

“Theatre as a Memory Machine”: *Magrita Prinslo* (1896) and *Donkerland* (1996)

Marisa Keuris

Theatre, as a simulacrum of the cultural and historical process itself, seeking to depict the full range of human actions within their physical context, has always provided society with the most tangible records of its attempts to understand its own operations. It is the repository of cultural memory, but, like the memory of each individual, it is also subject to continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts.

(Carlson 2004: 2)

Introduction

In Jill Fletcher’s well-known book on the history of South African theatre, entitled *The Story of South African Theatre: 1780-1930* (1994), she gives a fascinating overview of the establishment of a theatre tradition in South Africa during the 18th and 19th centuries. The influence of certain historical events and the impact of various political regimes at the Cape of Good Hope during this period all left traces on the development of such a tradition. The colonisation of the Cape of Good Hope first by Dutch settlers (1652-1806) and then the more prolonged colonisation of the Cape and South Africa by the British (from 1806 till 1961) led to the development of two mainstream European theatre traditions in South Africa: one that was mainly influenced by the British theatre tradition, and one that was clearly to a greater extent influenced by the European (Dutch, German, French) tradition. Afrikaans drama and theatre developed from the latter tradition.

I want to highlight in this article the importance of only two plays in this tradition, namely S.J. du Toit’s *Magrita Prinslo* (1896) and Deon Opperman’s *Donkerland* (1996). Whilst du Toit’s play is scarcely known or remembered by contemporary Afrikaans audiences and is relegated to the annals of South African/Afrikaans theatre history, Opperman’s play is well known, has received the most prestigious Afrikaans (literary) award

(namely the Hertzog Prize) and is today widely studied by students, scholars and researchers.

The discussion will be placed within the broader context of a contemporary interest in drama and theatre studies, namely a focus on the relationship between theatre and memory. This interest is evident in a number of recent studies (notably Marvin Carlson's *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*). A comparative reading of these two Afrikaans plays, namely *Magrita Prinslo* (1896) and *Donkerland* (1996), will focus on the theme of Afrikaner nationalism as a common theme linking these two historical plays. The main concepts and ideas associated with this theme as highlighted in this discussion are: the (re)interpretation of certain events within Afrikaner history and the relationship with the indigenous people of this land; the Afrikaans language; and the *volksmoeder* theme.

1 Two Afrikaans Plays: *Magrita Prinslo* (1896) and *Donkerland* (1996)

1.2 *Magrita Prinslo* by S.J. du Toit (1896)

The significance of du Toit's play lies mainly in the fact that it is considered by most theatre historians (Bosman, Binge, Fletcher) to be the first published play in Afrikaans¹ in South Africa. *Magrita Prinslo* is on one level just a simple love story, namely the story of Magrita's loyal and unshaken love for Pieter Botha, even after she is wrongly informed by his love rival, Koos Potgieter, that he has died. The historical context in which this romantic love triangle is set, that is, the Great Trek, can, however, be seen as the main focus of this play. The romantic intrigue plays out against the backdrop of important events associated with the Great Trek, namely the infamous Slagtersnek incident (where the British hanged 6 so-called Boer traitors in 1816 in public); Commandant Hendrik Potgieter's Trek to Natal (1838), and Commandant Piet Retief's murder at the hand of the Zulu King, Dingaan (17 February 1838). These historical events are all regarded as important events within Afrikaner history and became the focus of many historical studies of the period. The persons connected with these incidents (especially the various trekker leaders, amongst others Hendrik Potgieter and Piet Retief, became as Giliomee states (1983: xvi) "archetypal figures of Afrikaner history".²

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1. "Magrita Prinslo, written by Dominee S.J. du Toit who had been so active in 'Die Genootskap' was the first Afrikaans play to be printed, and sold out almost immediately" (Fletcher 1994: 110).
 2. In the Introduction to Bosman's reworked version of S.J. du Toit's play, he carefully lists all the changes that he made to du Toit's play, inter alia his

The trekker leaders, as well as the trekkers themselves, were often depicted in later reconstructions of these events by Afrikaner historians as a group of people bound by the religious belief that they were a chosen people and like the Israelites of the Old Testament on their way to the “promised land” (Praeg 1992: 63-64). According to their belief the *volk* would survive all adversity (especially attacks by the various barbaric native tribes) and were destined to bring “civilisation” to the dark hinterland of southern Africa.

