

**Back to the Roots? Forming New Concepts of Women's Identity in  
Contemporary Postcolonial Literature Written by Women in Dutch and  
Afrikaans**

Zpátky ke kořenům? Utváření nových konceptů ženské identity v dílech  
současných postkoloniálních autorek v nizozemštině a afrikánštině

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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto disertační práci vypracovala samostatně a v závěru uvedla veškeré zdroje použité při jejím vypracování.

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## 1. Introduction

*“Not many questions in Western literature and thought have a longer, deeper, and livelier intellectual history than how we give meaning to our lives and how, in doing so, we construct our selves as Gestalten in time, as personal and cultural beings.”* (Brockmeier, Carbaugh 2001: 1)

North American and European society, which we usually call the West, puts a lot of emphasis on the individual and individuality. In the West we are brought up with the idea that being an individual, having an identity, is essential for our being and existence in this society. The omnipresence of the quest for one’s identity in Western literature, mentioned by Brockmeier and Carbaugh in the introduction to their *Studies in Identity and Narrative*, is just one example of this urge. Decolonization, later the fall of the Iron Curtain and the subsequent massive immigration stream to the West<sup>1</sup> complicated thought about this quest, once thought to be universal. The growing popularity and influence of the feminist thought also amplified the problem of the concept of identity in Western society which was that there was a clear and homogenous (although artificially constructed) group marked as ‘the other’, including basically everyone who would not qualify as ‘the self’ This clearly defined category has been progressively dissolving under the influence of a number of social tendencies (for example the above mentioned decolonization and / or feminist movement) that both fought against and challenged the most embedded binary opposition, namely ‘man’ – ‘woman’ and ‘white’ – ‘black’. When ‘the subaltern’<sup>2</sup> starts to speak for her/hisself, the universalist system of the binary oppositions is destroyed and is not applicable any more. The pressure of the society and also the inner need of an individual to have an identity,

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<sup>1</sup> Here, I imply the second meaning of ‘the West’ as the western part of Europe, ‘in front of’ the Iron Curtain thus.

<sup>2</sup> The term “subaltern”, taken from Italian writer and theorist Antonio Gramsci, originally labeling any group of oppressed people, members of socially marginalized groups or coming from the lower classes of the society, the economically dispossessed. The term gained popularity after the publication of the essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In this essay has Spivak theoretically evolved ‘the subaltern’ to a person or a group of people whose agency is rendered, and placed this term in the centre of the postcolonial discussion. Spivak builds further on the premises of so-called Subaltern Studies Group, a group of scholars from South Asia founded in the 1980’s of last century that stressed terms such as autonomy, authenticity and consciousness. They were interested in the representation of “the subaltern” in colonial texts, defining subalterns as “those who did not comprise the colonial elite” (McLeod 2000: 191).

however, did not decrease. As a result of that, Western society has entered a phase of identity crisis.

*“We are widely led to believe that we have the freedom and ability to create and re-create our ‘selves’ at will, if we **have** the will, but at the same time are presented with a suspiciously narrow range of options and avenues that will allow us to fit comfortably into society and our particular gendered, regional, ethnic, sexual subset of it.”* (Hall 2004: 1, emphasis by D.E.H.)

We might call it the dilemma of the contemporary Western society but it is a fact that an individual feels pressure from the society on the one hand to define, or create as Donald E. Hall calls it, her/his identity but on the other hand has only a very limited number of discursive examples how to do so, which are above all at the same time labelled by the very same society as “wrong”, as in “it is wrong to define yourself as white, because you are not black”. Furthermore a lot of confusion has arisen, especially in non-feminist informed circles, after the publication of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990)<sup>3</sup> and after the great impact the third feminist wave has had on the society. As Rosi Braidotti puts it:

*“Feminist thought rests on a concept that calls for deconstruction and deessentialization in all of its aspects. More specifically, I think that over the last ten years the central question in feminist theory has become: how to redefine female subjectivity after the decline of gender dualism, privileging notions of the self as process complexity, interrelatedness, postcolonial simultaneities of oppression, and the multilayered technology of the self?”* (Braidotti 1994: 157)

Now that the hierarchy in the binaries ‘man’ – ‘woman’, ‘white’ – ‘black’ and ‘West’ – ‘East’<sup>4</sup> has been questioned, Western society stands before the problem of how to state itself without the white heterosexual middle-class male as the unmarked standard. This standard namely did not serve as a basis for one’s identity, only to the ones who met the

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<sup>3</sup> *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (published by Routledge in 1989 and since then republished already a number of times, to the 10 year anniversary reprint a new introduction has been added that reflects the reactions on the work in the first 10 years) is of one of the most influential books in feminist and queer theory. In her book Butler claims both sex and gender to be socially constructed, answering the need of the society for two clearly divided groups. Under the pressure of the society an individual gives in and joins one of the groups with the help of a number of ‘performative acts’ that are discursively embedded in and maintained by the society. Since Butler and her theory(ies) is not included in the theoretical basis of this projects and the theories as such are rather complex, I will not go further with this topic.

