

“*chew me until i bind*”: Sacrifice and Cultural Renewal in Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat*

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Summary

In *Agaat* (2006), Marlene van Niekerk presents the future of Afrikaner culture in a new matrilineal and racially hybrid genealogy. This matrilineal genealogy occurs through the self-sacrifice of the white matriarch, Milla de Wet. Van Niekerk disrupts and subverts dominant patriarchal, patrilineal and racial epistemes upon which the *plaasroman* is based by leaving the farm, not to Milla’s son and putative male heir, but to the coloured housekeeper, Agaat. The allusive prose passage that is the focus of this article is written in the style of a prayer or lament with its mournful meditation on the onset of disease and decay in the soil and farming stock that Milla regrets not having saved from abuse and denigration. The lament becomes an appeal for a beneficent successor to care for and “breathe” life back into the soil. In this article we shall explore how Milla is presented as an Earth Mother, through the invocation of the Demeter-Persephone myth, supplicating for rebirth and renewal. Here the Earth Mother figure is described as sick and fallow, and yet awaiting a catalyst for regeneration. In this passage Milla presents herself as a *pharmakos*, ritual sacrifice or scapegoat, whose purpose is “to restore harmony in the community, to reinforce the social fabric” (Girard 2005: 8). Milla’s question and plea, “who will chew me until i bind” (van Niekerk 2006: 35), and the recurring motif of cannibalistic sacrifice in the novel, can be read as a metaphor for the desire for social reconciliation and cohesion in contemporary South Africa.

Opsomming

In *Agaat* (2006), stel Marlene van Niekerk die toekoms van die Afrikanerkultuur in ’n nuwe matriliniëre en ras-hibridiese genealogie voor. Hierdie matriliniëre genealogie ontstaan deur die self-opoffering van die wit matriarg, Milla de Wet. Van Niekerk ontwrig en ondermyn dominante patriargale, patriliëre en rasse-episteme waarop die plaasroman gebaseer is, deur die plaas te bemaak, nie aan Milla se seun en veronderstelde manlike erfgenaam nie, maar aan die kleurling huishoudster, Agaat. Die prosa-uitreksel waarna verwys word en die fokus van hierdie artikel is geskryf in ’n gebedstyl of klaaglied met sy treurende bepeinsing oor die aanvang van siekte en verval van die grond en vee wat Milla berou sy nie gered het van misbruik en vernedering nie. Die klaaglied word ’n pleidooi vir ’n weldadige opvolger om te sorg vir en lewe in die grond in terug te blaas. In dié artikel sal ons ondersoek hoe Milla voorgestel word as ’n Aardmoeder, deur die oproep van die Demeter-Persephone-

mite, wat om hergeboorte en hernuwing smee. Die Aardmoeder word hier as siek en braak beskryf, en tog wagtend op 'n katalisator vir wedergeboorte. In dié uittreksel bied Milla haarself aan as 'n farmakos, rituele slagoffer of sondebok, wie se doel dit is “to restore harmony in the community, to reinforce the social fabric” (Girard 2005: 8). Milla se vraag en pleidooi, “who will chew me until i bind” (Van Niekerk 2006: 35), en die herhalende motief van kannibalistiese opoffering in die roman, kan gesien word as 'n metafoor vir die drang na maatskaplike versoening en samehorigheid in die eietydse Suid-Afrika.

In *Agaat* (2006), Marlene van Niekerk presents the future of Afrikaner culture in a new matrilineal and racially hybrid genealogy. This matrilineal genealogy occurs through the self-sacrifice of the white matriarch, Milla de Wet, or rather, Milla Redelinghuys, Redelinghuys being her maiden name inscribed on her tombstone. Van Niekerk disrupts and subverts dominant patriarchal, patrilineal and racial epistemes upon which the *plaasroman*¹ is based by leaving the farm, not to her son and putative male heir, but to the coloured housekeeper, Agaat.² The allusive prose passage that is the focus of this article is written in the style of a prayer or lament with its mournful meditation on the onset of disease and decay of the soil and farming stock that Milla regrets not having saved from abuse and denigration, as she herself failed in fending off her abusive husband and manipulative mother. The lament becomes an appeal for a beneficent successor to care for and “breathe” life back into the soil. In this article we shall explore how Milla is presented as an Earth Mother, in an invocation of the Demeter-Persephone myth, supplicating for rebirth and renewal. Here the Earth Mother figure is described as “sick” and “fallow”, and yet awaiting a catalyst for regeneration (van Niekerk 2006: 35).³ Employing an eclectic selection of theoretical and other secondary sources to illuminate the text, we shall argue that