1.3 *Donkerland* by Deon Opperman (1996)

Deon Opperman’s *Donkerland* (1996) also commences with the Great Trek, but depicts eventually in this epic play (it is 160 pages long and performance time is approximately 5 hours) more than 158 years of Afrikaner history (from the Great Trek in 1838 to 1996 – two years after the first democratic elections were held in South Africa). As stated in an article which I (2009: 2) wrote on this play, “[v]arious important historical events that took place during this whole period are highlighted in the 10 episodes/scenes that make up this play (for instance, various wars with the Xhosa and Zulu, the Anglo-Boer War, the discovery of gold, the urbanisation of the Afrikaner, the rise of African nationalism, the new democratic dispensation in South Africa and the diaspora of the Afrikaner) Most reviewers and commentators have seen the play as a tour de force – and an ambitious endeavour to comment on six generations of Afrikaner history. It has generally been interpreted as depicting the rise and fall of Afrikaner nationalism (Graver) and of conveying a rather pessimistic outlook for the Afrikaner’s future in the ‘new’ South Africa (Giliomee).”³

decision to add a scene to the first act in order to foreground the reasons for the Great Trek, as well as to give greater prominence to Piet Retief. His changes thus emphasise the historical context of this play, and make the love interest subordinate to this context.

3. Loren Kruger (1999: 127) also commented on this aspect:

Deon Opperman’s *Donkerland* (1996), a revisionist dramatization of the rise and fall of Afrikaner nationalism through the eyes and lives of an Afrikaans family, the De Witts, and their farm, Donkerland (Dark – and, by implication, rich – Land) from 1838 to 1994, stands on the cusp of this transformation. On the one hand, *Donkerland* may be the last Afrikaans play on this epic scale (five hours) to receive state subsidy. On the other, Opperman broke with Afrikaner “sacred history” that had sustained even mildly critical playwrights like W.A. de Klerk and Louw. Produced by PACT at the Afrikaans-language *Kleinkarooftes* and revived at the English-language Grahamstown Festival, the play reminds members of both privileged groups just how linked their pasts and presents have been

Thus: from the short (12 pages) and simple play of S.J. du Toit in 1896 to the epic and complicated play (160 pages) of Opperman a century later (1996). The themes introduced in du Toit's play, as well as the use of certain theatrical techniques echo in Opperman's play 100 years later – but are now given from a completely new perspective.

1.4 Afrikaner Nationalism

The author of *Magrita Prinslo*, S.J. du Toit, played a pivotal role in the language and cultural movements of the first “Afrikaners” in South Africa in the 19th century. He was an important figure within the development of Afrikaner nationalism,⁴ and with his participation in various important endeavours (as one of the founding members of the *Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners* (Fellowship of True Afrikaners), as well as of the *Afrikaner Bond*; editor of *Die Patriot*;⁵ and author of numerous articles and books)

and just how intimate have been the consequences of domination of the majority.

(Kruger 1999: 127)

4. According to Giliomee in an article entitled “The Beginnings of Afrikaner Nationalism 1870 – 1915”, S.J. du Toit played a pivotal role in two of the three reasons/developments that led to the development of Afrikaner nationalism, namely: “firstly, the establishment in Paarl in 1875 of the *Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners* (GRA) by S.J. du Toit, C.P. Hoogenhout and 6 others, and the subsequent publication of a newspaper (*Die Patriot*), a nationalist history, a grammar and some school texts in Afrikaans The first Afrikaans publications are regarded as major manifestations of Afrikaner nationalism” and “In the second place, key importance is attached to the establishment of the first two modern political movements among Afrikaners: the one by *Onze Jan Hofmeyr*, who founded the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Boeren Bescherminings Vereniging* (BBV) in 1878, and the other by S.J. du Toit, who launched the *Afrikaner Bond* in 1880” (1987: 121).
5. In Rob Antonissen's *Die Afrikaanse letterkunde van aanvang tot hede* (1964: 29), he also discusses the importance of du Toit's role in *Die Patriot* (as editor from 1878-1904) and describes why this publication was so important:

