

# The kitchen as battlefield – with special reference to the award winning play, *Kitchen Blues*<sup>1</sup>, by Jeanne Goosen

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## Summary

Goosen takes a strong feminist stand, challenging the conventional view people hold regarding violence, war, women, sexism and the romantic hue surrounding the military. In this hour long one woman play, Goosen returns women to the kitchen, claiming that a woman's kitchen is her "memory bank", stating that the actual power base in society is located in the kitchen. The entire play is set in the kitchen which becomes the battlefield, the source of the social and political conflict.

Life/creation and death/destruction are brought into sharp focus as balancing forces. While the main character, simply called Kitchen Woman, cooks (and kills) she attempts to write (create) just one immortal sentence while a politically inspired war rages on outside the kitchen.

She is aware of the violence outside, the violence which marks a war, but it is not part of her. She slaughters, and then chops up and cooks the chicken while surveying and commenting on the most deadly weapons found in any house: the kitchen utensils.

She experiences what people in battle experience in the same manner a voyeur might, when she viciously cuts up the chicken. She has to kill to live, to survive. She is aware of the outside world, of the past, the future. Her best friend is involved in clandestine political activities which result in her death – a death which serves as the culmination of all the horror of war and is the main character's internalisation of the violence. The Kitchen Woman gives voice to the voiceless, asks all the unanswered questions people ask during times of violent conflict, takes a defiant stand against God, the ultimate patriarch, who allows, perhaps even condones, the senseless killing.

## Opsomming

Goosen neem 'n sterk feministiese standpunt in, wat die konvensionele beskouing van mense ten opsigte van geweld, oorlog, vroue, seksisme en die romantiese waas wat die militêre omring, betwis. In die uurlange eenpersoonsopvoering, plaas Goosen weer die vrou terug in die kombuis, met die bewering dat 'n vrou se kombuis haar geheuebank is, en konstateer dat die werklike magsbasis in die gemeenskap in die kombuis geleë is. Die opvoering speel in die kombuis af, wat 'n slagveld word – die oorsprong van die sosiale en politieke konflik.

Lewe/skepping en dood/verwoesting word die fokus van ewewigsmagte. Terwyl die hoofkarakter, wat eenvoudig die Kombuisvrou genoem word, kook (en doodmaak), trag sy om een onsterflike sin te skryf (skep), terwyl 'n politiek gemotiveerde oorlog buite die kombuis woed. Sy is bewus van die geweld buite, die geweld wat 'n oorlog kenmerk, maar dit is nie deel van haar nie. Sy slag, sny en kook die hoender terwyl sy die dodelike wapens, eie aan enige huis, in oënskyn neem en kommentaar daaroor lewer: kombuis-gereedskap.

Byna soos 'n voyeur, ondervind sy wat mense gedurende 'n geveg belewe terwyl sy die hoender in stukke sny. Sy moet doodmaak om te lewe, om te oorlewe. Sy is bewus van die buitewêreld, van die verlede, van die toekoms. Haar beste vriendin is gewikkel in ongeoorloofde politieke aktiwiteite wat haar dood veroorsaak – 'n dood wat dien as die kulminasie van al die gruwels van oorlog en die hoofkarakter se internalisering van geweld. Die Kombuisvrou gee stem aan die stemlose, vra al die onbeantwoorde vrae wat mense vra tydens tye van gewelddadige konflik, neem 'n uitdagende houding in teenoor God, die eintlike en uiteindelijke patriarg, wat die sinlose slagting toelaat of dit moontlik nog goedkeur.

Looking at the title of this paper, two questions come to mind. The first is: Who is Jeanne Goosen<sup>2</sup>, and the second is: How is it possible to equate a kitchen with a battlefield?

In order to understand the metaphor on which the play is based, it is essential to turn to the apparent anomaly contained in the title of the paper, namely: How is it possible to equate a kitchen with a battlefield?

In defining the kitchen as battlefield, it would appear that this definition or description contains two mutually exclusive concepts, being kitchen and battlefield. While it is customary to find a kitchen on or near a battlefield, it is a totally foreign concept to look upon the kitchen as a battlefield.