<sup>4</sup> I am following the hierarchic order while speaking about binary oppositions, thus the order in which these are used in the colonial/patriarchal system.

standard, but also to all ‘the others’, since they were NOT this standard. One of the most influential postcolonial<sup>5</sup> theorists Homi Bhabha<sup>6</sup> describes colonial discourse as “*the repertoire of positions of power and resistance, domination and dependence that constructs identification subject (both colonizer and colonized)*” (Bhabha 2007: 95). We can however state exactly the same principle also in patriarchy and any other hegemony, since these systems are based on a binary opposition forming two homogenous groups of people one of which is thought of as a standard and the other as its deviation.

The project *Back to the roots?* analyzes women characters in contemporary women’s postcolonial<sup>7</sup> writing in Dutch (from the Netherlands) and Afrikaans, focusing on how and where these characters search (and eventually find) their identity in the new/altered situation of the postcolonial society. The Netherlands and South Africa are excellent

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<sup>5</sup> In the concrete context of this project *colonialism* is meant to be a state of society, not necessarily in the historical or geographical meaning of the word. Postcolonial theorists argue that *colonial* or *postcolonial* situation concerns not only those lands that in the past directly took part at the colonization. The colonial system with its altered hierarchy, placing some people in an advantageous position, based only on the skin color and/or gender, had and still has great influence on how people think about themselves and other people, especially those who fall in the category ‘the other’.

<sup>6</sup> Bhabha has published extensively on stereotype, identity, postcolonial society, minorities etc. and, of course, on topics that are directly connected to his theoretical work, i.e. hybridity, mimicry, difference and ambivalence, his main interest goes to the experience of social marginality. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), a compilation of Bhabha’s most influential essays, he proposes a radical methodological change in the practice of cultural analysis. Bhabha moves in his own analytical practice away from the Western metaphysics, based on the Cartesian logic, and tries to undermine this system, based on binary oppositions. He makes an attempt to attack the way binary oppositions are being created within Euro-American discourse. Bhabha tries to destabilize the binaries, in order to be able to think about different (interacting) cultures in a non-hegemonic way. He argues that only when the binary oppositions are deconstructed, real interaction between different cultures can come into being, with the effect of creation of new hybrid cultures and, eventually, identities.

<sup>7</sup> There is a discussion going on not only about the meaning of the term, but also about the different possibilities how the term should be written. The variant used within this project, namely *postcolonialism*, written on purpose with a small letter and without using the hyphen, puts more emphasis on the socio-cultural aspect than the geo-political. To prevent further misapprehensions, I would like to draw attention shortly to what Elleke Boehmer wrote in the Oxford guide to *Literary theory and criticism* calls “*the puzzle of postcolonial hyphen*” (Waugh 2006: 341). The hyphen stresses more the historical aspect of the term, accenting the fact that the period in which we live is a result of decolonization. The usage of hyphen would e.g. limit the term *post-colonial literature* only to the areas that have been colonized in the past. The variant without hyphen accentuates more “*cultural difference and marginality of all kinds*” (Ashcroft 2001: 10), trying to deconstruct the colonial discourse. *Postcolonial literature*, in the unhyphenated form, would then relate to any literature (writing) challenging the stereotypical colonial representations.



areas of research since they both have multicultural societies and a colonialist past<sup>8</sup>. I am especially interested in the way these characters deal with the altered system of binary oppositions on which our socio-cultural identity is stated through various alternations of the basic binary ‘self’ – ‘the other’ and whether the notion of identity and womanhood has changed in the course of time. Due to restricted space and time, the project stayed limited only to a corpus of in total six postcolonial works, divided equally between the Netherlands and South Africa. There is however surely space and possibilities for further research. The aim of the project was to offer a theoretical background combining the insights of postcolonial theory/ies and feminist (literary) theories and to apply these theoretical tools to a corpus of a number of selected contemporary postcolonial writings in Dutch and Afrikaans written by women.

This dissertation however strives not only to introduce a new theoretical approach to the fields of Czech academia and the (extra-mural) netherlandistics, it would above all like to point out the recent developments in literature written by women, and to show examples of these in contemporary women’s writing in the Netherlands and South Africa. The limitation to women’s writing only, however, should not be experienced as discriminative and/or exclusionist in any sense. In the decision to concentrate on women’s texts I follow the approach of Jane Fenoulhet<sup>9</sup> who describes it as follows:

*“I offer an alternative to the dominant narrative on Dutch literature by omitting male writers and by avoiding the use of traditional notions of movements and generations, and in so doing I acknowledge the contribution of Anglo-American feminist literary critics in the 1970s which began the work of uncovering a female tradition that had been suppressed by patriarchal, humanist history.”* (Fenoulhet 2007: 5)

The project thus offers an added value to the academic discourse in a number of aspects. Firstly, it introduces recent developments in the field of Dutch and Afrikaans literature (by women) to Czech academia, and secondly it introduces a new interdisciplinary way of working with (literary) texts in the field of (extra-mural) netherlandistics and to

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<sup>8</sup> For an extensive overview of different Afrikaner identities see Lianne Barnard’s dissertation *Van niemand tot iemand* (2002).