Die Patriot is die volledigste beliggaming gewees van die Afrikaanse Beweging in die eerste vyftiental jare. By 'n eenvoudige boerevolk wat die moeilikhede van die Nederlandse skryftaal nie baas kon raak nie, het hy 'n skryflus gewek en dit amper tot skryfdrif aangewakker. Die meeste dig-en prosastukke wat as representatief van dié tyd kan geld, het in sy kolomme verskyn Die Afrikaner het in hóm 'n spreekbuis gevind en deur hóm voeling gekry met die sosiaal-ekonomiese en politieke gebeure in sy land” [*Die Patriot* was the most complete personification of the Afrikaans

contributed a great deal to the establishment of this ideal. Davenport (1966: 28) gives a succinct description of the important role this *Genootskap* played in propagating the idea of Afrikaner nationalism: “[T]he *Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners* (Fellowship of True Afrikaners), which was launched at Paarl on 14 August 1875 by a small group of dedicated men, proclaimed the intention ‘*om te staan ver ons Taal, ons Nasie en ons Land*’ (to stand for our Language, our Nation and our Country). Its members fastened on to the concept of the Afrikaner people as a culturally distinct element within the population of South Africa: a blending of Hollander, German and Huguenot for the most part, knit together by two centuries of common history into a national group fully identified with the South African soil and speaking a common language, Afrikaans” (1966: 28).

S.J. du Toit wrote *Magrita Prinslo* with a specific intention in mind, namely to promote and develop the Afrikaans language – and by implication also Afrikaner nationalism. The use of drama and theatre in the service of nationalist ideals is not only found in the South African context, but according to Carlson (2004: 33), “[t]he appearance of modern nationalism, which swept across Europe in the years immediately following the Napoleonic period, significantly involved the theatre in almost every new nation, and in each a central function of the theatre continued to be what French Revolutionary leaders had sought, a place where the legends and historical events were continually recirculated as a part of the process of developing a new national consciousness The rise of nationalism gave a new prominence to the dramatization of historical material in the nineteenth century”.

As highlighted and discussed at length by various historians (especially by Giliomee in his seminal work *The Afrikaner: A Biography*), certain particular ideas or themes can be found clustered around Afrikaner nationalism. Some of the most important ideas which will be discussed and which are found within both S.J. du Toit’s *Magrita Prinslo* and Deon Opperman’s *Donkerland* are the following: the establishment of an Afrikaner identity

Movement in the first fifteen years. He aroused in the simple Boer nation, who could not master the intricacies of the Dutch written language, a liking for writing that bordered on a passion for writing. Most of the poetic and prose texts which are considered to be representative of this era, were published in his columns The Afrikaner found in him a mouthpiece and received through him a sense of the socio-economic and political events in his country].

Various important Afrikaans texts were first published in *Die Patriot*, e.g. the first “Afrikaner” history book (*Die geskiedenis van ons land, in die taal van ons volk* [The History of Our Country in the Language of Our Nation, 1877]; the first Afrikaans novel written by C.P. Hoogenhout (*Catharina*, 1879), as well as the first anthologies of Afrikaans poetry (1878)].

(e.g. mainly by means of a reinterpretation (often through the highlighting) of historical events deemed important for the Afrikaner; the Afrikaner's relationship with the indigenous people in South Africa; the role played by the *Afrikaans* language; and the development of an idealised *volksmoeder* concept).

In a short play, such as *Magrita Prinsloo*, these ideas/themes are merely introduced, while *Donkerland* has the scope to present these ideas in much more detail and with much more dramatic impact.

1.4.1 Afrikaner Identity as Linked to Certain Historical Events

In the following short discussion I will highlight only two aspects: (1) the historical events mentioned and referred to in both plays, and (2) the depiction of the relationship between the "Afrikaners" and the indigenous people, and also with the English-speaking people of South Africa.