The kitchen is usually associated with a standard home, and more often than not, with a "standard" woman, if I may use such a term. In fact, quite a number of linguistic strings have been formulated to serve as sexist insults, focusing specifically on the apparent close bond which exists between a woman and her kitchen. These sexist insults were specifically designed in order to ensure, or at least to attempt to ensure, that women will not stray from their traditional and designer stereotype which demands that they will be homemakers, comfortable home bodies, cleaners who breed, obey, serve and satisfy their masters. Examples of these insults which are designed to make women who break from the designer stereotypes feel guilty while these manipulative sexist remarks in fact seek to entrap, enslave and control women, are the following:

A woman's place is in the kitchen

A woman belongs in the kitchen – preferably barefoot and pregnant (x I like my women in the kitchen – barefoot and pregnant)

In the above examples, the linguistic and emotive link which is established between the two concepts, woman and kitchen, is negative in the extreme, but the terms are mutually inclusive. In contrast to these mutually inclusive terms, the terms *kitchen* and *battlefield* are mutually exclusive when used in the semantic context as contained in the title. That this is a false premise, becomes clear upon reading the award winning play, *Kitchen Blues* by the Afrikaans writer, Jeanne Goosen.

There is, however, one major difference between the traditional and thus male battlefield and Goosen's kitchen as battlefield. Life/creation and death/destruction are brought into sharp focus as balancing forces. While the main character, simply called Kitchen Woman, cooks (and kills) she attempts to write (create) just one immortal sentence while a politically inspired war rages on outside the kitchen.

Thus where a traditional battlefield carries with it only associations of (often futile) death and destruction with conflict and triumph as its two opposing poles, the concept kitchen as battlefield has positive associations as the result of the battle is measured in terms of sustenance, and the main character in the play, called Kitchen Woman, endeavours to write just one immortal line. This represents creativity on two levels, being on a cultural level (the writing of the *manuscript*), as well as sustaining physical creativity (life) by means of the food which is prepared throughout the play.

Goosen thus challenges the concept that the kitchen is associated with positive emotions, that it is a “safe” place, that it is the place where the woman belongs because of her low status in life, that it is a haven for the woman in which to express her woman-ness or her femaleness.

This then brings us to the second question, namely: Who is Jeanne Goosen?

Jeanne Goosen is the most important feminist writer in South Africa today, and one of the most important writers in the political and literary history of the country. Yet, although she is an award winning writer, she has not nearly received the literary acclaim due to her as she isn’t a “safe” writer. Instead she is a writer who thematically deals with feminism, sexism, suppression, and the politics of disenfranchisement. These are her subjects. Subjects which she uses as literary missiles which one has to view on at least two levels, being, firstly, the theme or subject of her writing, and secondly, fulfilling a specific function – for Goosen uses literature, and the female characters in the applicable literature, as activists. It is not the political activists who address us from their stages all over the country that society fears. It fears these literary activists, these fictional characters who somehow become larger than life. The activist character, Emma, says the following in the play:

Violence is not the awakening of barbaric instincts. You can only understand violence if you are personally involved. Violence is the only pure act left.

After having gesticulated viciously with her flick knife, Emma continues, saying:

He who takes the knife and cuts the throat of the fucking tyrant, destroys the oppressor, but at the same time he destroys his own feelings of inferiority. He recovers self respect. He recreates himself – once again he has hope. A new humanity. Violence purifies! It is creative. It is cathartic.

Jeanne Goosen was the first Afrikaans writer to put sexism under the spotlight when she wrote her first novel, *Om ’n mens na te boots* (which title translates roughly as “Imitating a human being”).

There are three characters in the novel. They all have sexless names, i.e. names which in the conventional sense do not indicate whether they are male or female names. There are no linguistic markers in the novel, no easy “he’s” or “she’s” to guide the reader. The three characters are merely three people living in the same house, interacting, loving and fighting with one another as though it was a normal situation.

The novel has great literary merit – yet, it has more or less been ignored by academics, critics and teachers of literature as it attacks the status quo, the existing power base – and it disturbs the comfortable sex classifications in terms of which power is exercised.

This attack is continued in a comic and light-hearted short story, “They call me Jean.” In this short story, which is a send up of the macho character, the main character is a woman and similar in nature to the characters Clint Eastwood portrays in his macho cowboy type films. The men in the bar take bets as to whether the character is male or female. When a fight erupts, the

character beats up all the men, collects the money set aside for the bets and leaves. But as she passes the reception desk in the hotel foyer, the receptionist – and a “real”, stereotypical woman – attempts to make contact, ostensibly believing that the character is a man.

