The black woman in South African English literature

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Summary

The article examines representations of black women in South African writing from the seventeenth century to the present. It is suggested that both race and gender are important factors in the formulation of several stereotypical depictions which recur in the work of white authors. These types are variously classified as "untouchables", "unattainables" and "destroyers". The article concludes with a brief consideration of the "Mother Africa" figure created by black male authors.

Opsomming

Die artikel ondersoek die uitbeelding van swart vroue in Suid-Afrikaanse geskrifte sedert die sewentiende eeu. Daar word aan die hand gedoen dat sowel ras as geslag belangrike faktore is in die formulering van verskeie stereotipe uitbeeldings wat herhaaldelik in die werk van blanke skrywers voorkom. Die onderskeie tipes word geklassifiseer as die "onaantasbares", die "onbereikbares" en die "verwoesters". Ten slotte word die "Moeder Afrika-figuur" wat deur swart manlike skrywers geskep is, kortliks oorweeg.

The black woman first appeared in English writing about South Africa in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; it was in this period of exploration and travel writing, with its exotic semi-factual, semi-fictional character, that two dominant stereotypes were established – types that were to become part of the literary consciousness of this country and would be carried into nineteenth- and twentieth-century South African writing. Since the first travellers and explorers in Africa were inevitably white, male and European, their descriptions of black women are often distorted reflections of the cultural prejudices of such men concerning gender and race: black women, together with black men, are the "other", yet their sex alienates them still further from those who write of them. As a result the black woman emerges as a being with two separate identities: like her white sisters she is either an angel or a demon,[1] but the added racial complexities of miscegenation produce sexual taboos, and the stereotype evolves further into what may be termed either an untouchable or an unattainable. I would like to suggest in the course of this paper that both types have their origin in unstated but implicit social disapproval of miscegenous sexual relations between black women and white men.

The untouchable stereotype is an animal-like, degenerate and stupid figure, and, it is implied, any white man who consorts with such a woman debases himself. The first untouchables in our literature appear in 1634 in the writings of the British traveller, Sir Thomas Herbert.[2] His book *Some Yeares Travels* was an exotic travelogue based on fact but containing a large element of imaginative fantasy and distortion: Herbert wrote for a home audience that was eager to read about strange and primitive beings in a savage landscape.

Thus the indigenous inhabitants of the Cape were depicted as sub-human and bestial, a total contrast to their 'civilized' European counterparts:

> ... they wear the raw guts of beasts, which serve as well for food as complement ... the rest of their body is naked, save that about the waist they have a thong of leather which like the back of a glove serves to cover their *pudenda* .... only upon their feet they have a sole or piece of leather tied with a little strap, which while these Hatten-totes were in our company their hands held, their feet having thereby the greater liberty to steal, which with their toes they can do exactly, all the while looking us in the face the better to deceive .... if famine and cold destroy them not, the Wild Beasts put a period to their languishing condition ... it is reported that the women are delivered without help or pain. And here the Woman give suck, the Uberous Dugg being stretched over their naked shoulder ... (Herbert, 1638: 17–18)

The illustration that accompanies Herbert's text depicts a Hottentot couple, and while the man is fairly acceptably portrayed as a hunter figure, the woman is coarse and vulgar, shown with her "uberous dugg" over her shoulder feeding a child and, at the same time, engaged in a dance of glee as she clutches what appears to be a piece of raw meat provided by her male hunter-partner. While these images may have gratified a seventeenth-century readership hungry for affirmation of its own innate superiority, to the contemporary reader they reveal also contempt for the black races, and black women in particular. The brutish character of Hottentot women was apparently confirmed by the case history of Krotoa, which appears in Jan van Riebeeck's *Journals* (1652–62). Krotoa was taken into Van Riebeeck's household as a young girl; she was "civilized" (taught to wear clothes), "christianized" (renamed Eva), and married off to a Danish explorer. She became useful to the fledgeling colony as an interpreter, yet she fell from grace since her quite understandable reversions to Hottentot life were viewed as a slide back into savagery which she was assumed to have willingly renounced in favour of a more civilized life, and she was several times committed to Robben Island for her "immorality" and "adulterous and debauched life" (Thom, 1952, Vol I and Schapera, 1933: 126). Krotoa's career seemed to confirm, to the seventeenth-century mind, that Hottentot women were inherently savage and base, and could not be accepted into white society.

