a sin before God.
>
> (van Niekerk 2006: 639)

Torn as Milla is, her dilemma between her duty towards Agaat and her duty to her "volk" is exacerbated when she unexpectedly falls pregnant when Agaat is 11. Milla has early on assigned the girl a birthday, and ironically on this day, which she forgets to celebrate, she moves the girl out of the house to an outside room, further marginalising her, without explaining her change of status. She provides Agaat with black uniforms and a white cap and apron, making her more servant than previously, and she makes the girl slaughter a lamb for the first time. Unbeknown to Milla, the other servants, who have long resented Agaat, deliberately choose as the lamb which she is to sacrifice the one which she has hand-reared herself. A month later Milla starts to have labour pains, and Agaat delivers the baby, which would have died without her skill. As the baby is being born, Milla thinks of Agaat: "Now it's you and me, … it's always been just you and me" (p. 175).

As a secret act of revenge against Milla Agaat becomes more of a mother to the baby than Milla herself, even breastfeeding him. As he grows up he remains devoted to Agaat, but his father jealously tries to gain his affections. Jakkie accedes to his father's dream that he become a pilot in the air force, but he is sickened by the killing which he is required to do, and after the celebration of his 25th birthday he deserts and emigrates to Canada. Jak dies, and roles in the central relationship between Milla and Agaat are reversed when Milla becomes sick and Agaat devotedly nurses her. In the present of the text Milla is in extremis; her paralysis has crept upwards until she can no longer speak, and her only means of communication is her eye communication with Agaat. Although Milla longs for Agaat to discern her yearning for the maps of Grootmoedersdrif to be displayed before her so that she can glory in the land which she has farmed, in this way accounting for her life, Agaat seems deliberately obtuse or vindictive in her apparent refusal to read Milla's desire. Instead she focuses on practical matters of feeding and cleansing, to Milla's frustration. However, having her formidable will thwarted and having extracts from her diary read to her by Agaat force Milla to see the past with deeper insight.

As Milla's faculties shut down almost completely, she undergoes a process of confession. J.M. Coetzee argues that a truthful confession which transcends self-interest can only occur at the brink of (or after) death, when self-preservation is no longer a possibility (1992). He also mentions that confession is the second part of "a sequence of transgression, confession, penitence, and absolution" (p. 251). Like Everyman in the medieval drama, the dying Milla has to purge herself physically and mentally in the face of

the ultimate Other. Previously Milla has realised that Agaat is her and Jak's "archive", their "parliament", their "hall of mirrors" (van Niekerk 2006: 554), and she has rhetorically asked: "[W]hat would be the joy of [her and Agaat's] finding each other without having been lost to each other?" (p. 555). Through the catalyst of Agaat, in Milla's extremity she comes to realise her previous transgressions against Agaat, and she mentally confesses to her, poignantly showing her heartfelt penitence:

> Oh, my little Agaat, my child that I pushed away from me, my child that I forsook after I'd appropriated her, that I caught without capturing her, that I locked up before I'd unlocked her!
> Why did I not keep you as I found you? What made me abduct you over the pass? What made me steal you from beyond the rugged mountains? Why can I only now be with you like this, in a fantasy of my own death?
> Why only now love you with this inexpressible regret?
> And how must I let you know this?
>
> (van Niekerk 2006: 540)

Although in Agaat's childhood Milla choked on the words, "My child", in her newly found position of humility she belatedly uses them in a context of penitence. In an echo of the story of Ruth she is surprised to wake, finding a sleeping Agaat at her feet, cradling them, possibly unconsciously, although when Agaat wakes she moves away, then deliberately returns and embraces Milla's feet. Through their private language of the eyes Milla asks a ritual three times for Agaat's forgiveness. She also asks Agaat to pray, although Milla has long forsaken religion. Agaat is a Christian believer, but she is also something of an animist or pantheist. She practises a kind of nature mysticism allied to the elements, particularly fire, but also associated with animal sacrifice and butterflies, symbolising metamorphosis. Her form of prayer is highly individualistic: it consists of exposure of the shame of her deformed arm, a personal bloodletting, a litany of farmyard disease which stands in for Milla's condition, and a cry of love for Milla: "Who do I have other than you? Don't go away from me! Don't leave me! What would I ever do without you, with my words?" (p. 496). She thus absolves Milla of her wrongdoing. Agaat's final gift for Milla is a shroud, which she has been embroidering with all her skill for years on precious linen which Milla gave her when she cast her in the role of servant. This, as Milla has taught Agaat, the fourth and final dress of a woman, is a tapestry of Milla's life, and Agaat acts as Milla's proxy, trying the shroud on and entering the grave which Milla herself is shortly to enter.