Although it is a very short play, *Magrita Prinsloo*, refers in fact to most of the main incidents in early Afrikaner history (1815-1838). The play commences with a *tableaux vivant* ("tafereel")⁶ which recalls the Slagtersnek incident,⁷ gives a prophetic reference to what is most probably the Battle of

6. Each of the "scenes" in this play commences with a particular "tafereel" (*tableaux vivant*), an interesting theatrical convention which probably is a theatrical residue of the use of this convention in European (especially Dutch and Flemish) theatre where this convention started as early as the 14th century. According to G.W. Brandt (1993: 49), [a] particular characteristic of Dutch theatre which impressed German audiences were the *vertoningen* (i.e. *tableaux vivants*): these occurred at key points in the dramatic presentation when the actors formed themselves into a picturesque grouping and held it for a while, as it [sic] were constituting a painterly composition" and also: "The presentations of *tableaux vivants* now grew into one of the most typical traditions in the theatre history of the Netherlands, both South and North From quite early on, the *tableaux vivants* were a specialty of the Rhetoricians' Chambers, and the practice continued in the time of professionalism" (p. 365). Du Toit's use of this convention (there are 13 "tafereel" in this short play) can thus be seen as a continuation of a very old tradition, as well as a demonstration of how early Afrikaans drama is linked to the European (in this case, Dutch) theatre tradition.

7. In S.J. du Toit's book *Die geskiedenis van ons land, in die taal van ons volk*, which had the stated aim to correct the biased versions of South African history as given during that period by British historians, du Toit was the first Afrikaans historian to highlight the Slagtersnek incident as a significant event preceding the Great Trek. (See Praeg's long discussion, linked to du Toit's book, on the importance of this incident for the Trekkers (1992: 51-69).)

Majuba⁸ of 1881 between the British and the Boers, refers to the battle between the Boers and Mzilikaze (Chief of the Matabele) at Vegkop, and culminates in the murder of Piet Retief and his men at the hands of Dingaan’s impis and an assault on the Potgieter Trek.

Donkerland has the scope to depict more events over a longer period: from 1838 with a focus on the Anglo-Boer War and with political developments up till 1996. The drama is divided into two main parts. Part I encompasses the period from 1838 to 1902 and consists of six episodes. Two headings, “Plant die stok [Plant the Stick] and “Graf in die gras” [Grave in the Grass], as well as an interval, divide these episodes into two groups of three scenes each. The first group of three episodes (“Die pad na Kanaän” [The Road to Canaan] (1838), “’n Stukkie grond” [A Little Piece of Land] (1840), “Lank genoeg geterg” [Teased Long Enough] (1881)) deals with the period from Pieter de Witt’s trek from the Cape, his establishment of the farm, Donkerland, and the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War. The second group of three episodes (“Vuur en bloed” [Fire and Blood] (1899), “’n Balling gekom” [An Exile Arrived] (1901), “’n Merk vir die eeue” [A Mark for the Ages] (1902)) continues to deal with the war, its destructive effect on his family and on the farm. Part I ends with the death of Pieter de Witt – ironically enough, not on his beloved farm, but as an exile abroad.

Part II covers the period from 1929 to 1996 and consists of four episodes. Two headings, “Boompie by die pad” [Little Tree at the Roadside] and “Die wiele van Afrika” [The Wheels of Africa], as well as an interval, divide these episodes into two groups of two scenes each. The first group of two episodes (“Ver van die stadsgeluide” [Far from City Sounds] (1929) and “Die self van eie gom” [Salved by Its Own Resin] (1948)) deals with the recovery period after the Anglo-Boer War, the discovery of gold and the

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8. When Hester Faber, the widow of one of the men hanged at Slagtersnek, visits his grave in the first scene of the play, she seems to experience a prophetic vision of British soldiers being killed by the Boers:

Di dag fan wraak kom Reeds het Nel, wat syn yge flees en bloed ferrai het, fer hom self opgehang. En daar – (*sy wys of sy iits siin*) daar fêr, fêr in di noorde siin ek ’n Spitskop, bloedrood fan di wraakfuur. – Kyk, daar maai di kogels fan di Boere di Engelse af soos koornhalme foor di sekel. Kyk, hulle spring af fan di kranse, hulle hang an di rotse. Kyk, di aasfo’els hou fees. – Ja, Ja – Slagtersnek is gewreek” [The day of revenge is coming ... Already Nel, who has betrayed his own flesh and blood, has hanged himself. And there – (she points as if she is seeing something) far away, far in the north I see a *Spitskop* blood-red in the fire of revenge. – Look, over there the bullets of the Boers are cutting off the lives of the British like corn-stalks before a sickle. Look, they are jumping off the cliffs, they are hanging from the rocks. Look, the vultures are feasting. – Yes, Yes – Slagtersnek has been revenged].

