

# Searching for Words: Towards a Gynocritical Model for the Study of South African Women's Poetry<sup>1</sup>

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## Summary

In this article I will attempt to provide a theoretical model for the feminist study of South African women's poetry. I argue for the use of a socio-historical and contextual approach, one that accepts the "presence" of women as poets and acknowledges their voices and their attempts to define themselves as women and as writers. Using the preliminary work of Anglo-American theorists as a point of reference, I attempt to justify the validity of my model of reading as a means of analysing the poetry written by women in this country.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel probeer om 'n teoretiese raamwerk op te stel waarbinne 'n feministiese studie van die poësie deur Suid-Afrikaanse vroue geakkommodeer kan word. Die gebruik van 'n sosio-historiese en kontekstuele benadering word bepleit, aangesien die "teenwoordigheid" van vroue as digters binne so 'n raamwerk aanvaar en hulle stemme en pogings om hulleself as vroue en skrywers te definieer erken word. Met die voorbereidende werk van Anglo-Amerikaanse teoretici as uitgangspunt word regverdiging gesoek vir die geldigheid van die voorgestelde leesmodel as 'n metode vir die bestudering van die poësie van Suid-Afrikaanse vroue.

## 1

Searching for words  
to contain the morning  
I looked beyond the line of trees  
at the white sky  
hung in the branches

And the words swarmed out  
like bits of black grit  
from the dark spreading pine  
cutting the sky  
and darkening my mind  
till I turned away

turned back to a garden  
overgrown with words  
sharp as blades

I searched  
till bleeding  
I found  
a flower  
with a face  
black as the sun<sup>2</sup>

For women poets, such as Jennifer Davids, the search for words has often been a painful process. Women have been required to alienate themselves from their gender identity, to assume the voices and the language of men, and to express themselves in terms of discourses shaped within an androcentric society. How, then, would a feminist critic analyse and evaluate the work of women poets, and what are the methods such a critic must employ? Masculine paradigms and models cannot be used, or even – I believe – appropriated and adapted. I have shown elsewhere how the masculine poetic tradition in South African English letters has functioned to marginalise and exclude women, rendering them as absences within the critical discourse of the institutionalised study of literary writing (Lockett 1988: 50). Yet despite their marginalisation, in South Africa women poets have constantly fought to affirm their presence, both as women and as poets. It will be my aim in this paper to begin to develop a theoretical model that will acknowledge the voices of these poets, and to attempt to provide an outline of the parameters within which such poetry may be examined.

In contemporary feminist scholarship in general most critical and intellectual energy has been focused on theory and the novel. Very little work has been done on attempting to provide models for studying women's poetry, although recently feminist critics, especially in America and England, have begun to explore this area. In this paper I will use their work as a point of reference in my own attempts to provide a model that can be applied to the work of South African women. In beginning to construct such a model it is necessary to ask the questions: "What is it that such a model must do? What kind of information must it provide? American radical feminist critic and poet, Adrienne Rich, suggests a starting point:

A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name – and therefore live – afresh.

(Rich 1979: 35)

Rich argues that a radical re-reading of androcentric "literature" would need to concentrate on ways in which language – and this must include the language of poetry – has trapped and liberated women, and she encourages women to take the initiative in the crucial activities of "seeing" and "naming" from a fresh perspective. In other words, feminists must formulate their own theory and discourse. Yet it is important to heed Elaine Showalter's warning that in framing a "gynocritical" model, the feminist critic must develop this with reference to women's work and women's criticism:

So long as we look to androcentric models for our most basic principles – even if we revise them by adding the feminist frame of reference – we are learning nothing new . . . I do not think that feminist criticism can find a usable past in

the androcentric critical tradition. It has more to learn from international feminist theory than from another seminar on the masters.

(Showalter 1981: 247)

Showalter's caveat in effect means that the feminist critic of South African women's poetry should not attempt to adapt current theoretical models for the study of poetry, in the line of those proposed by contemporary theorists of South African poetry such as Stephen Watson, Douglas Reid Skinner or Michael Chapman<sup>3</sup> – nor would she attempt to insert women's poetry into the existing canon. Feminist inquiry into this field needs to turn away from the overwhelmingly androcentric, and often misogynist tradition and begin to listen to and learn from the voices of the women poets on the margins. Once such critics begin to listen to these voices and to read the poetry of South African women, the need for a feminine theoretical model of analysis and evaluation arises.

