

Feminist Aesthetics: Aspects of Race, Class and Gender in the Constitution of South African Short Fiction by Women

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Summary

This essay focuses on the history of short stories by South African women of all races in an attempt to elucidate existing concepts pertaining to race, class and gender. It transpires that the first phase of modern feminist criticism was directed at exposing patriarchal tendencies prevalent in language and literature, while the second phase assessed the meaning and value of writing by women. The writer postulates that a perspective is imperative that both recognises and articulates intrinsic differentiation. Simultaneously, there should be an awareness of existing interrelationships allowing for different identities, divergent politics and dissimilar struggles.

“Woman”, per se, cannot be regarded as a stable identity because of diversification related to politics, culture and customs. The writer maintains that differences within ourselves have to be understood first before we can come to grips with differences inherent in others.

Differentiation of identity is discussed with reference to three instances namely precolonial narrative art manifesting in historical documents, journals, letters, diaries and other forms. White Afrikaans-speaking women were, due to British imperialism, alienated from white English women and regarded as being superior to black South African women. This status quo was maintained until the fifties when black women began making themselves heard. Several examples of writing are cited leading to the conclusion that identity cannot be dealt with perfunctorily as it possesses both negative and positive facets to be explored by future feminist writers.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel fokus op die geskiedenis van kortverhale deur Suid-Afrikaanse vroue van alle rasse in 'n poging om bestaande konsepte te belig met betrekking tot ras, klas en geslag. Dit blyk dat die eerste fase van moderne feministiese kritiek gerig was op die blootlegging van die patriargale inslag wat taal en letterkunde oorheers het, terwyl die tweede fase die betekenis en waarde van skrywe deur vroue evalueer het. Die skryfster stel voorop dat 'n perspektief noodsaaklik is wat intrinsieke differensiasie erken en artikuleer. Gelyktydig moet daar 'n bewustheid van bestaande interverhoudinge wees wat toelaat vir verskillende identiteite, uiteenlopende politiek en ongelyksoortige stryd.

“Vrou”, per se, kan nie as 'n stabiele identiteit beskou word nie vanweë 'n diversifikasie verwant aan politiek, kultuur en gebruike. Die skryfster beweer dat verskille binne onself eers verstaan moet word voordat die verskille inherent aan ander met begrip hanteer kan word.

Differensiasie in identiteit word bespreek aan die hand van drie fases, naamlik die voorkoloniale verhalende kuns soos gemanifesteer in historiese dokumente, joernale, briewe, dagboeke en so meer. Blanke Afrikaanssprekende vroue was, as gevolg van Britse imperialisme, vervreemd van blanke Engelse vroue en as meerderwaardig teenoor swart Suid-Afrikaanse vroue beskou. Die status quo is gehandhaaf tot die vyftigerjare toe swart vroue begin het om hulle teenwoordigheid te laat geld. Verskeie voorbeelde van skryfwerk word aangehaal wat tot die slotsom lei dat identiteit nie sonder meer afgemaak kan word nie, aangesien daar negatiewe sowel as positiewe fasette is wat deur toekomstige skryfsters ondersoek sal word.

Identities are never fixed but complex, differentiated and are constantly repositioned.

(Pratibha Parmar 1990: 116)

1

Today it has become commonplace to argue that the degree of freedom in any given society could be measured by the position and situation of the women in it. Much contemporary radical history and many social movements, with emphasis on the imperatives of change, have, upon close scrutiny, yielded negligible indications of fundamental changes regarding gender relations. This is attributed to many factors. It is often ascribed to the political strategies of class or national unity adopted by revolutionary or nationalist movements. In other cases it is attributed to the willingness of women to be drawn into movements which promised gender emancipation by subsuming women's interests into the broader liberalational agenda.

The failure of revolutionary movements, including feminism, to deliver on account of the emancipation of women has, of course, also attributed to flaws in their philosophical underpinnings.

In this essay I intend to focus on the conceptual inadequacies of the dominant radical traditions. This will be undertaken by examining the crystallisation of gender in relation to race, class and other intersecting social forces as manifested in the history of short stories by South African women. This paper is based on research I have completed on English and Afrikaans short stories by South African women of all races. The first part of this project has been published as *Raising the Blinds: A Century of South African Women's Stories*, and the second part is due for publication as *Vrouevertellings 1843–1993*. Envisaged for the future is a multilingual collection incorporating stories by South African women in all languages. This essay is a synthesis of past research and an exploration of what was not possible in two linguistically distinct and separate collections.