The relationship between the three people in *Om 'n mens na te boots* is balanced by power – the same power society uses to keep the one sex empowered, the other, powerless. The novel clearly spells out that one need not be a white male to wield power as power structures are determined by other things than by being born of the male sex. As such, the novel is a powerful attack on suppression based on biological sex differentiation and seeks to question not only the power base on which society is built, but also the traditional values which it relies on to protect and maintain itself.

When Goosen's second novel, *Louoond* (1987) (roughly translated as “Warming Drawer”) was published, she took a strong feminist stand, challenging the conventional view people held regarding violence, war, women, sexism and the romantic hue surrounding the military. She dared to take the women back into, and place them in the kitchen, to let them live from and through the kitchen, claiming that a woman's kitchen is her “memory bank”.

The novel from which the play developed, was praised by a few critics, ignored by most who could not deal with the manner in which Goosen eroded the power base, claiming it back for women by insisting that the actual power base in society is located in the kitchen. The main character in the play, *Kitchen Woman*, accepts that the kitchen is her power base when she says:

Fuck, this woman is a crack kitchen director. She governs her domain with a sharp knife.

When the novel failed to enjoy the recognition due to it, Goosen sat down and turned it into a one woman play, featuring the main character in the novel as the woman in the play. There are five characters in the play, all being women, and the actress who performs this one woman play, has to portray all the characters by varying her tone, inflection, clothing, and in one instance, by addressing a large, green “soft toy” frog which is a stage prop and which represents Gran. Instead of kissing the frog and finding a prince, the frog represents the *Kitchen Woman*'s history, her roots, and, to a large extent, her future.

The entire play is set in the kitchen which becomes the battlefield, the source of the conflict.

In this hour long one woman play with the straight forward and very direct title of *Kitchen Blues* Goosen returns women to the kitchen, claiming that a woman's kitchen is her “memory bank”, stating that the actual power base in society is located in the kitchen. The entire play is set in the kitchen which becomes the battlefield, the source of social and political conflict, mirroring the social and political conflict as it is played out in society.

Goosen's main point of departure in the play, namely that a kitchen is a woman's memory bank, is illustrated when *Kitchen Woman* says the following regarding her training as a woman and her memory of her grandmother:

(Kitchen Woman becomes herself, sits on a chair in despair:)

Could Gran once have been rosy, fragile and edible? (Smacks her lips.

Music: Blues for Jeanne by Johannes Kerkorrel fades in:)

I live in the tradition of Every Woman. My Kitchen is the storeroom of my memories. I need nothing else.

(It sounds as if she is reciting the following words:)

Gran and I are sitting on the verandah, two women in the world, with straight backs and conservative to boot. Gran owns thirty aprons and keeps a lock of my hair in her Bible.

Gran's head falls forward. Gran is dead. Her body still half full of groceries. She had been eating fruit to pass the time. (Kitchen Woman points viciously to the frog:.) She is my history.

Goosen furthermore believes that the kitchen is the most dangerous place in the home, and one of the most accessible places in society where one readily finds dangerous weapons such as knives, forks, scissors and the like.

It is the one place where a woman is the aggressor, so to speak. She chops, cuts, slices, spears, and saws when necessary, and although no actual slaughtering or plucking takes place in the modern Western kitchen, it remains an activity which is associated with the traditional kitchen which in turn is embedded in the memory bank. From the mayhem committed in this kitchen, the woman daily brings forth the fruits of her labour: life sustaining food, served to her man, children, friends and family. By putting the food on the table, she has fulfilled one of her most important functions as a woman, namely that of nurturing, and no one is aware of the fact that she has made use of some of the most dangerous weapons in order to achieve her aim – weapons generally associated with aggression, assault, violence and even death.

Goosen empowers women by equipping them with the same power, the same strength, the same resilience, the same aggression as that which men have claimed for themselves as soldiers over the centuries when she emphatically states that the kitchen is equal to the battlefield, that it is the battlefield.

While the main character cooks and attempts to write just one immortal sentence, the war rages on between two black groups, the Wit Doeke and the Comrades who are killing each other in a war which is politically inspired.

Kitchen Woman is aware of the violence outside, the violence which marks a war, but it is not part of her. She slaughters, chops up the chicken, surveys and comments on the most deadly weapons found in any house: the kitchen utensils.