## 2

The primary way in which a feminine critical paradigm would differ markedly from its masculine counterpart would be in terms of aesthetics and value judgements – since it is in this area that women have been excluded as poets. It is clear that the criteria used to create the South African poetic canon have been, and continue to be, gender-specific: The predominant critical approaches to poetry practised in this country in this century – formalism and “prac crit” – have evolved from the intellectual endeavours of Anglo-American male critics, and even contemporary historical and sociological criticism, such as that practised by Michael Chapman, examines poetry within the confines of masculine social and historical parameters. To be effective in re-instating the woman as poet in South Africa, a feminine discourse needs to develop a poetics based in the history and sociology of women as a marginalised group. American critic Josephine Donovan outlines the basis for such a discourse:

Women's aesthetic and ethical judgements, when authentic, are rooted in woman-identified, or woman-centred epistemology. That epistemology derives from women's cultural experience and practice (praxis). To understand women's art one must have a knowledge of women's experience and practice. A women's poetics will be constructed from comprehensive studies of women's stylistics and thematics, but those studies must be informed by an understanding of women's ways of seeing, a woman's epistemology.

(Donovan 1987: 98)

Donovan's proposal that a “women's poetics” must be based on a women's epistemology is a valuable point of departure, but can only be accepted in the South African context with two modifications: firstly, Donovan's insistence on the authenticity of women's experience must not be seen as a sanctioning of biological essentialism, and secondly, one must accept that in South Africa the community of women is not homogeneous and that there is, therefore, no single or universal “women's experience”.

In the first instance, it is my contention in this paper that “women’s experience” is not an essentialist category – rather what constitutes women’s experience is determined by socially and culturally imposed gender roles which are determined by cultural gender politics. Women’s experience is different, but it is so because women are socialised differently to men. It is difficult to speak about the “authenticity” of their experience if this is the case, since all experience will be “authentic”, unless one accepts that Donovan is referring to women’s experience unmediated by androcentric assumptions about women’s inferiority and women’s “place”. In the second instance, it is important to note that the community of women in South Africa is heterogeneous, and that the “experience” of white middle-class women who live under gender oppression will be separate and distinct from that of working class and black women who must cope with the oppression of class and race as well as gender. It is therefore not possible to develop a single women’s poetics since allowances must be made, in the critical study of the work of women, for intersections of issues of race and class with those of gender. The importance of such distinctions can clearly be seen in an analysis of the Jennifer Davids poem that prefaces this paper. Read from a purely feminist or gendered perspective, the poem records the difficulties of a woman in her “search for words”. Davids focuses on the painful nature of her search, where “words/ sharp as blades” cut into her until she bleeds. Yet the search is not fruitless, for it culminates in the discovery, in the garden of words, of a flower “with a face/ black as the sun”. This climax might suggest that the “flower” of poetry held by women poets is a dark and negative gift, one imbued with the energy of the sun, but nevertheless a bitter one. The feminist critic might conclude that even when Davids finds creative energy to “contain” her experience, its face is dark and destructive because she is bound within a masculine poetic tradition of “words/ sharp as blades”. Yet if the critic is sensitive to the issues of race, it becomes clear that the black woman poet is also learning to negotiate her way within a tradition that is not only androcentric, but Eurocentric. The emphasis on darkness and blackness does highlight sombreness and pain – but the flower whose face is “black as the sun” is also a symbol for black creative energy, an energy that must flower in the garden of words, so long the preserve of white middle-class men. The fact that Davids looks up at the “white sky” suggests that the transcendent realm of poetry is dominated by white writers, yet the flower whose face is “black as the sun” suggests an energy that can fill the sky and overwhelm the whiteness. The poem is therefore ambiguous, but its readings multiply to a critic who is aware of both race and gender. The creative experience of a black woman poet such as Jennifer Davids includes also elements of class as well as race. Her best known piece, “Poem for my Mother” (Lockett 1990: 201), illustrates her battle with elements of class, for in becoming a poet, Davids places herself within a middle-class group of educated women, and this in turn places her at a remove from her working-class mother. The poem records their failure to “meet” on the issue of her creativity:

...

A poem isn't all  
 there is to life, you said  
 with your blue-ringed gaze  
 scanning the page  
 once looking over my shoulder  
 and back at the immediate  
 dirty water.

and my words  
 being clenched  
 smaller and  
 smaller.