<sup>9</sup> Jane Fenoulhet is a senior Lecturer in Dutch at University College of London and an important Netherlandistics scholar whose interest goes also to gender studies. Her two interests are clearly visible in her book *Making the Personal Political. Dutch Women Writers 1919 – 1970* to which I will be referring a lot in the course of the text.

Czech academia where these are not commonly known and/or broadly applied yet. The *Back to the Roots?* project strives to explore a new concept of women's identity on a broad-based literary corpus, covering various cultural backgrounds, ages, sexualities, beliefs etc., working with interdisciplinary and intersectional principles. For example, the so-called immigrant authors are not handled separately; by adding also "immigrant authors", who are in my opinion a natural part of the literary field in the Netherlands, to the corpus I want to show that they follow the current developments in the society and work with these in their work, exactly as their autochthonous colleagues<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore they are more than a lively and inseparable part of the contemporary culture in the Netherlands<sup>11</sup>. Also the fact that a literary field of one country includes authors of different cultural backgrounds supports my theory of cultural mixedness of the contemporary (postcolonial) society. The aim of the project thus is, apart from the theoretical and methodological innovations in the field of (especially extramural) netherlandistics and Czech academia, to sketch the developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century women's literature in Dutch (from the Netherlands) and Afrikaans through a number of case studies, mapping the respective narrative and thematic changes. With the help of the analysis of their literary characters I want to take a closer look at the way contemporary women writers re-conceptualise the notion of womanhood, especially in relation to the body and motherhood, thus the aspects of women's experience that have been excluded from and silenced in the discourse on women in the patriarchal/colonial system<sup>12</sup>. Assuming that the situation would be different but still comparable for white as well as black women and women of colour<sup>13</sup>, the corpus of the project includes authors as well as literary characters disregarding their skin colour. However, the other

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<sup>10</sup> "Immigrant authors" is a term used in the Dutch context for writers of first and/or second migrant generation into the Netherlands. The binary "autochthonous – allochthonous" is also a term lent from the Dutch context, making a division between Dutch citizens of native, i.e. Dutch, origin and foreign origin. The latter however became an euphemism for Dutch citizens from "non-European countries", that is Africa, Asia and South America.

<sup>11</sup> For more information see for example the introduction to *Cultuur en migratie in Nederland. Kunsten in beweging 1980-2000* under the redaction of Rosemarie Buikema and Maaïke Meijer, published in 2004 by Sdu Uitgevers in Den Haag, the Netherlands.

<sup>12</sup> These different varieties of womanhood would namely destroy the universalism of the binary 'man' – 'woman' and were therefore threatening for the system.

<sup>13</sup> This project follows the division of white for Caucasian, black for African and brown for mixed origin, as used in South Africa.

axes of oppression will not be ignored. It also supports the presumption that the aforementioned uncertainty of and the discomfort about one's identity is common to all members of postcolonial society, disregarding on which side of the 'colonizer' – 'the colonized' (used in the broadest sense of the words) binary she/he would be found in the colonial/patriarchal system. While using only a small number of novels, striving more for qualitative than quantitative analysis, this project would rather be in the form of a case study. I however believe that the corpus is conceived in such a way that it offers a representative sample of the actual situation and recent development (with)in the literary field in a given area.

The result of this research, and the included analysis, which forms an essential part of this project, would be comparable to what already mentioned Jane Fenoulhet has done in her book *Making the Personal Political. Dutch Women Writers 1919 - 1970* (2007) in which she observed the thematic development in women's literature in Dutch in the given period. In her book, Fenoulhet thinks of "*women's writing as a personal and cultural 'space' where women begin to work on their own subjectivity through the act of writing*" (Fenoulhet 2007: 2). I find Fenoulhet's approach to literature as well as the concept of her book very useful and I will be coming back to her work regularly during the course of my own text. Furthermore, Fenoulhet, who has been born, raised and works in Great Britain, handles Dutch literature from the position of an informed outsider which is very much comparable to my own position. Also the methodology of her book, paying attention to the individual works as case studies and with the help of these showing the thematic development (and shift!) in Dutch women's literature is of great use for this project. Fenoulhet self comments on her choice for this particular theme as following:

*"It's choice to focus only on Dutch women's writing, though feminist inspired, intends to make available the writings of Dutch women and to understand a series of dynamics: between women writers and high culture, between women writers and culture and society at large, as well as the dynamic among women who use their creativity to engage with the public sphere."* (Fenoulhet 2007: 1).