The title of this essay lists a number of categories, including “aesthetics”, “race”, “class” and “gender”. I will not provide text book explications of these concepts or cite stories as illustrations of these categories. My presentation is oriented towards exploring the interpenetration of these discursive fields as constituent forces in narrative forms of articulation.

2

Although the women's movement has a long history, it has, especially since the 1960's, succeeded in unsettling many assumptions of general aesthetic discourse. This brought with it various forms of feminist aesthetics, carried out over a wide terrain. In literature it encompassed gender-focused approaches to thematic, structural, stylistic, generic, linguistic, ideological and historical aspects. “Feminist critique”, as defined by Showalter, constituted what today is widely regarded as the first phase of modern feminist criticism (1979: 25). Its main concerns were to expose prevailing patriarchal tendencies in language and literature. The second phase, now known as “gynocritics”, sought to underscore

the constitutive nature, meaning and value of writing by women. These ground-breaking approaches opened the field to further elaboration which, more often than not, occurred in response to these initial demarcations of the field.

A persistent charge levelled at so-called “mainstream feminism” is that it created new power hierarchies in which white, heterosexual, middle class women’s concerns assumed a hegemony that marginalised black, working class and lesbian women. In response to this, forceful counter-hegemonic perspectives such as materialist, black and lesbian feminism emerged to underscore the fact that women are of all classes, races and sexual preferences.

Similar criticism has been expressed at the direction advanced by French feminists, such as H el ene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who explored “the feminine” in terms of psycho-symbolic systems of language and literature. These approaches have been criticised for their universalist perspectives on the category “woman”. They proved to be a major shortcoming in the dominant feminist discourse. On the other hand, the way in which much of the materialist and ideologically oriented feminist criticism has defined gender identity as subdivided into other categories, such as race and class, was also found wanting. It seemed trapped in a deterministic mould, producing static notions of difference.

It is in relation to the concept of identity that almost all the variants of feminist theory encountered problems. Although highly critical of dominant and especially patriarchal social formations, these theories often reproduce the centre’s traditional fear of differentiation. Jonathan Rutherford, drawing on the seminal work of Laclau and Mouffe, observes that the

centre invests the Other with its terrors. It is the threat of the dissolution of self that ignites the irrational hatred and hostility as the centre struggles to assert and secure its boundaries, that construct self from not-self. In political terms, it has been the Right which has always appealed to this frontier of personal anxiety. At the heart of its hegemonic politics has always been that mobilising of a mass cathexis into issues of racial, sexual and national politics.

(1990: 11)

In feminist thought the Self and the Other are often reproduced in terms of centrality and marginality. Marginality should, according to this discourse, either be drawn into the centre, displace the centre or develop a new centre on the margin in order to shift the parameters of identity construction. However, this simplistic split between Self and Other, between Centre and Margin, often misreads the way in which it reproduces the discourse it intends to dismantle. It misreads the co-existence in the same identity of codes belonging to both so-called Centre and Margin. Instead of breaking the “fear of difference”, it reproduces subordination by emphasising stable identity formations and by ignoring fractured identities.

Feminism, I want to suggest, needs to move away from a conceptual frame which merely reads identity in the hierarchical language and static notions of its difference to the Other. What is required is a perspective capable of articulating the difference of identity to itself.

This is not to infer that all feminist approaches have been unaware of fractured identity. The materialist oriented approaches have, for example, pointed out that the category “woman” is fractured into race and class components, but tended to regard these as essential or monocultural categories. In other instances, when synchronicity between an identity and its race/class/gender position was unidentifiable it has often been characterised as contradictory. It displayed an inability to phrase this as the composition of intersections of differentiation with changing contents and positions, with unpredictable and mobile dynamics. Rutherford argues that in the

complex conjunctures of sex, race and class, and the multiple and microrelations of discrimination and domination, most of us cross these boundaries, both in our individual subjectivities and our personal relationships. Whoever we are, difference threatens to decentre us.

(1990: 12)

Recognition of differentiation “within” is thus a step further than recognition of differentiation “between”, and can take feminism a step further. Social categories are conceptually necessary for understanding social processes, but should not be read as homogeneous and autonomous categories. What should be recognised are the interrelationships of different identities, their politics and struggles and that people are positioned within numerous relationships among these categories.

This emphasises the fact that “woman”, for example, is not a stable identity. Its sobering implication is that it reveals the hopeless idealism involved in yearning for unity amongst women. In the same way undifferentiated categories of class and race and their stable intersections with gender, are unthinkable. This, however, does not imply that differentiation disseminates in such a way that it cannot work constructively or that women are doomed to a situation of paralysing divisions.