(du Toit 1897: 2)

urbanisation of the Afrikaner. Klein-Piet, Pieter de Witt's grandson, is now the owner of Donkerland. The second group of two episodes ("Swart klip" [Black Stone], 1976 and "'n Klein strepie mensdom" [A Little Line of Humankind], 1996) shows the rise of black nationalism, the disintegration of the de Witt family and the eventual failure of Donkerland.

Since most historical events include dealings with the indigenous people or tribes of southern Africa – in a lesser or more violent manner of interaction – it is interesting to note how interactions on a more *personal* level within these two groups are depicted in these two plays. The main relationship is simply one of servant and master – in the household, on the farms and on the various treks. In *Magrita Prinslo*, two indigenous characters are found: Swartman (a black man) and Danster (a Hottentot, Khoi). Both the patronising manner in which they are addressed by the white characters, and their own submissive demeanours when given orders are probably to be expected within the context of described relationships of that period. What is, however, quite surprising is the relatively important roles played by these two characters in this play, as well as the extent to which the conversations between the two of them gives a glimpse of how they judge and interpret their dealings with their white masters. Swartman even fulfils an important dramatic role in the play: with his talent to throw *dolosse* (he is a soothsayer) he correctly predicts the future outcomes of the main dramatic events (both the romantic reunion of the two lovers and the murder of Retief). Danster is also a character with interesting qualities and one can even describe him as a trickster figure – one who clearly has a very ironic viewpoint of his so-called masters. These two characters are thus not marginal characters, but occupy important dramatic spaces in the play.⁹

In *Donkerland*, Opperman goes even further: although the main focus of the play is the portrayal of six generations of the de Witt family's fortunes in South Africa by following the life of the white patriarch, Pieter de Witt, we do find in the "shadows" a parallel life being portrayed, namely that of

9. Although Antonissen (1964: 45) does not refer to the roles played by the 2 indigenous characters of the play (Danster and Swartman), he does mention a poem written by du Toit ("Hoe di Hollanders di Kaap ingeneem het" [How the Dutch took the Cape] – written the same year as *Magrita Prinslo*. In this poem we also find a "Danster" speaking and, according to Antonissen, it is seldom that we find in this period an example of such a

kritiese selfbeskouing en relativering van die witman se standpunt [critical contemplation of the self and relativisation of the white man's point of view]. The similarities between this Danster and the one found in *Magrita Prinslo* are striking. In another poem, "Di klaaglied fan di laaste Boesman" (1896), Danster also criticises "in 'n wrang i.p.v. komiese toonard ... die Dususman se kyk op die Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis [in a bitter rather than humorous tone ... the Dutchman's version of the South African history].

(Antonissen 1964: 48)

Meidjie, the black matriarch. Her descendants also figure in the historical events that occur during these 158 years – sometimes fighting together with the Afrikaners (in the Anglo-Boer War, for instance), but, with the rise of African nationalism, also experiencing increasingly opposing Afrikaner *baasskap*. In a parallel movement, the decline of Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa is juxtaposed by a concurrent rise of African nationalism in this country – a movement mirrored in the microcosm of the inhabitants of Donkerland. Although Meidjie has stood in “the shadows” after meeting Pieter and remained there until his death, her descendants have moved out of the shadows and as from 1996 will be the new owners of this farm.