Josephine Donovan, who proposes the idea of a women's epistemology as the basis of a women's poetics, also identifies "structural conditions" that have shaped women's lives and therefore, their world views, and uses these too in her suggested "women's poetics" (Donovan 1987: 100). Several of these proposals may be usefully adapted for formulating a discourse of South African women's poetry. The first condition she points to is that of oppression:

Women, whether in community or in isolation, share a condition of oppression, or otherness, that is imposed by governing patriarchal or androcentric ideologies. Women as a group, therefore, share certain awarenesses that are common to oppressed groups. There is a psychology of oppression, of colonization . . . aspects of the colonised mentality have been described by a number of theorists, notably Franz Fanon . . . one of the most important manifestations is the "internalization of otherness", a psychic alienation that is fundamentally schizophrenic.

(Donovan 1987: 100)

Donovan classifies women as a colonised group, one that has been colonised by men. As such they have been forced to submit to the will or power of the dominant male culture. They have had to suppress or relegate to a secondary place their own cultural values and their own experience. Women are taught to accept the values of masculine culture as primary and to internalise such values: these include a world view that sees women as the "other". The internalisation of otherness produces a psychic alienation akin to schizophrenia, since women – especially women writers and artists – must develop two selves. The poetic self attempts to create a persona who can participate in the dominant culture, while the feminine self necessarily lives in and partakes of the subculture of women. The inevitable psychic alienation manifests itself as neurosis, sometimes as extreme as that of Sylvia Plath, which led to suicide, but often in more subtle ways that can only be discovered by a critic sensitive to these currents in women's poetry. Here, for example, are some of the ways in which South African women poets have expressed their sense of alienation and otherness:

...

Nothing is ever right in the spoon's bright mirror  
 Nothing but is converted to gross error.

The silver bowl has no need to reflect  
That which mirrors perform quite adequately –  
But even *their* left is right. Perhaps it is best  
To accept distortion, to remain sane seldom and secretly.

(Ruth Miller, from "The Spoon" in Lockett 1990: 164)

I set aside the things I wear,  
Beads, silk, and mundane stuff;  
Still my anxious body's there,  
I can not get bare enough.

Not till I shed flesh and bone  
Divest myself of clay, I'll be  
Quite sufficiently alone  
For mine ownself's company.

(Mary Morison Webster, "I Set Aside" in Lockett 1990: 95)

A woman's hands always hold something:  
A handbag, a vase, a child, a ring, an idea.  
My hands are tired of holding  
They simply want to fold themselves.  
On a crowded bus, I watched a nun's empty hands  
Till I reminded myself that she clutched God.  
My hands are tired of holding.  
I'd gladly let them go, and watch a pair of hands  
Run ownerless through the world  
Scattering cooking pots and flowers and rings.

(Eva Bezwoda, "A Woman's Hands" in Lockett 1990: 194)

The case with the work of black women is more complex, since in South Africa black women have, so far, identified primarily with black men as part of an oppressed group that has been colonised in racial, geographic and cultural terms. The black woman writer will also feel alienated, but she is more likely to identify the source of her alienation in the hegemonic white culture (although many contemporary black women are beginning to realise that issues of race and gender are interrelated and that both must be addressed in their struggle for decolonisation). In terms of racial oppression, however, – and many would argue that racial oppression is still the most important determinant in their daily lives – black women identify white women as part of the colonising group. This tends to prevent a sense of shared gender struggle between black women and white women and ensures that black women will express their alienation in different terms. Here, for example, is a poem in which a black woman poet confronts her white counterpart:

I tear my hungry babe from my breast  
To come and care for yours  
Your's grow up fine  
But, oh God, not mine  
From school and beach yours I fetch  
And wonder if school mine did reach

Your man comes home at night  
 A welcome and delight  
 Wine glass in hand  
 Red chair in front of fire bright  
 To bed you go and make love  
 My bed is empty and cold  
 For all my energy is drained away  
 My man and I too soon feel old

...

Can you still look me in the eye  
 And ask me what's wrong  
 After you've stripped me to the bone  
 You win and take everything I own  
 And still you want my home  
 What have I done that you won't leave me alone?

(Gladys Thomas, from "Leave Me Alone" in Lockett 1990: 187)

Black women poets not only face the conflict between the writing self and the woman's self, but they must also cope with added conflict between the dominant white culture and their own oppressed black culture, between the white bourgeoisie and the black working class, and between different class interests within their own social formations. Political convictions have often lead them to valorise traditional black culture as an oppositional gesture to the will of the white coloniser, which leads to further internalised conflicts between the patriarchal values of black culture and women's aspirations. A discourse of women's poetry that aims to do justice to the work of black women poets in South Africa must take into account these psychic dislocations in its reading of their work. For such poets, issues of race and class interface with those of gender. However, in the case of both groups of women writers, "the construction of a women's poetics must be seen as a part of the 'conscientisation' process, and gynocriticism as a form of 'revolutionary praxis'" (Donovan 1987: 101).

