



# Introduction

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# Introduction

## Pamela Ryan

When I was asked to edit a special issue on feminism for JLS, I put out some tentative feelers to find out who was working in the field of feminist literary criticism. Within a matter of weeks I was inundated with offers of articles, and had enough for one issue. It will be evident that the contributors are by no means heterogeneous, as they come mainly from the “white” “English” universities and this issue may thus be accused of narrowness and bias in not representing Afrikaans and Black writers. In mitigation, although the first wave of contributions came from white English-speaking writers, there will be future issues in which the diversified nature of South African feminism can be more fairly represented, and I should like to use this platform to request articles for further debate from all feminist critics involved in literary studies in South Africa.

It is unfortunate then that this, the first special issue of feminist literary criticism in South Africa, has to begin with an apology for its racial and linguistic bias. We, as white women, occupy an uncomfortable position in South Africa. We are the victims of colonization by white men (see Dorothy Driver’s contribution in this issue), but we are also colonizers of black women. We must, therefore, admit to taking an imperialist position in this third-world country: we are part of the white hegemony writing about the colonized. We have, therefore, to be particularly careful to elucidate our site of enunciation and to be aware that we (inevitably) “produce” the third-world woman as white readers and writers.

What is our site of enunciation? How do we, as a group, “announce” our feminism? What is South African literary theory? At present it is a fledgeling practice, trying to find an indigenous base from which to proceed, but borrowing heavily from French and Anglo-American models. We live in the Third World but use Western feminism as our primary discourse. Mohanty (1984) defines Western feminism as the effects of various textual strategies used by particular writers that codify others as non-Western and hence themselves as (implicitly) Western (1984: 334). A South African feminist practice might then begin by trying to avoid a we/them approach by ensuring that we do not colonise the already twice colonised, the black woman. If we re-present the black woman in South Africa (by which I mean woman as historical subject) as Third World Woman, we construct a monolith which reifies the diversity of women in this country, ignoring class differences, income disparities and different language groups. Several essays discuss the stereotyping of black women: Cecily Lockett describes the stereotypes inscribed in certain texts written by white and black male authors, while Jenny de Reuck exposes the racist and sexist bias inherent in the authorial narrator of Perceval Gibbon’s *Souls in Bondage*. Margaret Lenta uses several black township writers to scrutinise the image of the black woman and to investigate heterosexual relationships. These three writers, as well as Dorothy Driver

who discusses the South African colonial enterprise and its effect on the white women who were used by the imperialist system as "bearers of culture", perform a valuable task for South African feminism in exposing the hidden bias in supposedly ideologically "neutral" masculine writing and the stereotypes which emerge in its depiction of women. It is a task which is executed by such Anglo-American critics as Kate Millett and Susan Cornillon and forms part of the vital spadework necessary for South African feminism. Indeed, this issue follows a similar pattern to the Anglo-American feminist writers: first expose the bias and the stereotypes, then unearth the lost or forgotten women writers and finally encourage women to write and concentrate exclusively on women (gynocritics).

Wendy Woodward, Pamela Ryan and Margaret Daymond use the gynocritical approach in examining women writers. Wendy Woodward uses Christina Stead's women artists to show how women use language to attempt to combat androcentrism in general and the dominant discourse in particular. Margaret Daymond shows how Buchi Emecheta uses women's silence and laughter to loosen the hold of androcentric language, while Pamela Ryan uses women's texts to demonstrate how they undermine the inscription of heterosexuality in patriarchal discourses.

Then there are those who concentrate on language. Michael du Plessis employs French feminist discourse of the body as sign to read inscriptions of femininity in J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* and Wilma Stockenström's *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*, and Eve Horwitz takes Bakhtin's description of the dialogic process to show how women's discourse in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is effaced by the value system of the listener using Shakespeare's depiction of Ophelia as her example.

And what of the future? It would be true to say that South African feminist criticism has immense possibilities, but there are still areas which need investigation and research: the academy in South Africa and the vexed issue of the syllabus in English departments; the continued re-reading of texts by male and female writers; and, finally, the encouragement and discovery of women writers in our country. I hope that this special issue of feminist literary criticism encourages other feminist writers to research new areas and concerns pertaining to women in South Africa.

## References

- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1984. Under Western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Boundary 2*, 12 & 13: 333-357.