The second stereotype – that of the unattainable – was established in the eighteenth century by writers under the influence of Rousseau and the ideology of the "noble savage". The travel writings of the Frenchman, François Le Vaillant, reveal the transformation of the black woman into a Romantic figure, the incarnation of that "natural" aristocracy that Wordsworth imagined to be part of the character of English peasants and rustics. In Le Vaillant's *Travels* (1790) he describes his encounter with a young Hottentot woman, whom he names Narina:

> I found her name difficult to be pronounced, disagreeable to the ear, and very insignificant according to my ideas; I therefore gave her a new one, and called her Narina, which, in the Hottentot language, signifies a flower. I begged her to retain this pretty name, which suited her in many respects; and this she promised

to do as long as she lived, in remembrance of my visit to her country, and as a testimony of my love, for she was already no stranger to this passion ... (Le Vaillant, 1970, Vol I: 382)

Le Vaillant, like Herbert, writes for a specific literary audience, one receptive to Romantic ideology. In this idealized scenario the beautiful black woman returns the love of the white man, but the relationship is never formalized; it cannot be, for the social barriers of race and miscegenation are insurmountable obstacles. In this case it is the black woman herself who, being closer to nature and, it is presumed, wiser, rejects the advances of her lover:

> I asked her to remain with me, and made her promises of everykind; but when I spoke to her, above all, of carrying her with me to Euope; where I said all the women were queens, and commanded hordes of slaves; far from suffering herself to be tempted, she rejected all my proposals, and without any ceremony began to grow peevish and impatient. A monarch could not have overcome her resistance, and the sorrow which she felt from the mere idea of quitting her family and her horde. (Le Vaillant, 1970, Vol I: 379)

Stephen Gray asserts that Le Vaillant's version of what he terms the "Hottentot Eve" myth did not take root in South African literature but,[3] as I shall demonstrate, both Le Vaillant's unattainable and Herbert's untouchable were to become established in the literary consciousness of this country, and in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were employed as a subtle means of entrenching the social taboos on miscegenous sexual relations between black women and white men.

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In the early nineteenth century the arrival of a substantial body of English settlers in the Cape resulted in the production of literary works by immigrant writers for a local audience (as opposed to the works of Le Vaillant and Herbert written for a European readership). It is in Andrew Geddes Bain's satirical play *Kaatje Kekkelbek* (1838) that we again encounter the untouchable stereotype in the figure of Kaatje herself, a young Hottentot woman from the Kat River Settlement. Although Kaatje is conceived of with deliberately satiric purpose, her personality derives from the untouchable myth – she is stupid but sly, drunken, immoral and promiscuous. These traits are established in her opening song:

> My name is Kaatje Kekkelbek
>   I come from Katrivier,
> Daar is van water geen gebrek,
>   But scarce of wine and beer.
> Myn ABC at Ph'lipes school
>   I learnt a kleine beetje,
> But left it just as great a fool
>   As gekke Tante Meitje.
>
> (Chapman, 1986: 41)

Bain means his audience to respond to Kaatje as a manifestation of irreverence and vitality, in comparison with stuffy settler respectability. Yet to the perceptive contemporary reader it becomes evident that the humour in the play centres on the debauched nature of her life and her sly cunning; the audience laughs at Bain's ability (unconscious, perhaps) to make the untouchable myth appear humorous, and even attractive. His social criticism is directed not only at settler prudery and hypocrisy, but also at the ineffectiveness of the judicial system, and the lack of interest on the government's part in the plight of settlers. The points are made through the experiences of Kaatje who is arrested and sent to prison for taking a sheep that "was not lost". Conforming to the nature of the stereotype, Kaatje is unrepentant on her release, flatly refuses to be "civilized", and continues her life of debauchery:

> De tronk is een lekker plek
>   Of'twas not just so dry,
> But soon as I got out again
>   At (Todds) I wet mine eye,
> At Vice's house in Market-Square
>   I drowned my melancholies:
> And at Barrack hill found soldiers there
>   To treat me well at Jolly's.

If Kaatje's supposed vitality and earthiness include an element of sexuality, it is an attraction only for the soldiers at "Barrack hill", men at the very bottom of the settler social scale.

In the late nineteenth century the untouchable myth was given greater credence by the proliferation of theories of Social Darwinism. Such theories were largely assimilated in Africa by the colonial mentality in order to justify its exploitation of the native peoples – blacks were believed to be on a lower level of evolution and therefore inferior to their white counterparts. It was the white man's duty to rule over these semi-savage beings until such time as they had evolved to the level of mid-Victorian "civilization". Under the pressures of such an ideology the black woman was perceived to be an extremely lowly creature, inferior by virtue of both race and gender. These ideas became so pervasive, and so much a part of the psychological landscape, that they are even encountered in Olive Schreiner's early work. In *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) Schreiner creates Lyndall as a complex character, but the black women in her novel are one-dimensional figures. It is as though she can only "see" them in terms of types, and not as human beings. Her descriptions of the black woman encountered by Otto include aspects of the untouchable myth – she is dirty, sullen, stupid and animal-like – and a distaste of the physical characteristics of blacks (believed to be evidence of their low position on the rungs of evolution):

> She had a baby tied to her back by a dirty strip of red blanket; another strip hardly larger was twisted around her waist, for the rest her black body was naked. She was a sullen, ill-looking woman, with lips hideously protruding.