The second structure of experience identified by Josephine Donovan as shaping women's art is the fact that women have always been located primarily in the domestic or private sphere (Donovan 1987: 101). While women, especially black working-class women, have been economically active for almost the entire twentieth century, in cultural terms a woman's place is still considered to be the home and the rearing of children her special obligation, whether it be her own home and children or that of her "madam". In the past, and to a certain extent even now, this has meant that women have been socialised differently to men: girls have been trained to focus their interests primarily on the domestic sphere, learning to maintain a home and care for a family, while boys learn to strive for and aspire to things outside the home, and are psychologically equipped to make their way in the public world of men's affairs. While such unequal cultural conditioning results in women being less prepared to succeed within a competitive market economy, it also inevitably produces different modes of thinking within the two groups. Women learn to focus on their immediate environment, on everyday realities;

men learn to aspire toward intangible but rewarding goals. Women are involved in the repetitive and cyclic tasks of housework and child-rearing; men are generally involved in the linear progression of careers if they belong to the middle class. (Working-class (black) men tend to be involved in repetitive and cyclic tasks in factories and mines similar in nature to those of women, and in South Africa this has produced a psychology of oppression and alienation in racial terms similar to that produced in gender terms in women.) Domestic tasks are repetitive and interruptible – public careers ascend in linear fashion and are rarely interrupted. This probably means that women will, more often, tend to think in cyclic modes, while men will think in linear modes. Transferred to the realm of poetry, this concept means that the trope of the quest or journey – whether expressed as Wordsworth's aspiration towards the sublime or T.S. Eliot's journey through the shattered wasteland of his culture – is a particularly masculine mode of thinking. As Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi notes: "Both history and story, traditionally so full of quests as to be synonymous with them, may not be formally appropriate to express traditional female experience" (Rabuzzi 1982: 153). A women's poetics would, therefore, not denigrate women's poetry because it has failed to engage with such overtly masculine modes of creative thinking, rather it would seek to valorise the feminine ways in which women writers have expressed their world and their experiences of it in poetry. Careful observation of domestic immediacies and shorter pieces of work, instead of being trivialised, may instead give an added dimension to our poetry in both social and aesthetic terms. Moira Lovell's poem "Making Bread" (in Lockett 1990: 236), for example, brings a transcendent quality to a simple household task:

I who will bear no children,  
 Hold in the plastic womb of my hands  
 The breathing dough. In thick living folds  
 It stretches warmly through my fingers  
 And oozing, binds my knuckles  
 In its sluggish, pulsing flow.  
 Nestling again in my cupped palms  
 The naked mass exudes its life-stench  
  
 In a film of sweat. Breathing the smell  
 Of its being, I drown, mindlessly  
 Succumbing to the rhythm of growth.  
 And when it has expanded enough  
 I see myself pressing the life-ball  
 Into a little tin coffin. Trembling,  
 I recoil from the dark cremation  
 Which will dessicate my dough to bread;  
 Hold the life-pulse in my hands instead.

This particular poem has a feminine focus: it brings together traditional feminine concepts of childbirth and homemaking in a piece that concerns the larger issues of a woman's role as the protector of new life. Perhaps, in a gendered society, a feminine path to the transcendent may not be through religion or nature or any of the other traditional masculine routes; it may be

through simple tasks that put the woman poet in touch with the sources of life and growth – such as baking bread.

As a social and cultural group women also have in common the physiological experiences of their female bodies. The most common of these is menstruation, but many others also share the experience of childbirth. The common experience of monthly menstruation may reinforce women's views of their lives as cyclic and interruptible, but it also provides an indicator of an important female rite of passage, as noted by Marilyn Keegen ("Rites of Passage" in Lockett 1990: 285):

One afternoon  
just after I'd turned fourteen  
I would walk under a shell-white moon  
to the mine canteen  
for my Kotex with loops.

Mrs van Aswegen would lean to listen,  
smile at me, sisterly  
but with bloodshot eyes and wolfish lips.  
She'd disappear behind the counter  
come back the secret messenger,  
then slide over  
a square, brown paper bag.

And I would walk home, delicately  
pinching  
off rose-buds that swung  
over the wire mesh fence,  
hoping no-one would see  
the change in me  
but hoping they would.