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1. According to the conventions of the “normative” South African farm novel, the farm is typically left to a white male heir of biological descent. See Loraine Prinsloo, and Loraine Prinsloo and Andries Visagie, for a comparison of *Agaat* with “normative” farm novels like C.M. van den Heever’s *Laat vrugte* (1939) that anticipates *Agaat* in terms of its strong (albeit marginal) matriarch, Ouma Willa, and its concern with the relationship between landownership and identity (Prinsloo 2006, Prinsloo & Visagie 2009).
 2. Although it may be argued that Jakkie is the agent by which Agaat receives the farm, it is our view that the mechanism of transfer of ownership is not of primary importance in Milla’s narrative. Rather, we are guided by the recurring motif of self-sacrifice and the predominant feeling-tone evident in her narration that highlights her desire to offer propitiation for the harm done to Agaat.
 3. Subsequent references to *Agaat* (van Niekerk 2006) are indicated by *Agaat* followed by the page number(s).

Milla presents herself as a *pharmakos*, ritual sacrifice or scapegoat, whose purpose is “to restore harmony in the community, to reinforce the social fabric” (Girard 2005: 8). Milla’s question and plea, “*who will chew me until i bind*” (*Agaat* 35), and the recurring motif in the novel of cannibalistic sacrifice, can be read as a metaphor for the desire for social reconciliation and cohesion in contemporary South Africa. Consequently, the death of the white matriarch serves symbolically to reunite the divisiveness caused by the structural violence of apartheid and to allow the renewal and regeneration of the land, Afrikaans culture and, arguably, the South African nation.

The extract that serves as the focus of this article is from the first stream-of-consciousness passage in the novel. The stream-of-consciousness passages form one of four alternating narrative strands in the novel; the other three include Milla’s first-person narration in the present of the text (set in the year of her death, 1996), her memories of past events written in the second person, and her diary entries from the 1950s and ’60s. Significantly, this passage is set in 1996, the year of Milla’s death and the inception of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings which permitted the exposure of the pathological nature of apartheid society. Accordingly, Tim Woods notes that in South Africa, in literature and in the public sphere, “social transformation has been constantly cast in the metaphor of healing a national trauma” (2007: 200). The poet Ingrid de Kok has also referred to the TRC hearings as a “work of mourning” that requires “healers” to “mediate between the discourses of the past self and the present self” (1998: 60-61).

In this first stream-of-consciousness passage Milla’s sick body is directly associated with the illness and affliction of the land and its creatures. The passage begins with the question, “*how does a sickness begin?*” (*Agaat* 35), and follows with a list of various animal and plant pathologies. The first sickness listed is botulism, a rare paralytic, bacterial disease that afflicts the animals on Milla’s farm. The bacterium *Clostridium botulinum* grows ideally in soil that is bereft of oxygen and rich in phosphorus. Jak, who accidentally shot some of Milla’s cows while using tin cans for target practice in the pasture, is blamed for triggering the illness as the decomposing carcasses provide the phosphorus necessary for the production of the botulism toxin. Botulism tends to occur in phosphorus-deficient animals that, in order to satisfy their craving for phosphorus, “eat bones or soil which contain [sic] the botulism bacteria and toxin” (Kirk & Adaska 1998). *Agaat* leads Milla out to where the cattle are grazing, where Milla discovers this shocking cannibalistic scene:

There against the brambles the pregnant cows were standing and eating white ribs, the carcass of a cow that had been lying there for a long time. The white shards were sticking out of their mouths as they were chewing. You gazed at the drooling and the crunching, too shocked to put one foot in front of the other. To one side the cows’ off-colour calves were standing

neglected, watching Blommetjie had already burst open. You could see the dead foetus of her calf. Blommetjie, a great-granddaughter of Grootblom, another of the Grootblom clan from your mother's old herd.