*Making the Personal Political* is however not the only inspirational source for this project, even though this concrete work has contributed a lot to the formal aspect as well as to the content. Other inspirational works have been Rachel Blau Duplessis' *Writing Beyond the Ending* and *The Mother/Daughter Plot* from Marianne Hirsch that

analyze the ways women's writers offer a narrative shift from the psychoanalytical (Oedipal) plot in their works: "*Writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention in narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from the dominant narrative*" (Blau DuPlessis 1985: 5). Both works named are however oriented on English literature, which is often the case of most of the publications on feminist literary theory and also postcolonial theory. The latter also usually, when applied to literature, stays concentrated on literature written in the major colonizer's languages, i.e. English and/or French. As Neil Larsen comments in the introductory chapter of *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, "*However current or fashionable in academic circles, 'postcolonialism' is, by anyone's reckoning, a term whose use is also virtually restricted to the metropolitan academy and its satellites.*" (Schwarz, Ray 2002: 23). One of the added values of this project is that it uses contemporary (postcolonial and feminist) theory on minor, and therefore not widely known, literatures, i.e. Dutch and Afrikaans.

My basic ideas about literature and its reception were greatly formed by Pam Morris' *Literature and Feminism*. Even though a bit older and therefore slightly dated, and essentialist in some places, this work has been a great eye opener. Maybe because it has been one of the first books I have read on the topic, it has had a great impact on the way how I think about literature, and consequently also on the way how I approach literature within this research project. In her book Pam Morris explains that feminists (or feminist literary scholars)

*"(...) are concerned to discover how literature as cultural practice may be involved in producing the meanings and values that lock women into inequality, rather than simply reflecting the existing reality of women's lives in literary texts."* (Morris 1993: 8).

Morris sums here very clearly up that there is more to literature than only a way to tell nice stories. Both colonialism and patriarchy have (un)consciously used literature as a discursive instrument to create exclusively those images and ideas that would support these systems. As aforementioned Homi Bhabha puts it, "*An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness.*" (Bhabha 2007: 94). In this project I want to take a look whether literature cannot also be used as an instrument to create an alternative to these stereotypical images based on a system of binary oppositions. After years of

postcolonial criticism and three waves of feminism, both of them are finally entering the world of the academia<sup>14</sup> and frequently becoming used in the everyday life. The question however arises how it is reflected in literature that, apart from bearing and creating meaning, can also function as a liberatory or even subversive cultural practice. This idea is not new. Inspired by Derridean deconstruction but more importantly by Lacanian psychoanalysis and fixation on language, the so-called French feminism<sup>15</sup> plaited for a radically different way of writing, named *écriture féminine*, a feminine way of writing that would form an alternative for the male-centred mainstream/traditional literature. In Kristeva's concept, there is however only a limited space for women's voices in their own right. As Rosemarie Buikema argues in her dissertation, a girl seems to have to separate from the mother if she wants to be identified as a speaking subject. When she wants to identify herself with, and at the same time distinguish herself from the mother, she finds herself in an area for which scarcely any representations are available (Buikema 1995: 101). Buikema further points out the phantasmic character of the representations of women and womanhood in the patriarchal culture/system. The aim of feminist theorist is according to her to deconstruct such concepts, but also to offer new representations that would serve as a contrastive against the myths about mothers and motherhood that are embedded in Western culture (Buikema 1995: 90). Now I come to the last goal of this research, I namely want to show that contemporary women's literature in Dutch and Afrikaans can already offer these alternative representations that combine motherhood with own subjectivity.

The last point that needs to be explained, before more practical aspects of the project will/can be handled, is the title (more specifically its first part) that might sound alienating without any further context. We have already mentioned the postcolonial identity crisis that seems very common and typical for an individual in the contemporary society, as well as for the society(ies) as such. After the system of binary oppositions, that helped to keep the patriarchal and/or colonial system alive and working, cannot be applied in its original sense anymore, the Western (North American and European) society has to face the problem of how to state one's identity without the

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<sup>14</sup> In the case of feminist theory as academic discipline (gender studies) we can even already talk about the second generation of feminist scholars.

<sup>15</sup> A grouping of feminist scholars in the late 1960's and 1970's, usually falling under the term 'French feminism', includes theorists Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray.

discursive help of the binary system. The title *Back to the Roots?* questions whether the solution of the postcolonial identity crisis is indeed to turn back to one's (socio-cultural) roots. As should be clear from the lines above this is, in my opinion, not possible any more. The political and social movements in the last decennia have disrupted the hegemony of the binary structure and revealed its basis as artificially constructed. As a result of that the clear borders between different cultures and groups in the society became blurry and impossible to preserve. The question in the title thus gets a slightly ironical touch, since the real question of this project actually is: How do we (the Western society and the individuals in the Western society) state our identity when there is no certainty about where we belong. How can we keep thinking about ourselves as members of a socio-cultural entity when this entity does not have clear borders? This situation, indeed, asks for a reconception of the notion of identity and the subject. The project 'Back to the Roots?' strives to offer a possible way of this reconception, on a personal as well as theoretical level, while showing (and proving its validity) on a number of examples from postcolonial women's writing in Dutch and Afrikaans.