In addition, the female-specific experience of childbirth provides a range of poetic experience entirely unavailable to men, and it is probably precisely for this reason that childbirth is generally a taboo subject in poetry (except where it has been appropriated by men as a trope for male creativity). For women it is a real and often miraculous physical experience, as for example, used by Tess Koller:

I journeyed last night to a far halt  
My mother's mothers knew.  
The sea plied criss-cross weft and shed its rind  
In the spin and loom of my tide,  
The tide that sliced me small with its flooded scythe  
And burgled my bones.  
I sped the blooded dew.

The mountains last night were the same walls  
My mother's mothers balked.  
The great crags clawed back toward the floor  
Of the sky and tore on the cawl

That covered every gleam, every thread of light.  
Those craters I toiled.  
Those steeps perforce I walked.

...

(from "I Journeyed Last Night" in Lockett 1990: 190)

In her long poem "Woman with Child" (in Lockett 1990: 268), Susan A. Wood also celebrates the growth of new life:

...

The baby's turned – the doctor says –  
head well down and waiting for birth.  
And I know you are there, immobile,  
your universe become  
a hoop of muscle  
and a crown of bone.  
Through my body  
I have sung to you  
of perpetual love  
lulled you with the pulses  
of my breath and heart  
and to you I have seemed  
unending.

...

However, not all women see this experience as solely celebratory. Here, for example, is an extract from Ingrid Jonker's ambiguous poem "Pregnant Woman" (Lockett 1990: 174):

I lie under the crust of night singing,  
curled up in the sewer, singing,  
and my bloodchild lies in the water.

...

Still singing flesh-red our blood-song,  
I and my yesterday,  
my yesterday hangs under my heart,  
my wild lily, my lullaby world,  
*and my heart that sings like a cicada,*  
my cicada-heart sings like a cicada;  
but sewer O sewer  
my bloodchild lies in the water.

...

An even darker vision is that of Ruth Miller in an extract from "Voicebox" (Lockett 1990: 161):

I have known her since I was a child.  
I recall her in the suffusion of one morning

With her firstborn in the incredible bed,  
 Its white horizon steppes stretching flatly  
 Past the headlands of the two fat pillows,  
 Furrowed with grooves of valley legs and loins;  
 Biblical birthing of the dark damp fur,  
 The cracked egg of the baby's skull repeating  
 'In, out breath; save me from harm  
 I am egg thin, have mercy on me Lord.'

...

Obviously, for all these poets, childbirth is a central feminine experience. Yet androcentric cultures reduce this creative experience to the trivial world of female domestic concerns and it is consequently seen to be unrelated to the important spiritual issues of men's poetry. Alicia Ostriker, poet, critic, and mother, argues for the advantages of such experience for the woman artist, and points to the misogyny behind male attitudes:

The advantages of motherhood for a woman artist is that it puts her in immediate and inescapable contact with the sources of life, death, beauty, growth, corruption. If she is a theoretician it teaches her things she could not learn otherwise; if she is a moralist it engages her in serious and useful work; if she is a romantic it constitutes an adventure which cannot be duplicated by any other, and which is guaranteed to supply her with experiences of utter joy and utter misery; if she is a classicist it will nicely illustrate the vanity of human wishes. If the woman artist has been trained to believe that the activities of motherhood are trivial, tangential to the main issues of life, irrelevant to the great themes of literature, she should untrain herself. The training is misogynist, it protects and perpetuates systems of thought and feeling which prefer violence and death to love and birth, and it is a lie.

(Ostriker 1986: 130–131)

For poets such as Ostriker, childbirth can be a gateway to the sacred – it puts the woman poet in touch with the creative side of her physical life; she can find transcendence in her participation in these processes. Rather than the negative focus on disintegration and death that seems to underlie so much masculine literary and critical thinking, a feminine discourse of women's poetry will offer a positive view of these creative and constructive aspects of women's lives.