(*Agaat* 230-231)

The horror Milla experiences not only reveals her shock at the loss of the animals she has known since childhood, her maternal birthright, but also marks a confrontation with the “utmost of abjection”, that which erodes the boundaries between ingested and expelled, inside and outside, dead and alive (Kristeva 1982: 4): pregnant cows, erupted carcasses, drool, skeletons, a dead foetus. Notably, the abject is distinctly associated with the feminine and maternal body. A mother herself, Milla experiences “shock”, revealing her uncanny identification with her infected and dying herd. With one “hand on the flank” and another “on the little crown between the ears” Milla weeps for the “meek caramel-coloured mothers” (*Agaat* 234). Milla describes Jak's use of his Simmentals as dairy cows, helping them calve and then having them slaughtered, as “treason” (*Agaat* 252). The cow is Milla's totemic animal, a symbol of the feminine and maternal. When Milla, in labour and unable to make it to the hospital in time, instructs Agaat on how to assist with the birth she says, “[J]ust do everything you'd do with a cow” (*Agaat* 180). Agaat, encouraging and crooning, uses the same words passed on by Milla's father to her: “[L]ittle buttermilk stand ready ... mother macréé little mótherców” (*Agaat* 181). Rosi Braidotti points out that “most abject beings, animals and states are also sacred, because they mark essential boundaries” (1994: 128). The mother as “life-giver” is at the “interface between life and death” and is thus a primary figure of abjection and also the sacred (p. 128).

The botulism that ravages Milla's herd of Jerseys, and later in the novel the tulip poisoning that almost destroys Jak's new herd of Simmentals (*Agaat* 252), are reminiscent of the Old Testament plagues visited upon the wicked as divine punishment. Milla's grief-stricken cry that a “weeping and wailing it was in those days on Grootmoedersdrift” echoes the words from the prophet Jeremiah: “A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more” (Jeremiah 31: 15). As Rachel mourns her children, so Milla mourns the loss of her cattle as if they were kin.

According to René Girard in *Violence and the Sacred*, in archaic societies human violence was controlled by limiting its effects to ritual sacrifice, while in modern societies there is no differentiation between sacred violence and wanton violence (Girard 2005: 199). Violence in modern Western society, Girard warns, is “limitless” (p. 253). Without distinctions violence becomes “contagious” and “spreads throughout the community” (p. 51). Girard proposes that, unlike incest and patricide motifs, where it appears that violence is limited to a single individual, such as the case of Oedipus, the motif of the plague “illuminates ... the collective character of the

disaster, its universally contagious nature” (p. 81).⁴ The death of Milla’s cattle can be seen as a metonym for social malaise and reciprocal violence endemic to apartheid South African society. The botulism epidemic is set in 1960, a year that can be described as a nadir in South African history, in terms of resistance to the racial segregation and discriminatory policies which had been consolidated during the 1950s under the apartheid government. The diary entry prior to the discovery of the cattle disease is 16 October 1960. Historically this is shortly after white South Africans voted in a referendum to sever ties with the Commonwealth and become a republic, thus further terminating hope of international intervention in the government’s segregationist policy. The year 1960 was particularly fateful for the “non-white” population, beginning with the anti-pass campaign that resulted in the Sharpeville Massacre on 21 March and followed by the banning of the African National Congress in April.

The whole cattle disaster is staged as a lamentation couched in terms of religious and national symbolic significance. The scourge on Milla’s herd presents an occasion for a more profound collective mourning on the part of those whose freedom has been denied by the restrictive pass laws and who have in effect been rendered vassals to the ruling white minority. Agaat directs a team of convicts hired to assist in clearing the field of the cows’ bones. As they work she leads them in a hymn, originally written by Martin Luther, derived from Psalm 130, in which David pleads for his own redemption and that of his people, the Israelites:

Hope, Israel in your sorrow,
trust, o nation that grieves;
his favour light’ns the morrow,
his grace your grief reprieves.
Then shines a sweet salvation:
all Israel is free
of trial and tribulation.
Do like, Lord, unto me!