The relationship with the other European group in the country, the English-speaking countrymen, is also fraught with tension. In the first scene of *Magrita Prinslo*, after the emotional outburst of Hester Faber when visiting her husband’s grave, and her dramatic death after conveying her prophetic vision of the Boers’ revenge of the Slagtersnek incident, other references are given which illustrate the antagonistic relationship between these groups. The trekkers’ remarks at the beginning of the play that it is unbearable for them to stay in the Cape Colony because of the British government and, for example, the discussion later between Commandant Hendrik Potgieter and Commandant Piet Retief to determine if the trekkers should go to Natal where they will again be confronted by the British presence there, particularly highlight this antagonism/conflict of strife.¹⁰

In *Donkerland*, the relationship between the Afrikaners and the British is dealt with in more detail, and a number of episodes are devoted to the lead up to the Anglo Boer War (in the episode entitled “Lank genoeg geterg” [Teased Long Enough] (1881)), the war itself (in the episode entitled “Vuur

10. In the Second act on page 5:

Hendrik Potgieter. – Ja, myn liwe Neef Piet, dis alles waar. Mar ek sê fer jou as ons wil rus hê fan di Engelsman, dan moet ons fan di sé af bly. Di Engelsman sal dit nooit met goeie oge an siin dat ons ’n yge séhawe het ni; hy sal ons nooit by di Baai met rus laat ni. En jy weet mos ’n Engelsman is nes ’n krokodil: so lank as syn stêrt nog in di water is, dan is hy baiing sterk, mar soos syn stêrt eers uit di water uit is op di droge grond is hy niks wêrd ni. Daarom laat ons mar hiir ’n republiek stig. Di Engelsman is baiing liif fer handel en fer geld; hy sal self wel met ons kom handel [Hendrik Potgieter. – Yes, my dear Piet, it is all true. But I tell you now that if we want to have peace with the Englishman, we must stay away from the sea [di sé = die see (Afr.)]. The Englishman will not accept it in goodwill that we will have our own harbour; he will never leave us in peace in the Baai. And you know the Englishman is just like a crocodile: as long as his tail is in the water he is very strong, but as soon as his tail is outside the water on dry ground he is good for nothing. Therefore let us establish a republic. The Englishman loves commerce and money very much; he will certainly come and trade with us himself].

(du Toit 1917: 5)

en bloed” [Fire and Blood (1899) and its bitter aftermath for the Afrikaners (inter alia the concentration camps and destruction of the farms in the episodes entitled “’n Balling gekom” [An Exile Arrived] (1901) and “’n Merk vir die eeue” [A Mark for the Ages] (1902)).

1.4.2 The Afrikaans Language

It is important to note that S.J. du Toit wrote this play (the only one he ever wrote) for a very specific occasion, namely for the second Language Conference on Afrikaans (“di Afrikaanse taalkongres”, held in the Paarl City Hall in January 1897). According to sources, the actors were in most cases also delegates attending this conference. All of S.J. du Toit’s endeavours during this period centred on the establishment and promotion of the Afrikaans language – of course, within the bigger ideal of establishing an Afrikaner identity and promoting the ideals of Afrikaner nationalism. This play was thus not merely the product of someone interested in the drama genre, but rather a calculated act¹¹ to use all literary means at his disposal to further the cause in which he believed so strongly. S.J. du Toit is famous for being one of the first activists for Afrikaans and Afrikaner nationalism and for his publications related to these issues. As a literary figure he is better known for his poetry than for this play.

Opperman, in *Donkerland*, addresses the Afrikaans language issue in a quite comprehensive and innovative manner. I have addressed the importance of this aspect in a chapter in a forthcoming book entitled “Afrikaans

11. Note in this regard Anna Minnaar-Vos’s remark:

Die eerste Afrikaanse toneelstukkies, soos dié van ds. S.J. Du Toit, D.P. du Toit, Melt Brink en J.H.H. de Waal, is doelbewus geskryf met die oog op die taalstryd van die Eerste Afrikaanse Taalbeweging en staan nog op die vlak van die egte volkstoneel. Hulle doel het hierdie stukkies darem gedien, want belangstelling vir die Afrikaanse toneel is baie beslis gewek – tot so ’n mate selfs dat daar in die krygsgevangenekampe in Indië gedurende die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog ook stukkies in Afrikaans opgevoer is [The first Afrikaans plays, like these of Rev. S.J. du Toit, Melt Brink and J.H.H. de Waal, were deliberately written in view of the language struggle of the First Afrikaans Language movement and are still viewed as being part of a national theatre or a theatre for the people. These pieces did fulfil their aim, because interest was created for Afrikaans theatre – to such a degree that even the prisoners of war in India during the Second Boer War performed these pieces].