### ***1.1. Approach***

I would call the approach I have chosen for this particular project "*a sympathetic reading of women's texts*" (Fenoulhet 2007: 203) since I think about the literary characters from the corpus as if they were real people and of their authors as having the power to change/alter the contemporary discourse on women, womanhood and motherhood. I believe, again in compliance with Jane Fenoulhet, that "*women writers are undeterred in their collective project to give expression to women's lives, helping to prepare the ground for feminism whether intentionally or not*" (ibid.). However, in order to prove this (especially in the traditional literary theoretical circles) quite radical and innovative statement, a suitable approach had to be found. New themes ask also for new alternative approaches. As has been already mentioned a number of times, the project is theoretically rooted in feminist literary theory and postcolonial theory. These theoretical areas however, even though (or maybe because) both of them are departing from poststructuralism, are far from being theoretically and methodologically homogenous or united. Ruth Robbins describes feminism(s), and the plural is here very important as "*antitotalising*" and adds further that it is "*not (to be) confused with absolute truth*" (Robbins 2000: 3). The very same thing can be said about

postcolonialism (I will come to the interrelation of feminism and postcolonialism later in the text), namely that it does not agree with the existence of one absolute truth and is fundamentally against any totalizing or globalizing practices. Feminism and postcolonialism also share an interest in the connection with the society and when applied to literature they both always search for the connection between the content of a text (in the broadest sense of the word) and the context of its production. This research is thus approached from a materialist point of view that is interested in the situation in which a literary work has been produced and the interrelation (both ways' traffic thus) between "this reality" and "fictive reality". Literature in my opinion holds a mirror to the society, but carries at the same time the potential to change this very same society. From comparable reasons it can further be labelled as 'critical discourse analysis'. As Donald E. Hall puts it,

*"Indeed, as literary and cultural critics have aggressively expanded what they mean by the term text, the textuality of the self as a system of representations has, itself, become a singularly important arena of investigation and speculation. Thus, in exploring subjectivity, we are in effect exploring the 'self' as a text, as a topic for critical analysis, both in and beyond its relationship to the traditional texts of literature and culture."*  
(Hall 2004: 5)

Feminist (literary) theory can and should be thought of within the frame of post-structuralist and/or postmodern theory, but also as a detached theoretical flux. Even choosing for the latter option does not release us from the previous theories on which feminist criticism reacts and whose theoretical (and methodological) tools it (re-)uses for its own aims.

*"Nor are Postmodernist-Poststructuralist theorists interested in asserting the value of literature at large. Outside the Postmodernist writing, they tend to see literary texts as bearing a very strong imprint of everything that is or was politically wrong with the societies which produced them. One role of Postmodernist-Poststructuralist theory is to stand guard against the reproduction of undesirable ideologies through literature."* (Harland 1999: 242)

Which is exactly the point where Postmodern-Poststructuralist theory, as this theoretical stream is called by the author meets the targets of feminist AND postcolonial critics. Another congruency is the active role of the reader self, Postmodernist-Poststructuralist

theory as well as postcolonial and feminist theory do think about the text as a set of marks the reader has to give meaning to, only through his/her reading practice.

As should be clear from what has been already said, this project chooses for an interdisciplinary approach that can provide a theoretical as well as methodological apparatus needed to realize the aim of this research. Theoretically as well as methodologically this project departs from a critical interpretative body of theories and methods in order to take not only gender, sex, race and ethnicity, class and other axes of signification that the aim of the project demands into account. Marjorie Pryse claims in her article *Trans/Feminist Methodology: Bridges to Interdisciplinary Thinking*, that “*interdisciplinarity produces an intellectual flexibility that can be conducive to cross-cultural insight and that therefore becomes a way of enhancing receptivity to difference in members of dominant groups.*” (Pryse 2000: 105). This intellectual flexibility is exactly what I am striving for. Furthermore, as Bhabha comments on a related topic, in order to be able to engage in postcolonial criticism one has to master the theoretical and methodological apparatus of the area that she/he wants to take a critical look at but then take a step further and create distance from this area.

*“Postcolonial critical discourses require forms of dialectical thinking that do not disavow or sublimate the otherness (alterity) that constitutes the symbolic domain of psychical and social identifications. The incommensurability of cultural values and priorities that the postcolonial critic represents cannot be accommodated within theories of cultural relativism or pluralism.”* (Bhabha 2007: 249)

The project as such is clearly interdisciplinary, not necessarily because it thinks both postcolonial and feminist theory, but mainly because it applies approaches to literary characters that are mostly used on “real” people. Especially the analytical chapter, that forms a crucial part of this project, uses mostly Freudian psychoanalytical approach with as result a text that can be called psychoanalytical literary analysis. This approach is not at all completely new or innovative. As I will also mention later, Freud himself has used literary characters as basis for his theory on sexuality and the unconscious. Freud’s theories are however not the only psychoanalytical background that will be used within the analysis; since a lot of emphasis is put on the language aspect of identity and acquiring the notion of self as subject through naming, bringing under words, I will be regularly referring also to Lacanian psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis would be within this project combined with insights from other disciplines.