On the contrary, these differences are at one and the same time potentially destructive as well as creative forces. Pratibha Parmar, for example, refers to June Jordan’s assertion that identity politics is a minimal point of departure but not sufficient to accomplish much (1990: 101). In an interview Jordan contends:

I think there is something deficient in the thinking on the part of anybody who proposes either gender identity politics or race identity politics as sufficient, because every single one of us is more than whatever race we represent or embody and more than whatever gender category we fall into . . . each one of us is more than what cannot be changed about us. That seems self-evident and accordingly our politics should reflect that understanding.

(Parmar 1990: 109)

She emphasises the fact that issue-oriented unity among specific kinds of people should not be dismissed, but is certainly not sufficient. She says it:

may be enough to get started on something but I doubt very much whether it’s enough to get anything finished.

(Parmar 1990: 109–10)

At the end of the interview she concludes that differentiation does not fragment in a negative sense, but becomes “a source of strength” (1990: 113). In this instance Rutherford also refers to the positive contribution of this understanding when he says that

interrelationships of differences are marked by translation and negotiation. The cultural politics of difference means living with incommensurability through new ethical and democratic frameworks, within a culture that both recognises difference and is committed to resolving its antagonisms . . . we must learn to live together . . . in the recognition of the otherness of ourselves, through the transformation of relations of subordination and discrimination.

(1990: 26)

Only when understanding the differences inside ourselves can we accept the differences of others, only then can difference be at peace with equality.

It now remains for me to articulate moments within the history of South African women’s short stories where this differentiation of identity has been at work. I shall only refer to three such instances.

3

South African women’s stories can be retraced to precolonial times with the tradition of oral story telling. This form of narrative art, still practised in contemporary times, offers a rich field of investigation around the questions of women’s domination in narrative discourse within an otherwise patriarchal social system. After colonisation, initially by the Dutch in 1652, followed by the British occupation in 1795, traces of white settler women’s writing gradually crystallised in the form of historical documentations, journals, letters, diaries, travelogues and other forms, regarded as marginalised in relation to literature, but privileged in relation to indigenous orature. In the context of British imperialism, nascent Afrikaner nationalism with its racist underpinnings, established a context in which white Afrikaans-speaking women were alienated from their English counterparts and elevated above black South African women. This situation, with various shifts and modifications, has up until roughly the seventies, formed the broad patterns of power and division with respect to women. Beginning with Bessie Head in the fifties, and acquiring momentum in the seventies with Miriam Tlali, the eighties saw black women bursting through the racial hierarchies.

When analysing Afrikaner middle class women’s writing up to the 1960’s predictable patterns of affiliation to Afrikaner nationalism and racial supremacy are manifested. More interesting for the purposes of this study, however, is how these patterns became interrupted. These fractures are, for example, evident in a story such as “Papawers en Pikkewyne” (“Poppies and Penguins”), by Sannie Uys, published in 1953.

Given the ideology of Afrikaner nationalism as the framework of Uys’s social position, a reductive feminism would postulate a “natural” affiliation to other white, middle class, Afrikaner women of her times. This affiliation, the argument predicates, is informed by a logical opposition to the Other. The Other, in this instance, embraces blacks regardless of gender. These expect-

tations are confirmed when the social position of the first person narrator, a white middle class Afrikaner woman, corresponds to that of the author. This, however, is unsettled when the narrator expresses a critical attitude towards women of her own social status. Freely translated from Afrikaans, this is how she comments on the behaviour of white middle class women:

Many have hard faces. Behind the sophisticated hairstyles, red lips and affected mannerisms, a stupid expression lurks: reminiscent of the clapping of comical little wings, the ridiculous tramping of penguins. In their shrill voices one hears the monotonous shouting of these grotesque birds.

(1953: 29)

The devastating characterisation of their personalities and social mannerisms dismisses them as being artificial, uncaring, self-centred, arrogant, affected, stupid and boring.

This critical position is not simply a rupture in the otherwise predictable narrative. The story's title juxtaposes "Penguins" to "Poppies". The narrative, as we have just seen, ridicules the penguins. Who then are the "Poppies"? These flowers, and the "feminine" characteristics they are commonly associated with, are surprisingly projected as the embodiment of the black male servant in this story. This is how he is valorised:

The silence and patience of the black man, his inborn dignity, robs the white woman of all the acquired decency she possesses.