Since western culture has consigned the role of childrearing to women, it is possible too that "maternal" thinking has developed a different mode to "paternal" thinking. Culturally assigned childrearing duties ensure that the woman is the one who nurtures the child and protects it in its earliest years. Sara Ruddick, in her paper "Maternal Thinking" suggests that the practice of mothering produces a certain mode of thinking: "I am increasingly convinced that there are female traditions and practices out of which a distinctive kind of thinking has developed" (Ruddick 1980: 346). Ruddick draws a distinction between maternal thinking and public or paternal thinking which she defines as "scientific". The mother, who must nurture the child, develops an attitude that Ruddick terms "holding", which involves caring and preserving, while

the ethos of the masculine scientific world is that of "acquiring": "The recognition of the priority of holding over acquiring . . . distinguishes maternal from scientific thought" (Ruddick 1980: 346). Maternal thinking is more inclined to produce respect for the processes of life and to realise that control over these is limited. Ruddick defines this as an ethic of humility, one that "accepts not only the facts of damage and death, but also the facts of the independent and uncontrollable developing and increasingly separate existence of its object and aspects, as a precondition, that the child will eventually outgrow the need for its mother's nurturing protection". Feminine maternal thinking accepts loss of control which paternal or scientific thinking finds untenable. Adèle Naudé accepts the loss of a child in her sonnet "Persephone" (in Lockett 1990: 138), but expresses also the pain and yearning that follow such acceptance:

She went away that day, my child, upon the train  
Away to school. I stood there lost, bereft,  
Upon the station platform in the rain.  
It seemed as though all things had gone and left  
Me empty-handed there. And then I knew  
How once with outstretched arms Demeter'd tried  
To hold her daughter when, withdrawing through  
Dark Dis's doors, she went at autumntide,  
For pomegranate seed she'd eaten there.  
But now it is again the time to sow  
For summer's bearing, till the ground, prepare  
Earth's slow awakening soil and soon, I know,  
Persephone will come to still my yearning.  
Already it's the spring of her returning!

With their acceptance of cycles, of loss and decay, women poets are less likely to insist on their immortality and to rage against the dying of the light, and more likely to accept the processes of corruption as part of normal life. In her poem "Fallen Leaves" (Lockett 1990: 120), Lilian Smit even finds beauty in these processes:

Faded and fallen are the leaves;  
Old age is like a tree in autumn.  
Subtle, silent are the thieves  
That bare duration's chilly branches.

Small seem the first few falling leaves,  
The slightly strained eye, ear and feet;  
The days are long that summer weaves  
And for defiance life is youth.

...

All bare, bare is the tree and leaves;  
No young disguise hides autumn lines,  
No gown, no flutter of green sleeves,  
Clear, clear, truly the bare tree shines.

Both the poems by Adèle Naudé and Lilian Smit might seem slight when viewed from a masculine perspective, but a feminist critic needs to be aware of the ways in which “maternal thinking” might manifest itself in the work of women poets and writers.

### 3

A discourse of women’s poetry, based on the above principles, would privilege content above form and would show itself to be sensitive to the lives of women poets and the ways in which their poetry mirrors their lives. However, such a “poetics” might find itself open to the charge that it ignores the special character of poetry as a genre – its distinctive use of form. This is the problem raised by Jan Montefiore in her book *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women’s Writing*, the first extended study of the relationship between feminist theory and poetry:

To read the women poets of the past and present for their covert or declared awareness of themselves as women is to lay a kind of grid of feminism over the map of poetry. Of course, this is in many respects a critical gain, for since women have throughout history endured oppression through their femaleness, and since women poets have written of this suffering with varying degrees of obliquity, bitterness or generosity, this grid at best enables the critic to read the map of poetry with a clear sense of direction and an enlarged richness of detail. But because if we stick exclusively to this grid we can read the map in no other way, the method makes for a finally limited critical practice. Graves’s “There is one story and one story only” is a wonderful line but a warning to critics. And criticism based on the assumption that what makes a poem valuable and interesting is its author’s awareness enacted within it, of her own dilemma as a woman (which in practice generally means her sexual/domestic life) risks reducing everything to the personal . . . A poem is always a pattern of words, creating its particular meaning from the relation between the material reality of language – sounds, breathing, letters on a page – and the images and ideas which they signify. As Pasternak wrote “The music of the word . . . does not consist of the euphony of vowels and consonants taken by themselves, but of the relationships between the meaning, and the sounds of words. This relationship, of course, exists wherever language is used. But it is the power of poetry, uniquely among forms of speech and writing, to manifest this relation, whether as pleasure or as paradox”.