(Minnaar-Vos 1969: 26-37)

and Afrikaner Nationalism in Deon Opperman’s *Donkerland*”.¹² In this chapter I focus especially on the role Afrikaans played within the context of Afrikaner nationalism from two perspectives: (1) firstly on the language itself (in other words Afrikaans as the language of the Afrikaner, the official recognition of Afrikaans, its relationship with the other indigenous (black) languages, as well as with English in South Africa; and (2) secondly on the use of numerous literary and textual references to introduce most of the scenes, consisting mainly of quotations of a number of well-known literary figures within the Afrikaans literary history (also a well-known poem by S.J. du Toit, “Vrystaatse Vryheidslied” [Free State Freedom Song]). As I state in my conclusion of this chapter, “[i]t is not only the references as such that are significant. Most of the figures behind these references (Celliers, Leipoldt, Opperman, van Wyk Louw) are also iconic figures in Afrikaner literary history, and thus, in themselves, equally evocative for the Afrikaner. The use of language in this manner in the play, namely, to evoke a wide and comprehensive world of reference through brief literary references, gives *Donkerland* a richness and depth that match the epic scope of its dramatic portrayal of 158 years of Afrikaner history in South Africa”.

1.4.3 “Volksmoeder”/“Mother of the Nation”

Although the concept of the “volksmoeder”/“mother of the nation” mainly received prominence during and after the Anglo-Boer War, the seeds for this concept were already present in the 19th century as indicated by Cheryl Walker (1990: 22): “The concept of volksmoeder harnesses many of the elements of the 19th-century settler ideology, of gender – female domesticity and nurturing, virtue of race purity – to a strong emphasis on patriotism and loyal conformity by women to the demands of a male-dominated nationalism”. Elsabe Brink (in Walker 1990: 273) also highlights the political dimension of this concept when she states that “[i]n terms of the volksmoeder concept, the Afrikaner woman was depicted not only as the cornerstone of the household but also as a central unifying force within Afrikanerdom and, as such, was expected to fulfil a political role as well”.

The historical Magrita Prinsloo, as well as the fictional Magrita Prinsloo of du Toit’s play, both attest to the importance of this insight. The historical Magrita Prinsloo’s name resonates in the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek (1938, Pretoria) where one of the nine ox-wagons was named after her. Her name appears again with another important historical and cultural event, namely the inauguration of the Women’s Memorial (Vrouemonument) in Bloemfontein in 1913 in celebration of the Boer woman’s role

12. Chapter in a forthcoming book edited by Chirambo, R., Makokha, J.K.S. & West-Pavlov, R. *Reading African Literatures: Critical Perspectives on Stylistics, Thematics and Language Use* by Rodopi Publishers, Amsterdam.

during the Anglo Boer War – especially the suffering experienced in the concentration camps. A well-known Afrikaans poet, Jan F.E. Celliers, was commissioned to write a sequel to du Toit's play for this event. In this play, "Heldinne van die oorlog" [Heroines of the War], the main character is the granddaughter of Magrita Prinsloo.¹³

In Opperman's *Donkerland*, we find an ironic reversal of the original "volksmoeder" idea: the white patriarch's (de Witt's) young wife (interestingly enough called Magriet) dies in childbirth and the black woman (Meidjie) – earlier saved by de Witt and for the rest of their lives part of his world (she is a servant in his household till her death) – becomes the black matriarch in the play. *Donkerland*, in fact, gives the parallel story of both the white patriarch and the black matriarch's families. Their lives are intertwined and the change in power relationships in this microcosm is a reflection of the concomitant decline of Afrikaner nationalism and the rise of African nationalism.

The African counterpart to the idea(l) of the Afrikaner "volksmoeder" is the "Mother Africa" concept. According to Lockett:

South African English writing by black male authors has equally distorted the character of the black woman in the Mother Africa figure, a black version of the earth mother. This stereotype elevates qualities of courage, strength, pride, maternal love as positive, and offers a contrast to the negative images created by white writers. Yet "Mother Africa" is based on a comparison between the land, Africa itself, and the characteristics of the woman: like Africa she is idealized as prolific, steadfast and giving. Underlying this stereotype is the concept of property – the woman, like the land, traditionally belongs to the black man.