She is caught in her own world, the battlefield she enters each day when she enters her kitchen. She experiences what people in battle experience in the same manner a voyeur might when she viciously cuts up the chicken. She has to kill to live, to survive. She is aware of the outside world, of the past, the future. Gradually she becomes aware of the war outside the kitchen, and even more gradually, she becomes part of it. Her personal kitchen experience is paralleled by the violence, the slaughter outside, the violence of the senseless war. Her best friend is involved in clandestine political activities which result

in her death – a death which serves as the culmination of all the horror in the main character's internalisation of the violence.

After having swatted some flies, the Kitchen Woman opens the newspaper which has just been delivered. A picture catches her eye. Initially she is merely curious and her remarks clearly indicate that it isn't her war, that the horror of the war holds nothing more than mere curiosity value. It is only when she recognises her friend that the full horror of the war strikes her, that she becomes involved, that she begins to feel for the victims, that she begins to understand what war means:

Good God, look at this pile of corpses. There must be war in the township again. It is just a heap of bones. It looks as though something has eaten parts of them. They don't even have all their hands and feet, bodies swollen like party balloons, eyes open, unfocused like the eyes of the newly born. The top one has a goitre. My God, it's Emma!

Once the recognition has set in, she crawls under the table with grief, crying like someone who has been injured, screams out her sorrow, her loss before saying:

Nothing is safe anymore. Nothing is the same. This is our new history. This is the unknown face of the future.

Now the full implications of the violence hit her – and only now she knows that she has not been prepared to face a future like this:

My parents never armed me. They gave me some Bible texts and their best wishes. They cautioned me. They sent me into life. Left me to find my own way.

Once she has internalised the violence and the effects thereof, she gives voice to the voiceless, asks all the unanswered questions people ask during times of violent conflict, takes a defiant stand against God, the ultimate patriarch, who allows, perhaps even condones, the senseless killing. The questions are rhetoric questions by their very nature, but they express all the anger, the full inability to understand why people have to die in the senseless killings. They express the sense of loss, the pain and fear she feels upon understanding that no one is safe, no one is above violence, protected against the futility of a violent and senseless death:

Jesus, God, You sit there, watching, waiting, not lifting a finger.

And finally she accuses God of deliberately putting people through this ordeal:

We must die, but before the last shudder of life leaves us, we must know the most terrible fear. You demand that we love forever (. . .) Jesus, God, You who are in breach of contract with the devil, Your attention please! Do You ever read our newspapers?"

She finally understands that she is not safe from the battlefield while she is in her kitchen – she is surrounded by it, she commands it. She is all powerful.

The knowledge of all this horrible power, of the effects of this power, nearly destroys her. She recalls Emma (literally from her death), and in her imagination they leave in a motorboat. While the boat is anchored somewhere at sea, Kitchen Woman has a conversation with Emma, explaining that one should make use of chemical substances to put an end to the futility, to the meaningless violence, death and destruction:

What I am trying to say is that if you can eradicate the maniac within man, you will be able to take him away from the power hungry, from murder, from death.

After having an argument about control by means of chemical substances, Kitchen Woman suddenly realises that it is Wednesday, the day on which the army (military) open their toilet sluices and flush their sewage into the sea. Surrounded by excrement in the sea, the scene changes. Kitchen Woman gets out of the boat and is back in the kitchen. She tidies it methodically. Then she serves the manuscript – her attempt at creativity, at immortality – to each of the imaginary guests at her table. In so doing the two levels of creativity are unified into one: imaginary sustenance. As imaginary as the excrement in the sea of which she says:

Everything that has happened and was done for billions and billions of years, on and above the earth, in heaven and even in the sea, was in the service of and for the survival of a species with a consciousness. Hallelujah! A flash is a thousand years. And turd by turd we have to crawl through it.

It is the destiny of the human being.

First the novel and thereafter the play destroys the myths surrounding women in general, women in their kitchens, war, political conflict and violence. It offers a blinding flash of insight which destroys the comfortable beliefs around which society turns.

## Notes

1. The play, *Kitchen Blues*, was written in Afrikaans and has been performed in theatres all over the Republic of South Africa. The translation thereof was done by me, but although it has been accepted for publication it has yet to be published. The original script was published in 1992 by Haum-Literêr: *Drie Eenakters: Kombuis Blues, Kopstukke & Koffer in die Kas*.
2. After the play had been produced at the Grahamstown Festival, Jeanne Goosen was unanimously chosen as the Playwright of the Year.