(Montefiore 1987: 8–7)

There are several assumptions in Montefiore’s argument that can only be termed androcentric. She considers that the feminist “grid” placed over the “map” of poetry is reductive and that “reducing” the field of poetic study to the personal – which she defines as the sexual/domestic side of women’s lives – is to diminish the interest of poetry. I would argue strongly with her use of the word “reducing”, since a focus on these specific areas is not only enriching to poetry in general, but may also demonstrate the ways in which women think, write and use language differently to their male counterparts. Furthermore, the “personal” has been a specific topic of feminist study since the late 60s and 70s when Kate Millet showed how the personal impinges on the

critical in her pioneering study *Sexual Politics*, and radical feminist activists in England and America adopted the slogan "the personal is political". It is a political and feminist activity to study and evaluate women's poetry in terms of the personal and to illuminate gender struggle in terms of poetic praxis. Montefiore, in her turn, reduces the field of feminist criticism to interest only in "the woman poet's awareness . . . of her own dilemma as a woman". She equates this "awareness" with oppression and suffering; as I have shown above, the feminist discourse of poetry *must* include not only an awareness of oppression, but also, and more importantly, an awareness of the ways in which feminine thinking and writing have contributed positively to poetry. The feminist critic, in turn, must also emphasise the positive aspects of women's work and not merely simplify feminist criticism into a study of women as victims.

As a critic, Montefiore seems to have internalised much of the masculine discourse of poetry, and this weakens her argument considerably. She seems happy to rely on masculine definitions of the nature of poetry, such as those provided by Graves and Pasternak. She ignores the misogynistic basis of androcentric discourses about poetry and the fact that formalism is a male discourse that has functioned to exclude women. It has done this by privileging certain forms *and their content*, and yet claiming that content is not the issue, but rather form. For example, the epic form so beloved of masculine poets from Homer to Campbell, presupposes the content of the heroic quest, a particularly masculine topic. Yet women poets are supposedly judged merely according to "formal" criteria, while the content presupposed by the sanctioned masculine form is overlooked in the attempt to provide ideological justification for silencing women on the grounds of formal incompetence.

It cannot be argued, however, that Montefiore is not correct when she notes that poetry derives its specificity from the relation between language and form, and meaning. But in recognising this, the feminist critic must also recognise that language and discourse have always been male-dominated areas where women must struggle to be heard. Josephine Donovan draws on French poststructuralist theory to make this point: "To enter into the public realm of history – what the French Lacanian feminists call the realm of the Symbolic – means in a sense to capitulate to male domination. But to remain in the pre-literate, pre-Oedipal realm of the Mother, of female dominance and authenticity, means to remain silent" (Donovan 1987: 101). Montefiore seems to recognise as much when she discusses the relationship between masculine tradition and the woman poet: "Tradition appears as determining in the way it defines the symbolic and referential context of the poems, and not necessarily as a product of the poet's own intention . . . poetic tradition needs to be seen not only as a defining context, but as an area of perpetual struggle, both political and intellectual" (Montefiore 1987: 19–20). Yet despite her implied acceptance that poetry *must* be an area of conflict for women poets, Montefiore is still prepared to make evaluative statements, based on formalist criteria, concerning "good" and "bad" poetry. For example, in her discussion of a recent anthology of women's poetry, *Scars*

*Upon my Heart* (1981), she says: “However grateful we are to the editor for disinterring these poems (which are full of interests to the social historian of ideologies), it cannot be pretended that many of them are good, most being uncomfortably reminiscent of the ‘original contributions’ section of an old-fashioned school magazine. In other words the general effect is conventional, sincere and amateurish” (Montefiore 1987: 65). From a formalist perspective, Montefiore is probably quite right about this work, yet her judgement denies the very specificity of the socio-historical context of women as poets, and the constant struggle of women with an alien medium. For a feminist critic of poetry, or a feminist theorist aiming to create a discourse of women’s poetry, formal value and linguistic competence cannot be the determining factor in evaluating women’s work.

Perhaps what is lacking in Montefiore’s analysis is a clear vision of the aims and objectives of feminist literary criticism, whether of poetry or of any other form of writing. A feminist critic is interested, before all else, in what Ellen Messer-Davidow defines as “the feminist study of ideas about sex and gender that people express in literary and critical media” (Messer-Davidow 1987: 77). Consequently, in analysing poetry, this will be the main perspective of the critic, rather than formal competence. Messer-Davidow goes on to point out that traditional critical paradigms, such as formalism, are based on male norms:

Traditionalists make the male the norm – the pattern for a group, the model for humanity, the standard of quality. Focussing exclusively on the male, they make it the norm by default. If they construe the male as the norm for a male population, the standardisation effaces race, class and other specificities, or if for humanity, the standardisation effaces sex/gender. They incorrectly extrapolate a human norm from a homogenous population when they derive models of psychological development from male subjects, of linguistic competence from male speech, of genre from male-authored works. More perversely, focussing centrally on the male, they make it the human norm by a democratic logic that converts majority into quality and female marginality into deviance.