(*Agaat* 233)

This hymn becomes Agaat’s personal expression of injustice and supplication for “salvation”. Ironically, and in a form of mimetic doubling, in singing this hymn, Agaat and the convicts appropriate the founding myth upon which the Afrikaners based their entitlement to the land: a story of “tribal

4. Girard’s theory relies on an engagement with, and critique of, Sigmund Freud’s theories, including the Oedipus complex and his theory of collective murder in *Totem and Taboo* (1913). He criticises Freud for not seeing that Oedipus is a prime example of the scapegoat – “a repository for all the community’s ills” (2005: 81) – and thus also evidence of collective violence. The collective nature of violence merely appears more overtly evident in a plague.

salvation” in which the wandering Afrikaner clans, like the Israelites, find their Promised Land (Coetzee 1988: 50). The hymn uncannily returns to haunt Milla, but now with a difference, as in Agaat’s “mouth it was a battle hymn ... and it was directed at you and you felt how she was piling up a case against you. It was a case for which she could locate her injustice in the very hymns of your own church, in the very mouths of the prophets of the Old Testament” (*Agaat* 233). Agaat, in her mimetic replication of Milla’s culture, language and religion, thus introduces an element of strangeness and difference in her re-signification and appropriation of the hymns of the *volk*.

For Freud the uncanny (*Das Unheimliche*) possesses “the double semantic capacity to mean its opposite, signifying at once the homely, familiar, friendly, comfortable, intimate and the unfamiliar, uncomfortable, alien and unknown” (Chisholm 1992: 436). Freud sees figures or expressions of uncanniness as related to the phenomenon of the “double”. Agaat has become Milla’s double, “originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an ‘energetic denial of the power of death’” (Freud 1957: 235). However, the double threatens to efface the subject and thus “from having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death” (1957: 235). “Death is her objective [and] [s]he has prepared it excellently” (p. 17), Milla states matter-of-factly of Agaat’s preparations for her demise.

While Agaat may be the harbinger of death she also serves a positive function in “observing and criticizing the self” (Freud 1957: 235). The postcolonial theorist, Homi K. Bhabha, following Freud, thus posits that the uncanny creates a space for re-evaluating the authority of the coloniser and his/her cultural superiority. Bhabha draws attention to the uncanny ambivalence of culture:

Culture is *heimlich*, with its disciplinary generalizations, its mimetic narratives, its homologous empty time, its seriality, its progress, its customs and coherence. But cultural authority is also *unheimlich*, for to be distinctive, signifiatory, influential and identifiable, it has to be translated, disseminated, differentiated, interdisciplinary, intertextual, international, inter-racial. (Bhabha 1994: 136-137)

While culture is “homely” and comforting in its repetition of the same, and in the shared meaning it is given by those who belong to it, it is also “unhomely” because its significance is open to the interpretation of those others to whom it does not belong. Thus Agaat, in her mimetic replication of Milla’s culture, language and religion, may introduce an element of strangeness and difference in her re-signification and appropriation of the hymns of the *volk*. Bhabha argues that the mimicry upon which colonial assimilation is based is inherently ambivalent, as in order to maintain its racial hegemony the colonised’s resemblance to the coloniser can never be exact: “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say

that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (Bhabha 1994: 86). Agaat’s songs and her deviation from Milla’s monotheistic Calvinism suggest that Agaat does present some potential for change;⁵ however, the extent of her difference becomes a subject of debate in the frame narrative where the narrator, Jakkie, refers to her as the “Apartheid Cyborg. Assembled from loose components plus audiotape” (*Agaat* 677).⁶

The botulism epidemic serves as a warning: a culture that is too homogenous and that does not allow for difference only feeds off itself and dies. The cannibalism of Milla’s pedigreed Jersey cows may imply a form of cultural entropy. Melissa Steyn notes that Afrikaners face “a profound existential crisis” in the “new” South Africa where they fear their language, religion and identity will be “annihilated, swamped or eroded” (2004: 158). Milla’s reflection after watching her cannibalistic cows, that “death itself [has] nutritional value” (*Agaat* 233), anticipates her own offering of her body as fallow land – an alternative to entropy and annihilation. Milla glosses the term “fallow” as a “state of pseudo-death [in which] you restore your substance” (*Agaat* 133), and thus her death does not signify a final consummation or end, but rather a cyclical renewal.