(1953: 32)

Every lexical item in this sentence is coded with ambivalence. Silence, traditionally valued by men in women, is here transferred by a female narrator to a black man. Within the context of transferring the domestic roles of white women to black men, the silent subservience of the black male servant is expressed as a form of theft.

The apparent valorisation of the black male servant, at the expense of the white woman he serves, is fraught with further complications, evident in the patronising tone of the narrator when referring to the black man as "trustworthy like a child" (pp. 28–29). Thus the white woman articulates her dominance over a black man in a patriarchal society.

Referring to similar practices elsewhere, Andrea Stuart says that

"neither socialist feminists nor radical feminists want to acknowledge that their concept of patriarchy failed to account for the power that white women in households historically had over some black men."

(1990: 36)

This reading reveals that the narrator's projected critical attitude towards the prevailing racism is actually manifestly racist. This is encoded by her patronising tone about and evaluative gaze of the black male servant, oblivious of how it uncritically reproduces patriarchal discourse by valorising in the black man the "feminine" attributes demanded by a coercive patriarchal society of women. How, for instance, would any form of feminism respond to praise in relation to the qualities of "silence, "obedience", "dependency", "trustworthiness" and so forth?

Sannie Uys's work was written at a time when Afrikaner nationalism was in the process of asserting itself, resulting in the infamous apartheid policies with the rise to power of the Nationalist Party in 1948. In response to this, English literature, which had previously adopted an arrogant imperialist and civilising attitude towards the indigenous population, developed a critical discourse in relation to Afrikaner racism. This is exemplified in the work of women such as Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer.

Gordimer's short stories are frequently directed towards critically exposing the workings of South African racism. With reference to her fiction, Gordimer, quoted by Clingman in his study of her novels, observes:

My novels are anti-apartheid, not because of my personal abhorrence of apartheid, but because the society that is the very stuff of my work reveals itself . . . if you write honestly about life in South Africa, apartheid damns itself.
(1986: 12)

By doing this she says that her stories

reflect the attitudes of various kinds of whites towards blacks in South Africa, and sometimes the attitudes of blacks towards whites, and various relationships between black and white, but rarely my own attitudes, for the simple reason that these would too often represent the exception and not the rule.
(1976: Introduction)

Gordimer makes a clear-cut distinction between the general racism of white South Africans and its anti-racist exceptions. However, when analysing her stories in the collection, *Some Monday For Sure*, a picture of a less clear-cut ideological perspective emerges.

The story "Something for the Time Being" was first published in 1960, a time of mass black resistance against the apartheid state. The story deals with the help a white, English, middle class couple, Madge and William Chadders, attempt to offer Daniel Mgoma, a black worker. In Gordimer's words, the narrative explores

with irony, the inevitable limits of the white liberal attitude and the usefulness to which blacks could hope to put it in their struggle for liberation.
(1976: Introduction)

Accordingly the narrator reveals the ways in which the anti-racist attitudes of the liberal whites become fractured. It is done through clear characterisation, such as when William says:

I can give the man a job because I feel sympathetic towards the struggle he's in, but I can't put him in the workshop as a Congress man. . .
(1976: 106)

It is also done more subtly, such as when Madge's somewhat critical, however flippant awareness of both patriarchy and racial inequality is exposed:

Sometimes it amused Madge to think that William, making a point at a meeting in a boardroom, fifteen floors above life in the streets, might achieve in five

minutes something of more value than she did in all her days of turning her hand to anything – from sorting old clothes to duplicating a manifesto or driving people during a bus boycott. Yet this did not knock the meaning out of her own life, for her; she knew that she had to see, touch, and talk to people in order to care about them, that was all there was to it.

(1976: 104)

However, more interesting than the narrative exposure of the ideological split in the liberal position, are similar inconsistencies in the course of the very same “objective” narration. It is, for example, telling that the characters of the white couple are explored in great detail, while the black couple does not come to life in the same way. Although the narration attempts to sympathise with them, the black couple is diminished by subtly equating them to children. When Daniel’s wife, Ella, is first introduced

she said nothing, while she ran her hand up the ridge of bone behind the rim of her *child-sized* yellow-brown ear.

(My italics, 1976: 102)

And when Daniel is dressed in his suit with a

hat tilted back on his *small head*, he looked a wiry *boyish figure*, rather like one of those *boy-men*.

(My italics, 1976: 102)

This is in contrast to the way in which both the physiques and the characters of the white couple are extensively elaborated on.