> The German questioned her as to how she came there. She muttered in broken Dutch that she had been turned away. Had she done evil? She shook her head sullenly. Had she food given her? She grunted a negative, and fanned the flies from her baby . . . (Schreiner, repr. 1975: 79)

Similarly, Tant Sannie's Hottentot maid is duplicitous and cunning, rejecting the old German when he appeals to her for aid against Tant Sannie's anger:

> She was his friend; she would tell him kindly the truth. The woman answered by a loud, ringing laugh.
>
> "Give it him, old missis! Give it him." It was so nice to see the white man who had been master hunted down. The coloured woman laughed, and threw a dozen mielie grains into her mouth to chew. (Ibid: 82)

Schreiner depicts her act of rejection as one of inherent malice, as if the woman were incapable of finer feelings such as compassion. While it may be argued that several of the characters in *The Story of an African Farm* are stereotypes, it does seem that whereas Tant Sannie and Bonaparte Blenkins, for example, are deliberate caricatures, the characters of the black woman and the Hottentot maid were the unconscious manifestation of a masculine world view inherited by Schreiner. (She later modified her perceptions, for in her unfinished novel *From Man to Man* (1926) her heroine Rebekah, sensing that her philandering husband sees differences of sex and colour as an opportunity for exploitation, adopts his illegitimate coloured daughter.)

Social Darwinism, together with the myth of the untouchable, form the basis of the writings of Sarah Gertrude Millin, who employed them in her self-appointed crusade against miscegenation. Nothing, she declared in her autobiography, had shocked her more in life than the suffering and evil produced by miscegenation (Millin, 1941: 145). Unlike Schreiner, Millin was never to comprehend the masculinist ideology behind her views and, although it is now fashionable to dismiss her work as morally reprehensible and hence worthless, she was in many cases merely articulating views and ideas which, although intellectually outmoded, still had currency at the time among a certain sector of the South African population.[4] According to Millin, it is only the most debased of black women – the untouchables – who consort with the most debased of white men to produce the half-caste offspring she terms "bastards". The attraction between such persons is ascribed to genetic flaws in their make-up, which draws them to debauchery and its accompaniment, inter-racial sex; the children of such unions inherit and pass on the "tainted" blood and, as a result, are rejected by both black and white alike. Millin locates their suffering in a supposed "flaw of blood", and is unable to perceive, as the modern reader must, that its true cause is social prejudice and hypocrisy. In her novel *God's Step-Children* (1924), the Hottentot woman who marries the weak and pitiful Reverend Andrew Flood is, in her youth, depicted as a fairly attractive figure; slim, dainty and vital. According to Millin, however, blood will out and after her marriage the dusky maiden becomes the gross matron with the typical characteristics of the untouchable:

> With maternity Silla was beginning to develop the typical Hottentot figure. All the Hottentot matrons were stout to malformation, although their men remained slim and wiry till death. And Silla's youthful litheness had disappeared so completely that the recollection of it seemed like an impossible dream. She waddled when she walked, like an overfed goose. Her face had almost doubled in size, and all its youthful alertness was gone. She was fat – fat all over. Her years were exactly twenty.
>
> She was extremely indolent, and whereas before Cachas had kept the reed hut in some sort of order, under Silla's management it was in a state of overt filth. They ate and slept in the same room – the Rev Andrew and Silla and the two children .... (Millin, 1986: 67)

Flood's great-granddaughter, Elmira, is pale enough to pass for white and later marries a white man, yet she inherits the negative qualities of the untouchable, the legacy of her "tainted" blood. Millin describes Elmira as stupid, mentally incapable of development and fitted only for the role of procreation:

> She was not as clever at her schoolwork as she had promised to be when a child. It was as if her brain, running a race against the brains of white children, was very quick at starting but soon tired and lagged behind, so that the time came when it fell altogether out of the running. At sixteen Elmira had ceased to make any mental advance, and was really, in all essentials, a mature young woman.(Ibid: 152)