*“It is probably unreasonable to expect that any theoretical approach to literature can bring about absolute changes in human conditions. And a critique that exposes a problem is still worth doing, even, it cannot change the world. It is a tool, a part of an ongoing process – not an answer in itself. What is still needed is a better explanation of how images produce their calls; and of why viewers continue to respond to them. Image criticism, if it is to retain its usefulness, needs to combine the ideas of psychoanalysis with the more materialist sociological views about why and how the image count.”* (Robbins 2000: 68)

The idea of connecting the unconscious of literary characters with that of living people is furthermore only logical, the language of the unconscious works exactly the same way in the literary characters, the writers that create them, and the readers that re-create them (with)in their reading practice. As Nicola King points out,

*“All narrative accounts of life stories, whether they be the ongoing stories which we tell ourselves and each other as part of the construction of identity, or the more shaped and literary narratives of autobiography or first-person fictions, are made possible by memory; they also reconstruct memory according to certain assumptions about the way it functions and the kind of access it gives to the past.”* (King 2000: 2).

Herewith is the project also being put in the context of memory studies, a new interesting and very popular research area in contemporary humanities in North America and Western Europe.

But let us return to the theoretical keyword of this project – postcolonialism. Ironically enough, postcolonialism as a “label” is nowadays very often being used in all sorts of contexts, but mostly by critics or theorists. It does not happen very often that a writer self would speak about his/her own work while using such terms. It is however important to state that postcolonial theory reaches much further than only literature, and therefore postcolonial theory does not only engage with literary texts. As other academic disciplines falling under the field of cultural studies it analyzes a variety of cultural outings. What is actually meant with the term ‘postcolonial literature’ in the framework of this project? Postcolonial does not necessarily mean that it has to be written after the factual decolonization. Some of the crucial post- or anticolonial works have, on the contrary, been written in the times of colonization<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand,

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<sup>16</sup> To name an example: the classical Dutch literary work *Max Havelaar of de koffyveilingen der Nederlandsche Handelsmaatschappij* was first published in 1860, i.e. in the blooming period of

there are, many years after the decolonization, still works being produced that reduplicate the colonial thinking patterns and herewith strengthen the colonial discourse. Postcolonial literature thus raises the voice of ‘the subaltern’, the voice of the people that have been left out of the mainstream stories suppressed by the colonial discourse.

Although postcolonial discourse analysis usually works with a larger/broader scale of texts (or writings, if we want to use Foucault’s term) this project will focus on literature in the “traditional” sense of the word, more concretely it will only concentrate on novels. There are more reasons for such reduction of the possible scope of texts that could be analyzed for the purposes of this project, among other that it is my belief that prose texts can be of a greater informative value than other texts, since e.g. autobiographic texts are always influenced by a form of (more or less conscious) self-censorship. A fictional novel leaves therefore more space for, mostly unconscious, outings of the writer’s mind. However, that does not necessarily mean that this project would in any sense want to put any equation marks between author’s life and the life of the (main) character of his/her novel. It could be argued that authors re-work in their writings their own (f)actual daily-life experiences and even though their lives may not be the major source of their inspiration, their writings are inevitably influenced by them.

Another point that might cause misapprehensions is the problem of combining postcolonial theory with feminist critique. Some might namely claim that coaptation of two theoretical corpuses would be a way too broad for a project of this scale. However, as John McLeod states in his book *Beginning Postcolonialism*, “*feminist work is a constitutive part of the field of postcolonialism*” (McLeod 2000: 172-3), since the issues of gender difference and gendered identity are central to postcolonial optic. The theoretical background of the project thus does not try to combine two different methodologies or theories from two different scientific fields, it rather approaches a given subject, in this case women’s identity in postcolonial situation, from two different directions, in order to offer an all-round grasp of the problematic. I believe that by combining the theoretical ensemble of postcolonial theory with the methodology of feminist critique I would be able to handle the topic appropriately. In order to analyze and/or create a theory on postcolonial women’s literary characters one clearly needs to

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Dutch colonial reign. It is a very clear critique to the Dutch colonial administration and a very modern work for its time. I will come back to this work later in the text.

take the gender aspect (feminism) as well as the race/culture aspect (postcolonialism) into account.

I would like to remind the readers that there is a crucial difference between activism and academic theory in the case of both feminism and postcolonialism. Although both depart from social/cultural/political activism, the theoretical framework should not be (directly) connected with this activism. As Plain and Sellers sum up in their introduction to *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, “(...) *feminist literary criticism can be distinguished from feminist political activism and social theory. Most obviously, the difference lies in the dimension of textuality.*” (Plain, Sellers 2007: 2).