As in many Gordimer stories, this differentiation within the ideological narrative intention, is also specifically observed in the way black women are depicted as ignorant and passive. Madge is an intelligent, vociferous, energetic and politically active woman, despite her own liberal deficiencies. Ella, on the other hand, is apart from being child-like, also quiet, submissive, and politically inactive, to such an extent that her husband identifies her with the forces who wish to incarcerate him for his political activities. He says:

What are you all going to do with me, Ella? Send me back to prison as quickly as possible? Perhaps I’ll get a banishment order next time. That’d do. That’s what you’ve got for me.

(1976: 110)

Ella is further depicted as continuously scratching her body in search of the “the flaw, the sickness, the evidence of what was wrong with her” (p. 101). To this her husband responds, saying “You’re like a monkey catching lice” (p. 110). This tendency to present black people in terms of the characteristics of animals occurs frequently in Gordimer’s fiction. Further examples of these animalistic depictions in *Some Monday for Sure* occur in stories such as “Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet” where the black man stares like a “cow” (p. 3); in “Ah, Woe is Me” where the hand of a black person is described as the “paw” of “a knowing monkey” (p. 7); in “Which New Era Would That Be?” where two so-called “coloured” men are described as “toads” (p. 30); in “The Smell of Death and Flowers” where the performance

of a black singer is likened to the “antics of a monkey” (p. 49); in “Some Monday For Sure” where a black man reminds his brother of “the big ape at the Johannesburg zoo” (p. 122) and a black child is associated with “a cockroach” (p. 128), and so forth. The argument that these forms of characterisation are ironic and therefore critical of white racism is refuted by the fact that black characters frequently apply these attributes to themselves.

In these stories most white women are politically active in the struggle for black liberation, while most black women are presented as passive, submissive and apolitical. These ruptures within an avowed non-racial ideological affiliation are reminiscent of Cora Kaplan’s reference to Virginia Woolf’s

public polemical support of working class women and the contempt with which the feelings and interests of her female servants are treated in her diaries, where they exist as lesser beings.

(1985: 168)

This reading of Gordimer’s short fiction reveals the co-existence of two conflictual visions. On the one hand, a strong critique of racism along with liberal noncommittal attitudes and a critical awareness of the consequences of a patriarchal society, are evident. On the other hand, a perpetuation of racist attitudes towards black people and black women in particular, is also operative. In response to Woolf’s writing, Kaplan refers to the manifestation of such factures as

the historic effects of . . . social divisions and ideologies worked through psychic structures, worked into sexual and social identity.

(1985: 168)

The emergence of writing by black women in the eighties resulted in the publication of numerous short story collections. In 1987 Jayapraga Reddy became one of the first Indian women in South Africa to publish a collection entitled *On the Fringe of Dreamtime and Other Stories*. This collection exposes the silenced world of the South African Indian woman as a world riven with ideological ruptures.

In a story, ironically titled “Friends”, an affluent Indian woman and her child and their black domestic worker and her child are positioned in oppositional terms. Although both the women belong to an oppressed race and gender, there seem to be no grounds for unity. When Sadhana sees her child playing with the servant’s child, she thinks:

It wasn’t good for her to mix too much with the child. She might pick up something.

(1987: 107)

This story “reveals that oppression is not a two-dimensional white-black opposition” and illustrates

the practical operation of overlapping and interacting power hierarchies by demonstrating how oppressed people are often co-responsible for keeping the chain of oppression intact by co-operating, instead of breaking the chain.

(Van Niekerk 1990: 24–5)

The interaction of processes of oppression and how the experience of one kind of oppression can induce another within categories of expected alliance, also manifest in this story. Sadhana is severely oppressed by her husband and does not express much resistance. When her mother says:

You let him get away with too much! His duty is to see to you and your children, not to other women!

(1987: 106)

Sadhana's response is: "But he gives me everything" (p.106). Although she defends him she is frustrated by her own oppression as a woman. Instead of constructively responding to her own frustrations, she becomes harsher on Bessie, the servant. This story thus shatters assumptions of shared identities.

In conclusion this brings me back to June Jordan's injunction:

... people have to begin to understand that just because somebody is a woman or somebody is black does not mean that he or she and I should have the same politics. . . We should try to measure each other on the basis of what we do for each other rather than on the basis of who we are.

(Parmar 1990: 111–12)

An aesthetics in South Africa and elsewhere, which focuses on the literary articulation of women in the context of social and internal divisions amongst women, requires an alertness to the fraught nature of identity. This, as I tried to argue, offers many debilitating as well as enabling possibilities for feminist practices.

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