As the untouchable myth became entrenched in South African writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, its opposite, the myth of the beautiful but unattainable temptress, developed equally. The personal characteristics of the untouchable were guarantee enough that she would not appear sexually attractive to the average "respectable" white male. By contrast, in her romanticized role of "noble savage" she is both morally acceptable and sexually attractive. As such she constitutes a threat to colonial society, for she may both displace the white woman as a sexual partner for the white man and produce unwanted half-caste offspring. For this reason the barriers of miscegenation cannot be lowered, even in fiction, and it becomes imperative that the alluring black woman should always be beyond the reach of her white lover. If a formal union should be established the man must inevitably suffer the punishment of social ostracism. This is the fate of Arend Plessie in Thomas Pringle's poem "The Forester of the Neutral Ground" (1823–34), and although Pringle's purpose is to challenge the cruelty of "colour and caste" in South Africa, his hero Arend Plessie falls in love with "Brown Dinah", who is a literary descendent of Le Vaillant's Narina:

> When we had grown up to man's estate,
> Our father bade each of us choose a mate,
> Of Fatherland blood, from the *black* taint free,
> As became a Dutch burgher's proud degree.
>
> My brothers they rode to the bovenland,
> And each came with a fair bride back in his hand;

> But I brought the handsomest bride of them all –
> Brown Dinah, the bondmaid who sat in our hall.
> (Chapman, 1981: 38)

Stern disapproval meets Arend Plessie's choice, yet Pringle's sympathy is obviously with the brave man who has dared to confront unjust social taboos in the name of love:

> My father's displeasure was stern and still,
> My brother's flamed forth like a fire on the hill,
> And they said that my spirit was mean and base,
> To lower myself to the servile race.

Accusations of baseness are not sufficient to deter Plessie, and when Dinah is sold by his family in an effort to prevent the marriage, he rescues her and marries her. For this act, for breaking the miscegenation taboo, Pringle acknowledges that Plessie must accept his status as an outcast:

> I've reared our rude shielding by Gola's green wood,
> Where the chase of the deer yields me pastime and food,
> With my Dinah and children I dwell here alone,
> Without other comrades – and wishing for none.
> . . . .
> And thus from my kindred and colour exiled,
> I live like old Ismael, Lord of the Wild –
> And follow the chase with my hounds and my gun;
> Nor ever repent the bold course I have run.

Although unrepentant, Plessie keenly feels the alienation from his own kind, for the poem ends with his plea for an "Edict of Mercy" to allow his family to live a normal life.

Rather than allow the hero to suffer the pain of social disgrace, and his compatriots to be openly revealed as bigots, fiction writers such as Rider Haggard found it more acceptable to portray the beautiful black woman as unattainable. In such a case not only was the impossible love affair made more poignant, it could also be ended without revealing overt racial prejudice on the author's part. Narina thus reappears in popular romance in the figure of Foulata in Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885). The young Kekuana woman is a typical "noble savage". She is first encountered by the protagonists at a ceremonial dance, where Quatermain observes her beauty and grace:

> Then the flower-crowned girls sprang forward in companies, singing a sweet song and waving the delicate palms and white lilies ... At last they paused, and a beautiful young woman sprang out of the ranks and began to pirouette in front of us with a grace and vigour which would have put most ballet girls to shame. At length she retired exhausted, and another took her place,then another and another, but none of them, either in grace, skill, or personal attractions, came up to the first. (Haggard, 1977: 148–8)

Foulata, sentenced to death as a ritual sacrifice, is saved by the intrepid trio of Curtis, Good and Quatermain, whereupon she falls in love with Good and a relationship develops between the pair when she nurses him back to health after an illness. Such a relationship cannot be allowed to follow its natural course, and so Haggard allows Foulata to die in a grisly scene. Her dying words echo Narina's sentiments as she requests Quatermain to tell Good of her love and her knowledge that their union was an impossibility:

> Say to my lord ... that – I love him, and that I am glad to die because I know that he cannot cumber his life with such as I am, for the sun may not mate with the moon, nor the white with the black. (Ibid: 226)

Foulata is rendered unattainable by death, and she herself, like the naturally wise Narina figure, is made to articulate the prejudice that, had she lived, would have ensured that she remained beyond reach. As for Good, he is left socially unscathed to mourn the loss of his ideal: Curtis reports that on his return to England Good "told me that since he had been home he hadn't seen a woman to touch her, either as regards her figure or the sweetness of her expression" (Haggard: repr. 1977: 253).