Postcolonialism and feminism are frequently used in different contexts. Beyond the borders of their own disciplines they are however still thought of as two separate theoretical frameworks and/or activist groups that do not have anything to do with each other. In the following paragraphs I would like to prove that postcolonialism and feminism do not only depart from comparable attitudes and mind frameworks but also theoretically support each other by mutual constructive criticism. For this project is however most important that they share the interest in raising ‘the other’ voice and strive to articulate the differences within. Postcolonialism and feminism developed from the fight against colonialism and sexism/patriarchy, both systems where a group of people us being exploited and/or suppressed on the basis of a binary opposition in which one pole (which is thought of as a standard) has more value and is in an advantageous positions towards the other pole (or other possibilities that are thought of as deviations and alterations of the standard) Also any other possibilities or in-between variations are automatically put in a disadvantaged position against the standard, since any alteration of the standard means to be in an opposition to it. The colonial, as well as the patriarchal system, make use of a number of discursive strategies that represent the disadvantaged variations of the standard as ‘the other’, e.g. women, black people, homosexuals, third world people, the colonized, the elderly, disabled people etc. Through marking of any group that differs from what has been decided to be the standard as ‘the other’ a surprisingly solid and homogenous image of the standard, ‘the self’ is being created. Consequently also all the variations and alterations that do not meet the criteria of what is thought of to be the standard fall in another, in its variety, consistent group, that of ‘the others’. This latter group is discursively silenced and its access to education and information is limited, which retroactively strengthens the advantageous position of the group marked as ‘the self’. Therefore the group marked as

‘the other’ practically loses the chance to escape from the disadvantaged position that has been ascribed to it. The term ‘colonialism’ therefore does not only mean simple economical mastering and exploitation of one area by another country, it is also (and even more importantly) a complex system that touches and alters an individual’s existence in society on more levels in a number of aspects.

In her account of postcolonial theories (or, as she names it: colonial discourse studies) *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998) Ania Loomba argues that postcolonialism cannot be understood as something that came after colonialism. She pleads for an understanding of postcolonialism in a more flexible way that would subsequently challenge the notion of colonial oppression and colonial heritage (Loomba 2000: 12). This way of thinking would, according to Loomba, enable us to think of all people that have been dis-/misplaced as a result of colonialism as postcolonial subjects, even though they live in the centre / the metropolis<sup>17</sup>. Loomba takes the geographical position of the postcolonial subjects as her point of departure. We can however widen this notion to dis- and misplacements in a broader, not necessarily geographical sense of the word. Colonization, decolonization, fall of the Iron Curtain and other geopolitical changes have caused a great turmoil in the (till then) quite stable system of the West. As a result of colonial expansion and the following decolonization with its massive migration a lot of people started to feel misplaced, even though they personally have not changed their physical location. The reasons for this feeling of misplacement have already been shortly mentioned above. The system in which they find themselves and the society in which they live have changed:

*“(...) both the ‘metropolis’ and the ‘colony’ were deeply altered by the colonial process. Both of them are, accordingly, also restructured by decolonization. This of course does not mean that both are postcolonial in the same way.”* (Loomba 2000: 19, emphasis by A.L.)

But what is colonialism actually? Sandra Ponzanesi, one of the most important European postcolonial theorists that combine postcolonial theory and gender studies and applies these to European, especially Italian culture, claims that postcolonialism takes a position that the colonial system has enabled (Ponzanesi 2007: 98). According to her colonialism is a system of power that differentiates between different members of the

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<sup>17</sup> This refers to the binary opposition ‘centre’ or ‘metropolis’ – ‘periphery’ that is well-known and frequently used in the frame of postcolonial theory.

society, advantaging one group and discriminating against another. Homi Bhabha defines colonialism as follows:

*“an apparatus that turns on the recognition and disavowal of racial/cultural/historical differences. Its predominant strategic function is the creation of a space for ‘subject people’ through the production of knowledges in terms of which surveillance is exercised and a complex form of pleasure/unpleasure is incited.”* (Bhabha 1994: 70)

It is a hegemonic system thus based on contradictions, or, as Derrida would say: ‘binary oppositions’. The aim of postcolonialism would then be to attack this system and deconstruct it, so that the discursive minus sign by the other (second or less valid) pole of the binary opposition will be erased.

Feminism has exactly the same aim, namely to ensure for the woman the same position in society as that has been granted for the man – the standard. This position is ensured by a number of discursive practices and figurative as well as literal silencing of ‘the woman’. In her famous book *The Second Sex*<sup>18</sup> Simone de Beauvoir has pointed out that a woman is thought of (also by women) as a deviation of/from the man. De Beauvoir claims that women are made to live in complete moral and psychological dependence on men. Women do not differ from men, with the exception of anatomic and/or physiological aspects, but they are made different. A woman is not born a woman, but she is made one, argues de Beauvoir, by a number of ‘othering practices’ we have already described earlier in the text.