J.M. Coetzee, reading Emile Zola, notes that “society itself is an organism” and that in literature “the degeneracy of individuals is in fact a symptom of the sickness of the social body” (1988: 142). Milla sees sickness as insidious and contagious, a defilement that infects all living organ-

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5. Cheryl Stobie explores the representations of religion and spirituality in the text in her article entitled “Ruth in Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat*” (2009). Stobie explores the parallels between van Niekerk’s novel and the Book of Ruth, noting the subversive potential of Agaat’s pantheistic religion. She also relates the “radical representation of the godhead within the novel” to Marcella Althaus-Reid’s *Bi/Christ*, which challenges heteropatriarchy (2009: 68).
 6. Although mimesis always provides a space for difference and Agaat’s mimicry of Milla may reveal a disruption of the hegemony of colonial discourse, we would contend that Jakkie’s observations challenge the extent of Agaat’s difference, or that she provides a productive alternative to her tyrannical mistress/mother. Agaat may share some common features with Donna Haraway’s “utopian dream” (1991: 181) of the cyborg: a hybrid creature “simultaneously animal and machine, who populate[s] worlds ambiguously natural and crafted” (p. 149). Agaat’s loosely assembled parts suggest that like the cyborg she can be “disassembled and reassembled” (p. 163), allowing space for reinvention. However, the fact that she is accompanied by an “audiotape”, and is thus simply replaying Milla’s discourse, suggests she is not as transgressive as Haraway’s cyborg who possesses “a powerful infidel heteroglossia” (p. 181).

isms from microscopic bacteria in the soil to insects, plants and animals: “How does a sickness begin? botulism from eating skeletons but where do the skeletons come from? Loco-disease nenta preacher-tick-affliction smut-ball bunt black-rust glume-blotch grubs beetles snails moths army caterpillars ... soil sickens slowly in hidden depths” (*Agaat* 35). The origin is ubiquitous. The defiling agent, Paul Ricoeur finds, “harms by invisible properties, and that nevertheless works in the manner of force in the field of our undivided psychic and corporeal existence”; it is “quasi-physical” and “quasi-moral” (1967: 148-149). Thus, as the entire community is degenerate and “polluted”, it requires a scapegoat, which becomes society’s violence and dissention incarnate (Girard 2005: 291). Girard proposes that the sacrifice of the scapegoat “serves to protect the entire community from *its own* violence” (p. 8); “the victim is considered a polluted object, whose living presence contaminates everything that comes in contact with it and whose death purges the community of its ills” (p. 100). Thus the *pharmakos* (sacrifice) is a *pharmakon* (sickness and cure), “a volatile elixir, whose administration had best be left by ordinary men in the hands of those who enjoy special knowledge and exceptional powers – priests, magicians, shamans, doctors, and so on” (p. 100).

The administration of the *pharmakon* is left to Agaat. She is depicted as a kind of sorceress with an intuitive relationship with nature. Milla describes her as “witched” and her voice as “incantatory” (*Agaat* 154, 683). Not unlike the Greek Fates who are depicted weaving and holding the figurative thread of life, Agaat is shown from the inception of the narrative to possess exceptional skill at embroidery. Milla describes her as her “deathbed accompanist” and “embroiderer of deathbed stories” (*Agaat* 395). The shroud Agaat embroiders for Milla merges biblical scenes with images from nature, particularly fauna and flora found on Milla’s farm. The shroud reflects the centrality of agrarian life in Agaat’s mythology. Her *Hulpboek vir Boere in Suid-Afrika* (*Handbook for Farmers in South Africa*), a gift from Milla, is treated as a sacred text. In a final intimate church service around Milla’s bed, attended by the farm labourers and their families, Agaat chooses to read a section from the handbook entitled “Soil”, which deals with the effects of erosion, instead of reading from scripture (*Agaat* 651). As Cheryl Stobie notes, Agaat “practises a kind of nature mysticism allied to the elements, particularly fire, but also associated with animal sacrifice and butterflies, symbolising metamorphosis” (2009: 65). She is able to summon up the elusive Emperor Butterfly, which is central in connecting Milla, Jakkie and Agaat. The butterfly is also the symbol of Psyche, the Greek goddess of the soul, who represents spiritual reincarnation. Psyche was incarnate as a butterfly, as early Greeks believed that human souls would occupy flying insects when they passed from one life to the next (Seigneuret 1988: 199).