(Messer-Davidow 1987: 84)

Messer-Davidow goes on to quote the critic William W. Morgan, who asserts that literary tradition,

... like the governmental, religious, educational, economic and social traditions of which it is a part, has operated by and large according to male norms and has excluded, distorted or undervalued female experience, female perceptions, female art and female scholarship and criticism ... *insofar as it presents itself as a history, analysis and evaluation of human literary activity, everything that we know as the literary cultural tradition is, simply, wrong; it is a history principally of male activity, analyzed and evaluated according to male norms.*

(Messer-Davidow 1987: 84)

The fact that women’s poetry has always been undervalued when judged by male standards is most graphically illustrated in the South African context – where that which constitutes the tradition is overwhelmingly masculine, and where academics and students speak with authority about the rarity of South

African women who are poets.<sup>4</sup> There have been, and still are, a great number of women poets in this country, their work fills the pages of the anthology *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women's Poetry*. But if we are to appreciate their contribution to the culture of letters in this country we have to develop new ways of speaking and writing about their work. The methodology that I have outlined above concurs with the recommendations of Ellen Messer-Davidow that, in order to liberate women's work from the constraints of male paradigms, feminists must develop their own discourses: "The methods of feminist literary study include specifying, patterning, and approximating systems that include us: they are employed to discover and change the gendered literary-cultural system. While traditional literary critics as agents fade from the domain of study, leaving their stances like plumes of smoke trailing behind them, feminist literary critics stand forth in a domain of our making, revealing our perspectivity – and theirs" (Messer-Davidow 1987: 88). Messer-Davidow goes on to develop an approach which she calls "perspectivism", which is eclectic and implicitly includes many of the ideas outlined in this essay:

Feminist epistemology is based on the assumption that we as diverse knowers must insert ourselves and our perspectives into the domain of study and become, self-reflexively, part of the investigation. These perspectives are the requisite of our knowledge. Perspective is the effect of relative position and distance; visually it means that the configuration seen varies with the observer's standpoints. Through the circumstances of life, people acquire specific feelings, ideas and values that situate them relative to *any* subject. Because their situations differ, their perspectives diverge. The circumstances that diversify perspectives are: (1) our affiliation with a sex, race, class, affectional preference, and other cultural circumstances; (2) our personal histories; (3) our technical approaches to inquiry; and (4) our self-relexivity or awareness of the ways these factors organise existence . . . Reflecting multiple stances, we need to develop *perspectivism* . . . Perspectivism would bring together, in processes of knowing, the personal and cultural, subjective and objective – replacing dichotomies with a systemic understanding of how and what we see.

(Messer-Davidow 1987: 88–89)

In the study of women's poetry we need, as Messer-Davidow suggests, to rise above the value judgements inherent in traditional dichotomies such as those of good:bad in relation to the binary opposition of male:female. Messer-Davidow's perspectivism urges an amalgamation of perspectives important to women both as poets and as critics and theorists – an amalgamation of the personal, the cultural, the subjective and the objective. Such fields of interest, based in the discourses of women's poetry, must replace traditional masculine value systems. This is not to suggest that feminists eliminate formal competence from their discourse entirely – rather it will become just another of many perspectives, and one recognised to be subject to historical constraints. A poem judged to be "bad" in formal terms may reveal a richness of interpretation when viewed from another perspective – whether personal, social, economic or gendered. Its very failure to attain formal excellence may

reveal a wealth of information about the writer, her context, and her struggles with her work and her gender identity.

## Notes

1. I wish to acknowledge the financial assistance of the HSRC towards my doctoral research into South African women's poetry. The views expressed in this paper are, however, my own and not those of the HSRC.
2. With the exception of this poem which appears in Jennifer Davids's collection *Searching for Words* (1974), all poems quoted in this paper are from my anthology *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women's Poetry*.
3. Stephen Watson and Douglas Reid Skinner, both published poets, have established themselves as theorists of poetry through their control of the journal *Upstream* which recently amalgamated with *Contrast* to form *New Contrast*. Michael Chapman's influence is felt mainly through his study *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1986).
4. In a review of the work of Ingrid de Kok (*Weekly Mail* September 16–22, 1988) Stephen Watson says: "Among the many anomalies of South African English poetry is the absence of women poets who figure prominently in it." In the same year I was given an essay by an Honours student comparing the work of Ingrid Jonker and Ruth Miller. The student commenced the essay by pointing out that both poets were members of a very rare species – the South African woman poet.

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