Milla's death is recounted in a final stream-of-consciousness passage in which her last moments are lovingly attended by Agaat, who physically enfolds her and "gently parts my shoulders like wings" (p. 673). There is a moving call and response, including the words of Ruth:

*where are you agaat?*
*here I am*
*a voice speaking for me a riddle where there is rest*
*a candle being lit for me in a mirror*
*my rod and my staff my whirling wheel*
*a mouth that with mine mists the glass in the valley of the shadow of death*
*where you go there I shall go*
*your house is my house*
*your land is my land*
*the land that the Lord thy God giveth you*

(van Niekerk 2006: 673)

In the final epiphany of her death, Milla experiences her beloved farm, which Agaat is to inherit. As I read it, the speaker is Agaat in the line which reworks the comforting words of David in Psalm 23 ("Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" – Psalm XXIII: 4) in the first person and adapted to include feminine imagery of spinning. Agaat is figured in her previously mentioned role of representative of God, but here a comforting, feminine aspect of God. In addition, Agaat utters Ruth's words of devotion, and because of several references in the novel to "In my Father's house there are many mansions", "house" resonates as abode, lineage and the afterlife. Further, "land" refers simultaneously to the farm Grootmoedersdrift and to South Africa itself. The concluding line of this profoundly moving death reverie: "*in my hand the hand of the small agaat*" (p. 674), revisits Milla's very first dream of her life with Agaat, skin to skin, hand in hand together (p. 661). By her love Agaat has given Milla a good death, one purged of negativity and full of emotional and spiritual significance. This is hard-won redemption, which resonates even for a non-believing reader.

The prologue and epilogue of the novel are recounted through the voice of the sceptical and alienated Jakkie, winging first to and then from South Africa, having missed his mother's funeral. The epilogue contains four important points. Jakkie remembers an apposite quotation: "I do admire our Good Lord for his aesthetic flair in creating a world that is at one and the same time both heaven and hell" (p. 676), pointing to the interpenetration of good and evil referred to in Rabbi Nosson Scherman's kabbalistic interpretation of the Book of Ruth. The second pertinent piece of information provided by Jakkie is the full text of Milla's "commission", which the reader encounters for the first time at this late stage of the text. The third significant item is the text of Milla's epitaph:

**Kamilla Redelinghuys. 11/3/1926-16/12/1996**
*Passed away peacefully.*
*And then God saw that it was Good.*

(van Niekerk 2006: 681)

The reader has previously learned that Agaat was entrusted with composing Milla's epitaph, and it is noteworthy that she has chosen Milla's maiden name, rather than her married name, for her headstone, thereby dissociating her from Jak's racism, sexism and cruelty. It is also significant that Milla died on the Day of the Covenant, the sacred day on which she had claimed Agaat – but by 1996 having been renamed more inclusively the Day of Reconciliation. Van Niekerk has chosen for the day of Milla's ending the day of Agaat's second birth, thus connecting their destinies in a circular pattern, but with a shift of emphasis from promise to fulfilment. The last line of the epitaph refers to the Genesis account of the creation. However, the capitalisation of "Good" in the final line of the epitaph leads the reader to infer that Milla's death has made her Good, has given her Agaat's claim to divinity. Milla's association with Agaat, despite its evils, has proved a blessing to both of them. This is far from an apologia for apartheid, racism or colonialism; however, van Niekerk is showing that some degree of grace can be attained after the cycle of transgression, confession, penitence and absolution has been completed – particularly in the cathartic presence of transcendental and selfless love and its concomitant, good works.

Although Agaat functions in the novel as a Ruth-figure and as a saviour-figure, she is no saint: her treatment of the farm tenants is likely to be tyrannical, as she has learned her lessons well from her own oppressors. The fourth significant aspect of the epilogue is Agaat's personal creation myth, as whispered in secret to the child Jakkie, and recounted by him in the present of the end of the text. As Agaat is the exemplary other in the novel, she is both memorably present and a significant absence in terms of her own voice, desires and beliefs, which have to be inferred as they are filtered through the consciousness of others. Agaat's story shows just how much she had to sacrifice, and how she suffered, emphasising the depth of her devotion and love for Milla.