The myth of the unattainable is also employed, but for a different effect, by William Plomer in his novel *Turbott Wolfe* (1925). The novel is a satirical examination of the failure of the moral idealisms of the protagonist, Turbott Wolfe. Plomer has Wolfe encounter various stereotyped characters and situations of early twentieth-century life in order to test his responses. Wolfe himself is based on the type of the young English liberal, while characters such as Bloodfield and Flesher are caricatures of colonial bigotry. Nhliziyombi, the young black woman with whom Wolfe falls in love, is created from the stereotype of the unattainable. In a deliberate manipulation of the myth Plomer describes Wolfe's romanticization of Nhliziyombi as the noble savage incarnate:

> She was a fine rare savage, of a type you will find nowhere now: it has been killed by the missions, the poor whites and the towns .... She was an ambassadress of all that beauty (it might be called holiness), that intensity of the old wonderful unknown primitive African life – outside history, outside time, outside science. She was a living image of what has been killed by people like Flesher, by our obscene civilization that conquers everything. (Plomer, 1980: 30–31)

In order to demonstrate the failure of Wolfe's idealisms Plomer shows him to be incapable of establishing an emotional or sexual relationship with Nhliziyombi. In his internal agonizing Wolfe denies that race is the obstacle, as he notes to the narrator: "I suppose you think I mean that I was white and the girl was black ... pray accept my assurance that that had nothing to do with it. I am too much the humanitarian to be colour blind. There was no question of pigment (I was in love, remember)". He continues to speak of an impenetrable barrier: "... but there appeared to be a great forbidding law, like all great forbidding laws, subcutaneous" (Ibid: 33–34). This "great forbidding law" is none other than the taboo against miscegenation. Wolfe cannot admit

that he does not have the courage of his convictions and is unable to break the taboo and cross the barriers of race, and so he makes grandiose speeches about "great forbidding laws" in an attempt to conceal this truth. He is never able to consummate his love and the woman Nhliziyombi marries a black man; true to the myth of the unattainable she remains an ideal and unsullied memory to Wolfe, who, in turn, is freed from the threat of the unpleasant social stigma attached to a miscegenous union.

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After the era of *God's Step-Children* (1924) and *Turbott Wolfe* (1925) there is a change in the manner in which black women are depicted by white writers: the separate myths of the untouchable and the unattainable tend to merge to produce a single figure with characteristics of both. There are many reasons for this change – in literature the decline of Romanticism led to the displacement of the "noble savage" motif, while the rise of sociology as a discipline in the early twentieth century revealed the fallacies inherent in Social Darwinism by showing that terms such as "civilized" and "primitive" were relative. Possibly of equal importance, however, was the enactment of legislation rendering miscegenation a criminal offence: the Immorality Act of 1927 outlawed sexual contact between black African women and white men, the Immorality Amendment Act of 1950 extended the prohibition to include all non-white women, while the Mixed Marriages Act of 1950 effectively ended legal unions between the races. Miscegenation no longer constituted a real danger in South African society and a new set of circumstances arose in which interracial sex became a criminal offence.

In post-1927 South African English fiction the black woman thus takes on an altered character in her relations with white men (for this continues to be her major fictional role). Like the unattainable she is a sexual temptress, often attractive, but with physical qualities that recall her descent from the untouchable. In this guise she becomes a destroyer figure, for by consorting with her the white man faces the danger of prosecution under the Immorality Act and, as a convicted criminal, his life and that of his family is destroyed. In the miscegenation novels of this period, which often seek to highlight the inhumanity of such laws, it is the black woman, and equally the law itself, which function as instruments of destruction. In Herman Charles Bosman's novel *Willemsdorp,* which he began writing in 1951, the destroyer myth is incarnated in the figure of Marjorie, a young coloured woman who earns her living by sleeping with white men.[5] Charlie Hendricks, one of her "victims", reacts in stereotypical fashion, and his description of her emphasizes both attraction and revulsion:

> ... She had small features, a tip-tilted nose that gave piquancy to her face, and lips that were inclined towards fullness. She had the kind of face that could smile readily, or could just as easily turn petulant. Her eyes – well there was a thing, now, Charlie Hendricks thought; her eyes were large and dark and lustrous and her eyes betrayed her coloured ancestry in a way that her skin did not. Her skin was no darker than many a white girl's skin. But her eyes gave her away. The lashes were thick and coarse; the lids protruded slightly; the blackness of her

> pupils was unlike the blackness of a Spanish girl's eyes, say: it was a streaky blackness; it was a coloured woman's eyes. (Bosman, 1981, Vol 1: 527)

The associations of the untouchable myth are echoed in the debased guilt Hendricks suffers as a result of his relationship with Marjorie. It is not so much Marjorie's sexual promiscuity that repels him as the colour of her skin:

> Charlie Hendricks despised himself for having sexual relations with Marjorie, a coloured woman. But he had come to reconcile himself to having that opinion about himself. He was just low, that was all. And he had always been low. And he had tried to conceal his lowness from himself. But it had all come out now. Good. He was a dirty, lousy, shabby creature. He wasn't fit for decent human company .... And so he could not help but wonder what Marjorie, the nigger skirt, must be thinking of the class of white men to which he himself now belonged .... (Ibid: 568)

The contempt is both for Marjorie and for himself, and is a result of the conflict between his physical needs and his horror of being discovered, prosecuted and brought to social disgrace. Bosman deliberately uses the destroyer myth in creating Marjorie, for Willemsdorp itself is a metaphor of South African society with its often one-dimensional attitudes towards race and sex.[6] His aim in the novel is to highlight the destructive nature of race laws such as the Immorality Act, and Hendricks's self-hatred, projected onto Marjorie, is a measure of the warping of his psyche in the oppressive milieu of small-town Willemsdorp. In fairly typical fashion the novel concludes with the destruction, in social terms, not only of Hendricks but of several white men suspected of the murder of Marjorie (who had fallen pregnant and begun blackmailing her various white lovers).