In this passage Milla imagines an answer to the question posed to Agaat by pointing to words on a chart: “Guilty. I am. I shall be. But. How am I to.

Die. Question mark” (*Agaat* 438). Later in self-reflection she laments, “*oh my soul in me there is not room for you to mortify yourself*” (*Agaat* 622). Her quest for mortification has dual significance as an act of contrition and atonement for the sin of forsaking *Agaat*, and as a literal desire to decay and return to organic matter. The “*long-suffering*” soil contaminated by bacteria, fungi and a range of bugs is an objective correlative of the abject female body. Although Milla’s harsh treatment of *Agaat* cannot be denied, Milla, repeating the Golden Rule (“*i have done as was done unto me*”) realises that she has replicated the ills done unto her by her mother, the “*disillusioned despot*” (p. 35).

Van Niekerk’s experimentation with the *plaasroman* deviates from typical personifications of the earth. According to Coetzee, “if the pastoral writer mythologises the earth as a mother, it is more often than not as a harsh, dry mother, without curves or hollows, infertile, unwilling to ask her children back even when they ask to be buried in her, or as a mother cowed by the blows of the cruel sun-father” (1988: 9). Although Milla suffered under the abuse of her husband and did not “*strike back*” (*Agaat* 35), she does, even if only in phantasy, offer the greatest sacrifice for reconciliation: herself, and by extension the Afrikaner (agri)culture she comes to represent. Consolidating and summoning her forces together she awaits an alchemical or divine transformation:

*i clamp myself gather my waters my water-retaining clods my loam my shale
i am fallow field but not decided by me who will gently plough me on
contour plough in my stubbles and my devil’s-thorn fertilise me with green-
manure and with straw to stiffen the wilt that this wilderness has brought on
this bosom and brain? who blow into my nostrils with breath of dark humus?*
(*Agaat* 35)

Milla’s body becomes the menopausal Earth Mother whose womb of “*water-retaining clods*” and “*loam*” may, if nurtured with tender (ostensibly feminine) care, be revitalised and still offer a “*belated harvest*” (*Agaat* 35). Milla presents her body as an offering, in order that she might yet contribute to some communal enrichment. She asks: “*who sow in me the strains of wheat named for daybreak or for hope? ... who will harvest who shear who share my fell my fleece my sheaf my small white pips?*” (*Agaat* 35). The wheat and pips (or seeds) are symbols of the mother and daughter goddesses of agriculture and death: Demeter and Persephone (Hard 2004: 128-129). Unlike in Judeo-Christian myths where the earth is paired with a male “fecundator”, here both earth and fecundator are feminine. In “The Forgotten Mystery of Female Ancestry” Luce Irigaray sees the mythological couple of Demeter and Kōrē/Persephone as paradigmatic of the mother-daughter bond, which formed a “natural and social model” in which the couple was the “guardian of the fertility of nature ... and of the relationship with the divine” (Irigaray 1994: 12). In this myth, used commonly to

explain the changing seasons, Hades rises from the underworld, steals Persephone to be his bride, leaving Demeter in grief and resulting in the barrenness of earth. The subsequent reunion of the mother and daughter signals spring and a restitution of harmony and plenitude on the earth. In her reading of this myth, Irigaray sees Hades as representative of the destructive forces of patriarchal power in which the mother-daughter bond is sacrificed and subverted to satisfy male desire. In this patriarchal economy women are objects of commerce between men and must substitute their identification with each other for a desire directed towards men: their fathers, husbands and sons. In van Niekerk's novel, Milla submits to the patriarchal law and ousts Agaat, her first child, in her joy at finally producing a child of her own and a male heir. In the phallogocentric order, a woman's identity is dependent on her relationship to a man. As a "sex which is not one", women and their relationships with each other remain unsymbolised – they exist in a state of *dereliction* outside the symbolic order (in Whitford 1991: 77). Abandoned and without hope, women exist in "interminable rivalry" as they can only occupy the position of mother by substitution (p. 78).