In the novel *Agaat*, two women in the contact zone of the colonial encounter explore the possibilities for connection. As in the biblical story of Ruth, an outsider is the boundary marker of the limits for inclusion in social, religious and national terms. The reader enters intimately into five decades of South Africa's history through this female history, which ends in the democratic present. If we as readers enter into imaginative dialogue with the text, what does this suggest in religious or spiritual terms? The key issue, I would suggest, is expressed by Trinh Minh-ha like this: "[T]he understanding of difference is a shared responsibility, which requires a minimum of willingness to reach out into the unknown" (1989: 85). In this spirit, those who are secularists are invited by the text to perceive the shortcomings and value of religion, while those within organised religion are invited to consider where they collectively or individually have lacked charity and imagination, been hypocritical, or have fallen short of their highest ideals of love. The cycle of acknowledgement of transgression, confession, penitence and absolution is a model within the novel. Systems

of othering, such as gender, race and class, as they are embedded in religions need to be re-examined. The character Agaat is an archive of the past, but also a symbol of hope, and her form of inclusive, ecologically aware religion, which is non-binarist, practical, and imbued with an ethic of good works, is posited as a progressive way into the future.

## 4 The Bi/Christ

The most radical implications of the novel are, I would argue, in terms of gender and sexuality. Selfless, humble love is seen as a supreme good within the text, but it is not embodied in a conventional romantic relationship. Marriage relations in the novel are portrayed in terms of oppression, violence, manipulation and toxic malaise. Through the comparatively generous relationship between Milla and Agaat, the novel thus opens up a consideration of the place within religion for love which does not conform to social idealisations of romantic love or ties of blood. The feminisation of the word of God through the character Agaat invites a feminist reconceptualisation of the gender attributes of the deity. Further, the physical closeness of Milla and Agaat, seen most poignantly when Agaat embraces Milla's feet, accords in various ways with Adrienne Rich's vision of what she terms the lesbian continuum (although I am not suggesting at all that this is a sexual relationship). In her analysis of examples of the lesbian continuum Rich refers to the possibilities of woman-identified experience including "the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support" (1980: 649); she also refers to the sharing of joy and of work, and amongst various imaginary cases she refers to that of an elderly dying woman being nursed by women, as well as instances of bequeathing property to female companions. In addition to these consonances I am mindful of the possibility of a lesbian reading of the Book of Ruth, such as that by Rebecca Alpert (1994). Bearing in mind all of these echoes within the novel, it may be suggested that the radical representation of the godhead within the novel can fruitfully although provocatively be considered through the lens of Marcella Althaus-Reid's Bi/Christ (2001), an image which serves to

> disrupt the mono-relationship, challenge dualistic submission, and subvert the "normative vision" of heterosexual difference. Instead of a Mono/Christ, the Bi/Christ has the potential to challenge religious groups, including the Basic Christian Communities, to organize themselves based not on homophobic theology and compulsory heterosexist relationships, and to bring about social transformation based on more egalitarian principles.
>
> (Kwok 2005: 181-182)

*Agaat* contains specific references which render this theoretical lens particularly apposite. The shroud which Agaat embroiders from youth to the present of the text as evidence of her "mastery" reminds the reader of the most famous shroud of all, the shroud of Turin. Agaat's work of art is combinational rather than hierarchical or oppositional, encompassing scenes of sea and land, "fire, … flood, … and feast" (van Niekerk 2006: 584), as well as religious and material imagery, or "Genesis and Grootmoedersdrift in one" (p. 677). After completing this work of art Agaat acts as a "herald" (p. 584) or "scout" (p. 585) for Milla's soul journey to death, as she dons the shroud and enters the grave which has been prepared. This entry into and rising from the grave is recounted speculatively by Milla, who imaginatively shares Agaat's experience. The boundaries between the characters' psyches is blurred in Milla's prescient dream which includes the entry into black loam, a vision of the cosmos, a sense of wings folded, and a song about the cyclical repetitions of the natural world, mother-child intimacy and beauty. The mystery of death unlocks a spirit of generosity and reconciliation between Agaat and Milla, who also resonate as modern South African counterparts of Ruth and Naomi, and have spiritual associations of the Bi/Christ who disrupts heteropatriarchal hierarchies and certainties.

## 5 Conclusion

In *Agaat*, Marlene van Niekerk challenges each of us to find a hard-won sense of good in religion and society, pushing aside the blinkers of our own age and creatively engaging with the plight of the other, the metaphorically homeless, the abused and reviled. Through allusion, especially biblical allusion, as well as through multiple reference, suggestive imagery and combinational pairings, van Niekerk offers a spiritually luminous and compelling narrative which speaks to readers across the spectrum of the Dawkins debate.

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