Similar problems and issues are examined in Alan Paton's novel *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953). The protagonist, Pieter van Vlaanderen, is an Afrikaner policeman in a small South African dorp, and the destroyer a young coloured woman called Stephanie. Van Vlaanderen's relationship with his strict Afrikaner father is marred by a clash of temperament, for Pieter has a gentle, almost effeminate side to his nature which is unacceptable to his father's conception of masculinity, while his relationship with his wife, Nella, is sexually problematic, and so he seeks release in an illicit affair with Stephanie. The narrator of Paton's novel is, ironically, the disfigured and unattractive maiden aunt of the protagonist (she has a hare lip), who relates the story of the sexual misdemeanours of her nephew with sympathy both for Pieter's torment and for the resulting destruction of the Van Vlaanderen family: "And I write it all down here, the story of our destruction. And if I write with fear, then it is not so great a fear, I being myself destroyed" (Paton, repr. 1983: 9). Pieter van Vlaanderen, perhaps harbouring his own uneasiness, reinforces the theme of social destruction in the lecture he gives to a young boy whom he catches attempting to solicit Stephanie:

> The police had instructions to enforce the Immorality Act without fear or favour. Whether you're old or young, rich or poor, respected or nobody, whether you're

> a Cabinet Minister or a predikant or a headmaster or a tramp, if you touch a black woman and you're discovered nothing'll save you .... It's a thing that's never forgiven, never forgotton. The court may give you a year, two years. But outside it's a sentence for life .... (Paton, 1983:15–17)

Van Vlaanderen is torn between the constraints of Afrikaner society and his subconscious need to rebel against its codes, and views his developing illicit attraction to Stephanie as a form of psychotic illness, as he writes in his journal:

> I knew it was there, but I had known it so long that it did not trouble me, so long as it stayed apart. But when the mad sickness came on me, the shadow of danger would suddenly move nearer to me, and I knew it would strike me down if it could, and I did not care. It was only when the sickness had passed that I saw how terrible was my danger, and how terrible too my sickness, that when it was on me my wife and children could be struck down and I would not care. (Ibid.: 46)

Paton shows Van Vlaanderen at the mercy of narrow South African attitudes, and in his psychological torment he tends to view the relationship as evidence of his own debased character. His dealings with the black woman are, from this perspective, a descent into filth:

> How, I wondered at myself, that I who shrank from any dirty jokes, and was so fussy about my body and clothes, especially my shirts and handkerchiefs, should be tempted by such a thing, for I notice always a man's and woman's nails, and I shudder when a man clears his throat and spits, and pulls a dirty handkerchief from his pocket. I could never sleep on a soiled pillow, and it was painful for me to go into one of the lavatories that they seem to have in every garage and service station that I ever saw, full of oil and muck and papers .... (Ibid.: 96)

The myth of the destroyer again resurfaces in fiction as late as 1972 in Nadine Gordimer's novel *The Conservationist.* The protagonist of her novel, Mehring, suffers increasing confusion and paranoia as he buckles under the psychological and social pressure of life in South Africa in the 1970s. As he reaches the point of total collapse he transforms his anxieties into an hallucinatory certainty that someone is trying to destroy him. At the close of the novel he picks up a young woman hitch-hiker and takes her to a nearby plantation; in his confused state he imagines that she is coloured and that she has been sent to trap him:

> ... That hair's been straightened and that sallowness isn't sunburn. That's it. Perhaps its a factory girl he's been lured into the woods with; a poor factory girl doing a grade of work reserved for coloureds. A Sunday newspaper story. A dolled-up supermarket caricature of the tanned, long-waisted lucky ones who, aping pigment, provide in turn a model for one like this, who has it, to follow: a double fake. She's a trap, then; she waits by the road and brings white men here for whatever those *Boere* call themselves, the miscegenation squad or the vice squad, to follow ... (Gordimer, 1983: 261–262)

Gordimer, a woman writer, deliberately employs the stereotype of the de-

stroyer in order to highlight the fears inherent in the white male psyche: the horror of miscegenation, the fear of criminal prosecution and contempt for the black woman herself are all reflected in Mehring's paranoid perceptions.