(Lockett 1988: 320)

And "[w]hile the Mother Africa figure generally offers a positive image of black women (and for this reason is often accepted by black women themselves), it is based on biological or sexual functions, and draws its strength from an ideology that views women as the property of men and glorifies motherhood as the highest aspiration of all women ..." (p. 35).

13. [which] can be seen as the culmination of Afrikaner nationalist sentiment in 1938, the year of the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek. The celebrations centred around symbolic ox wagon treks across the country culminating in a *volksfees* and the unveiling of the cornerstone of the Voortrekker Monument by three female descendants of the Voortrekker leaders. Two of the ox wagons were named after mythologised Voortrekker women, the female heroes of the Voortrekker clash with the Zulus at the Blaauwkrantz, viz. Magrieta Prinsloo and Johanna van der Merwe.

(Marlene van Niekerk in Kriger & Kriger 1996: 141-154)

It is clear that the Afrikaner “volksmoeder”, the “Mother Africa” and the “mother of the nation” concepts are all ideological concepts¹⁴ as McClintock (1991: 116) also states: “Within Afrikaner nationalism, as in its Afrikaans counterpart, women’s political agency is couched in the presiding ideology of motherhood”. Whilst the Afrikaner “volksmoeder” is mainly placed within a domestic sphere,¹⁵ African women “have transformed and infused the ideology of motherhood with an increasingly insurrectionary cast, identifying themselves more and more as the ‘mothers of revolution’”. In both plays the seeds of these ideas are present: Magrita Prinslo is portrayed as steadfast and loyal in her love for Pieter Botha, and courageous in the face of an *impi* attack on their trek – she represents everything symbolised by the Afrikaner “volksmoeder” idea. Meidjie in *Donkerland* is portrayed as the matriarch of the black family (her family tree appears on the page opposite Pieter de Witt’s at the end of the play) and she can thus be seen as representing the “Mother Africa” or “mother of the nation” idea. Although by no means a “mother of the revolution” herself, her descendants are active in the political turmoil of the eighties and nineties of South Africa.

1.4.4 Conclusion

S.J. du Toit wrote this one play only, amidst numerous other publications, and it is clear from all the documents consulted that he wrote it with a clear purpose in mind, namely the propagation of the general idea of Afrikaner nationalism, as well as the particular ideal of the development of the Afrikaans language. *Magrita Prinslo* – the first printed Afrikaans play – may be forgotten today by most South African theatregoers, but many of the issues and themes introduced in this play resonated a century later in *Donkerland*. One can discern in *Magrita Prinslo* the first awareness and introduction of the concept of an Afrikaner nationalist consciousness by a group of people who saw themselves as *Afrikaners* within the historical context of the mid-1800s in South Africa.

Deon Opperman is a contemporary Afrikaans playwright, who has written many plays and who is still today a prolific playwright and producer – not only of plays for the stage, but also for other theatrical media (television

14. Also see Gaitskell & Unterhalter in Yuval-Davis & Anthias (1989), chapter entitled “Mothers of the Nation: A Comparative Analysis of Nation, Race and Motherhood in Afrikaner Nationalism and the African National Congress”, for a discussion on the relation between these three concepts and the “nation”.

15. McClintock (1991: 109): “The icon of the volksmoeder is paradoxical. On the one hand, it recognizes the power of (white) motherhood; on the other hand, it contains that power within an iconography of domestic service”.

plays, television series and musicals). His epic play, *Donkerland*, continues with many of the ideas imbedded in Afrikaner nationalist ideology and tries to give a panoramic view of the rise and decline of Afrikaner nationalism by the end of 1996. Opperman is still interested in contemporary Afrikaners' experience of the "new" South Africa and continues to portray their beliefs and experiences in new plays (*Kaburu*, 2007); television series (*Kruispad*, 2008, *Hartland*, 2011 – seen with *Donkerland* as a trilogy of the Afrikaner) and musicals (*Ons vir jou*, 2008; *Tree aan!*, 2011).

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Marisa Keuris
University of South Africa
keurim@unisa.ac.za