However, Irigaray encourages the reimagining of a new female social contract that allows for contiguity rather than substitution. She also calls for an attempt to symbolise the mother-daughter bond and for women to have "a religion, a language, and ... a currency of their own" (Irigaray 1993: 76). She suggests that if "a woman were to celebrate the Eucharist with her mother, giving her a share of the fruits of the earth blessed by them both, she might be freed from all hatred or ingratitude toward her maternal genealogy" (p. 21). In a state of humble contrition, Milla imaginatively presents herself as the offering, a fallow ground awaiting rejuvenation. Her question, "*who [will] sow in me the strains of wheat named for daybreak or for hope?*" (*Agaat* 35), implies Agaat as the agriculturalist who shares her love of, and devotion to, the land. However, Milla does not simply wish to bequeath the land, but hopes that she may be *incorporated* into something new.

In the final stream-of-consciousness passage, which relates Milla's death and passage to the afterlife, this possibility of being with rather than replacing the mother is presented. Milla's sacrifice is not an act of self-annihilation, but is rather a phantasy of transubstantiation and mending of the broken mother-daughter bond. The constant refrain of "*who*" in the first passage is echoed and finally answered:

who breathes beneath me as if I'm lying on a living bedstead my pulse ignited with another pulse my breath to the rhythm of another my insight capsulated in sturdy scaffolds my sentences erected on other sentences like walls built on a rock? Who?

where are you agaat?

here I am

(*Agaat* 673)

Agaat's imagined response continues with a repetition of Ruth's words of allegiance to her mother-in-law Naomi: "*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*" (*Agaat* 673).⁷ Milla's Eucharistic supplication, "*who will chew me until i bind*", is not answered directly, but is implied. It is through her coloured daughter and mimetic double that Milla's transubstantiation occurs.

In *Agaat*, van Niekerk exchanges the patriarchal Judeo-Christian religious discourse at the core of Afrikanerdom for an alternative belief system that is based on a pre-Christian, ecologically-aware and feminine theosophy.⁸ The first and last stream-of-consciousness passages suggest a participatory social contract of women-amongst-women (to borrow Irigaray's phrasing), and continual spiritual evolution that reimagines an Afrikaner identity that is not based on the exclusionary politics of apartheid ideology or on masculine linear time. Van Niekerk's novel resonates with what Melissa Steyn notes as a general disenchantment with the Afrikaner world view of apartheid in the public sphere, in particular "its faith in patriarchal religious foundationalism", resulting in a need for the "rehabilitation" and reinvention of Afrikaner identity and the mythologies upon which it is based (Steyn 2004: 150).

The unconscious phantasy presented in Milla's stream-of-consciousness passages is utopian in its wish fulfilment of Milla's desire to make reparation and be reconciled with the daughter she has cast out. These passages also present Milla as the victim, in their record of her suffering as the result of her physical degeneration as well as her psychological anxiety and guilt over the wrongs she has committed against Agaat. While the reader might feel pity for Milla, it should not be forgotten that she is also Agaat's oppressor and can only be redeemed through admission of her contrition. In the present of the text Milla reveals her remorse and bad conscience:

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!

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7. Stobie (2009) explores this exchange between Milla and Agaat in terms of its allusion to the biblical story of Ruth and Naomi.
 8. Van Niekerk also draws on a wide range of myths and belief systems, including Egyptian eschatology, Norse myth and shamanism.

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?