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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. Possibly, the first Mother Africa figures in our literature were created by Sol T. Plaatje in his historical romance *Mhudi* (1930).[7] Although the work is effectively a tale of important events in the history of the Baralong and Matabele people in the nineteenth century, it takes its name from one of the characters, Mhudi, a beautiful Baralong woman who risks her life to save her husband, Ra-Thaga. The title suggests the analogy between the people of Africa and the woman herself, yet Mhudi emerges as a fully developed character in this work, (unlike the one-dimensional depictions of white writers), and Plaatje shows her marriage to be one of mutual respect and love, Mhudi often acting as an inspiration and a source of wisdom to her husband. On the other hand, Mhudi is largely defined in relation to her men: the story is narrated by her son, Half-a-Crown, who relates the meeting of his parents and their married life, and there is no doubt that both men have great respect for this "mother" figure. In a sub-plot, the Matabele queen, Umnandi, who flees from her husband's home in fear of her life, is also associated with the fortunes of the Matabele people: when Umnandi leaves the tribe fares badly, but on her return (an act of loyalty and courage after many hardships), the fortunes of the tribe once again rise. The points are made in the musings of her husband, the Matabele king Mzilikazi:

> [Umnandi] was the mainstay of my throne. My greatness grew with the renown of her beauty, her wisdom and her stately reception of my guests. She vanished and, with her, the magic talisman of my court ... yet she was not the only wife in my harem. How came it about that all was centred in her? What was the secret of her strength? It is clear that calamities will continue to dog my footsteps until that wife is found .... (Plaatje, 1980:116)

Umnandi's eventual return is associated with concepts of fertility and regeneration, and of power granted to the black man:

> In due course the Matabele ... established a new capital named Gu-Bulawayo in the very far north. There a magnificent feast was repeated a year later, for Umnandi had presented the king and nation with her son, the newborn prince. In the course of a prosperous life, during which the Matabele grew in power and affluence, Umnandi's son extended the awe-inspiring sway of his government to

> distant territories of the hinterland; and when at length he succeeded his father as Matabele king, he wielded a yet greater power than that of his renowned father. (Ibid.: 181)

Although Plaatje obviously intends a symbolic representation here, the symbolism is based on the correlation between the woman and the land or nation. Similarly, in the parallel story of Mhudi and Ra-Thaga, prosperity for the Baralong people is concomitant with the prosperity of the couple, which in turn owes much to the fortitude and wisdom of Mhudi herself.

The Mother Africa figure undergoes a permutation in the novels of Peter Abrahams, who presents her in the guise of the newly urbanised African woman. In his novel *Mine Boy* (1946) it is the woman, Leah, who is the strongest character in the book, stronger even than Xuma, the male protagonist. Although she has no man to support her (he is in jail), Leah survives because she is proud and strong, and because she must be strong she becomes tough; but, as Abrahams points out, beneath her tough exterior are the soft and loving qualities of the mother. Leah is also physically attractive, as Xuma describes her:

> Leah ... wore a gay blue dress with red and white flowers and she wore a many-coloured kerchief round her head. Her face shone with the fat she had rubbed in after her wash. On each ear dangled a long glass ear-ring, and a string of small glass beads circled her strong handsome neck. She was pretty as she stood on the verandah .... And she stood there for everyone to see her big strong beauty. (Abrahams, 1980: 116)

Leah's success in Johannesburg (she is a leading "Skokiaan Queen"), is based on her philosophy of life, which she explains to Xuma:

> ... In the city it is like this: all the time you are fighting. Fighting! Fighting! When you are asleep and when you are awake. And you look only after yourself. If you do not you are finished. If you are soft everyone will spit in your face. They will rob you and cheat you and betray you. So, to live here, you must be hard. Hard as a stone. And money is your best friend. With money you can buy a policeman. With money you can buy somebody to go to jail for you. That is how it is, Xuma. It may be good, it may be bad, but there it is. And to live one must see it ... (Ibid.: 50)

Xuma, adopting the male view that women should be soft and pliant, accuses Leah of unfeminine hardness, but, as the reader is led to perceive, Leah's hardness is necessary for survival and is tempered by the selfless love and care she lavishes on her makeshift "family" – an old drunk called Daddy, an elderly woman Ma Plank, her niece Eliza and a friend Maisy, as well as Xuma himself, whom she befriends on his arrival in the city.

The qualities that distinguish Abrahams's Leah – pragmatism, strength, beauty, the capacity for love, and ultimately the ability to survive without male support – were idealized by the writers of the Black Consciousness movement of the 1970s, whose aim was to foster pride in their black cultural heritage and in their historical relationship with the land. They saw in the

Mother Africa figure a symbol of the suffering, courage and beauty of the black people, and revolutionary struggle was perceived as one in which Mother Africa, the oppressed land, must be freed by her children. In the poetry, short stories and novels of the seventies the black woman images the resistance and anguish of blacks. Molahelelu wa Mmutle's "Our Immortal Mother" shows her suffering transcending her life as she is mythologized by her children:

> My mother died a servant
> She was buried a meid
> A house meid she was
> Like a dienskneg she lived
> With all humanity removed
> ....
> They killed her
> She died in solitude
> Broken – broken to the bone
> Without raising an eye to heaven
> For the foreign God betrayed her
> She lives on in her shrine
> Her soul they could not destroy
> She went to rest, a goddess
> Worshipped by those she loved
> Immortalized by her children.
>
> (Chapman, 1982: 169–170)

Similarly, in his poem "Somewhere" Es'kia Mphahlele elevates the creative power of motherhood and its connection with the struggle:

> Somewhere a mother waits
> her man, her son
> in chains of an oppressor
> or waits for those who never come
> and still endures we know not how
> ...
> somewhere a woman gives the world an artist
> a child who sings and dances,
> dreams and weaves a poem around the universe
> ...
> To know our sorrow
> is to know our joy –
> somewhere a mother will rejoice.
>
> Ibid.: 171–172)

Mothobi Mutloatse's short story, "Mama Ndiyalila", includes this poem of lamentation to Mother Africa:

> Mama, oh mama, ndiyalila
> I am crying mother
> Oh, Mother Africa

I am crying for your breast
Your breast of comfort
Amidst these wordly obstacles
Amidst these human snares
Oh, Mother Africa
We shall seek you
We shall love you
Your children are crying
For your breast of comfort...
(Mutloatse, 1982: 19)

The correlation of black womanhood with the land and with the people of the land also gave rise to the image of childbirth as a metaphor of revolutionary change. This is the concept implicit in the title of Mongane Serote's novel *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981), which concludes with the prophecy of political change in South Africa metaphorically depicted in the painful birth of a child:

> The woman lay on her back. Her vagina, open like the lip of the earth, the lip of the sky when the sun pours out, was red with blood ... Blood like the sun's rays spilled from the lips, the now red lips, to the thighs, to the mat, onto the newspapers. (Serote, 1981: 368)

The novel ends with an invocation that refers to the literal birth and equally to the political birth: "Push, push, push".

While 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. It seldom allows for any role other than those of wife and mother for the black woman, who continues to be a prisoner of gender, defined only in terms of black men. Similarly, the emphasis on courage, determination and survival as positive qualities inherent in black women tends to glamorize their real suffering and oppression as, in many cases, sole breadwinner of single-parent families. In such cases their status as victims, both of racist legislation and often of mistreatment and desertion at the hands of black men, is minimized. Ultimately the Mother Africa figure offers a perception of black womanhood as warped in its own way as the types created by white authors.

South African writers and readers, whether black or white, need to take cognisance of the often damaging type-casting of black women in our literature and begin the process of creating a literary space for depictions of black women with aspirations beyond those imposed by race and gender. Similarly it is to be hoped that black women writers in the 1980's will become aware of the need to formulate a literary identity free from the distortions of myth and stereotype.

Notes

1. These are the terms used by Nina Auerbach in her book *Woman and the Demon* (1982, Cambridge, Mass.).
2. I wish to acknowledge my debt to Stephen Gray's chapter "The Frontier Myth and Hottentot Eve" in his book *Southern African Literature: An Introduction* for information on the writings of Herbert, Van Riebeeck and Le Vaillant.
3. Stephen Gray, 1979 *Southern African Literature: An Introduction*, p 49. Gray's explanation of the source of the "myth" of the "Hottentot Eve" involves a correlation between the woman herself and the white man's conception of his relationship with Africa, in which the woman is an extended metaphor of the land. My own view is that the myths arose as reinforcements of social taboos against miscegenation. Equally, in the place of the one figure who is both attractive and repulsive (Gray's view), I see two distinct types that may, on occasion, be merged into a single character.
4. For a detailed discussion of the intellectual background to Millin's philosophy see J.M. Coetzee's article "Blood, flaw, Taint, Degeneration: The Case of Sarah Gertrude Millin", *English Studies in Africa,* (vol 23, no 1, 1980).
5. *Willemsdorp* was published posthumously in 1977.
6. A.M. Potter makes this point in his article "The Threat of the Wild: Sources of Racial Tension in Bosman's *Willemsdorp*", contained in Gray 1986: 527.
7. *Mhudi* was written in 1920 but only published in 1930 by the Lovedale Press.

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