(*Agaat* 540; our italics)

Due to her paralysis, Milla cannot utter these words to Agaat. Stobie refers to this as a “mental confession” and a “sign of her heartfelt penitence” (2009: 65). She substantiates this view by summarising J.M. Coetzee’s argument in “Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky” (1992), 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” (p. 64). However, this “mental” acknowledgement of Agaat’s suffering is insufficient. Furthermore, it is necessary to critically assess Milla’s partial and essentialised view of Agaat, especially since Agaat’s suffering remains eclipsed by Milla’s narration. Indeed, Agaat’s grief remains largely unsymbolised as she is given no narrative voice until the Epilogue where, in her fairy-tale cosmogony, she states that “[n]obody noticed anything of Good’s mourning because she cried without tears” (*Agaat* 689). Irigaray states that it is “necessary for a symbolisation to be created among women in order for there to be love between them Without that interval of *exchange*, or of words, or of gestures, passions between women manifest themselves in a ... rather cruel way” (Irigaray in Whitford 1991: 81). For there to be true contrition, Milla must admit the extent of her abjection of Agaat.

Before the last supper prepared for Milla by Agaat Milla remembers how she othered Agaat, through dehumanising her most basic human function: the need to eat. Once relegated to servant status Agaat is made to eat separately and her gastronomic proclivities become cloaked in tantalising mystery and terror. As a child Jakkie invents a riddle (an adaptation of Little Red Riding Hood’s interrogation of the wolf) in which he imagines she drinks snake venom and eats “steamed frog [and] baked lizard”, amongst other things. Milla, spying on Agaat, notes that she sits at a meal as if she were eating “boiled human flesh” and drinking blood (*Agaat* 582). Now, in the present of the text, Milla’s silent entreaty, “eat me a psalm” (*Agaat* 583), is an implicit acknowledgement of how the most ordinary act (eating), which attests to Agaat’s humanity, has become othered and monstrous. This base act is now seen as good, even spiritual – a blessing. For the first time, since Milla ousted Agaat to the outside house, Agaat eats before and with Milla.

Through this shared meal Milla makes a more overt communication and gesture of contrition. As Milla watches Agaat eat she identifies that this

shared meal is hallowed: “My mouth cannot speak, now epicurean” (*Agaat* 584). In Milla’s mind this is a final communion between mother and daughter where she imagines herself as a “baked bat”, whose spindly wings are the Eucharistic “body” and “blood” that get stuck “between [Agaat’s] teeth” (*Agaat* 584). Her bat wings are a substitute for more vital organs such as the heart or liver, organs that are used in making “humble pie” and which are usually associated with the soul. Yet they are an appropriate reflection of the depleted and impoverished state of Milla’s ego and highlight the state of her abjection before Agaat. Wings are also associated with flight and transcendence. Agaat is equally fascinated with bats as she is with butterflies. Unlike Milla, whose moral universe is based on Christian dualism, Agaat does not associate the spectral bat with ugliness and evil, and butterfly with light, beauty and good. Indeed, the Emperor Butterfly is symbolically ambivalent in its association with day and night, and fire as destruction but also revelation. Both the bat and the butterfly are intermediary and ambiguous creatures, one a flying worm and the other a flying mouse. Both are also symbols of the soul (Gordon 1993: 52). Milla’s final identification with the bat, which she rejected in Agaat’s childhood drawing of her with “spindly black wings” like Lucifer’s (*Agaat* 623), enables her transcendence. It is through her abjection that she is redeemed by Agaat, her saviour and guide to the metaphorical Elysian Fields of her “*Overberg*”.

The final stream-of-consciousness passage and the symbolic last supper shared by Milla and Agaat answer the call for reconciliation and restoration in the plea, “*who will chew me til I bind*” (*Agaat* 35). It may be argued that the mother-daughter narrative, recounted by Milla, provides a dangerously seductive closure and synthesis to a dialectical relationship between self and other that is felt in the novel as a whole to be far more fraught and equivocal. However, the final image of mother and daughter hand in hand evokes such deep pathos as to override any feelings of scepticism (if only temporarily)⁹ and offers the utopian ending that is so deeply desired by the reader who sees this reconciliation as an allegory for reconciliation between the races and the yearned-for ideological fantasies of social harmony inherent in the notions of the Rainbow Nation and the African Renaissance.

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9. Although there is not scope to elaborate on this here, Jakkie’s detached ironic voice in the frame narrative may be viewed as a caveat to the liberatory potential of Milla’s fantasy of reconciliation.

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