Even though the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir and of the second wave feminism<sup>19</sup> which she, among others, inspired have been rather progressive and surely groundbreaking, a critique has arisen later that their theory takes only white heterosexual women from

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<sup>18</sup> Published originally in 1949 in French under the title *Le deuxième sexe* in the political journal *Les Temps modernes*.

<sup>19</sup> Feminism is traditionally divided in historical or proto-feminism, and then the first, second and third wave. Historical feminism is dated till the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and includes actually only individual women who were concerned about the position of women in the society, as e.g. Mary Wollstonecraft. First wave feminism, till the half of the last century, was mostly engaged with women’s right to vote and other human rights. Second wave that escalated in the 1960’s and 1970’s focused than on women’s right to decide about their own body, sexual freedom etc. In the last decennia of the 20<sup>th</sup> century more variety came into the feminist movement which opened the third wave of feminism.

(higher) middle class into account. In this way the majority of the world's women is actually left out<sup>20</sup>. In the 1980's the voices of 'the other' women started appearing: of Afro-American, chicana, lesbian or third world women, i.e. of all the women who were left out till then. In 1981 the book *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* was published under the editorship of Cherrié Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa who claim that white women have figuratively used their backs to get up the social ladder. In the same year the famous book *Ain't I a Woman* by bell hooks was published that problematizes the position of white women in the feminist movement. Another important work of third wave feminism I would like to mention here is the Chandra Talpade Mohanty's essay *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse* (1984, revised version 1991) where Mohanty claims that third world women are not handled as equals by the Western feminist scholars and that they are, as result of that, without the right to speak, or more specifically to have their own voice. The feminist AND postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak<sup>21</sup> argues the very same thing in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) where she criticizes the discursive hegemony of the West. According to Spivak the voice of the colonized can never be heard in the Western (colonizing) discourse because there is no place, nor vocabulary, for it in there<sup>22</sup>. 'The subaltern' whom Spivak defines as "a person without lines of social mobility." (Spivak in Ashcroft, Griffith, Tiffin 2006: 28) can only be heard (acquire a voice) when someone listens to her/him. According to Spivak (and here she opposes Marx's idea<sup>23</sup>) there should not be spoken FOR (in place of) but listened to

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<sup>20</sup> Postcolonial theory would have to face a comparable critique, since it does not consider women in the theoretical discourse and is as result "gender-blind".

<sup>21</sup> Spivak belongs together with aforementioned theorists Edward Said and Homi Bhabha to the "Holy Trinity" of postcolonial theory (see e.g. Huddart 2006: 151).

<sup>22</sup> Spivak argues that it is not possible, as Marx has claimed, to say that "the others"/subalterns cannot represent themselves and therefore should be represented. She points out that the subordinated cannot speak as long as their right/ability to speak, their voice, is being ablated. Therefore, one of the major tasks of feminism (and at this concrete moment an equation mark can be put between feminism and *postcolonialism*) means for Spivak to get engaged in the endeavor to create some place/space for articulation of the needs of the subalterns in their own voice. "For the (gender unspecified) 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself," explains Spivak her point (Spivak in Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2006: 32).

<sup>23</sup> Marx actually complies a lot with Plato's ideas about state and society, that are partially rooted in the Indian caste system. Plato thought about 'the woman' as a being of lower level.

‘the subaltern’ who speaks from the position of difference. This is exactly the moment I would like to analyse further in the following text. I want to take a look at what ‘the subaltern’, the postcolonial woman (or to be precise postcolonial women in all their variety) have to say.

Feminism (especially) of the third wave has, as I hope is clear from the text above, a lot in common with postcolonialism. Spivak is only one example of theorists who combine both of these academic disciplines in their work. There is even a theoretical discipline that is called feminist postcolonial theory that combines these two, on the first sight different disciplines, and works exactly in the overlap of these two academic disciplines, adding the gender aspect to postcolonial theory and the racial aspect into feminist theory<sup>24</sup>. This project clearly is also one of this kind, since it analyzes women characters created by women authors (feminist literary theory) in a postcolonial situation (postcolonial theory). As I hope to be able to show later in the text in the contemporary situation one can only with difficulty think of people and/or literary characters without taking postcolonial theory into consideration. All the to-be-analyzed characters, I–narrators of the novels in this project’s corpus, are obviously living in and confronted with the postcolonial situation around them, but even more importantly (with)in themselves. They are made to face the change in the societal order and take a (new) position. But let us return to postcolonial and feminist theories before the analysis can be started.

Postcolonialism and third wave feminism, as social activist groups AND academic disciplines both question the self-evidence of the contemporary social discourse and the notions on which it is based. Edward Said<sup>25</sup> characterized the relationship between West

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Marx takes over Plato’s ideas about the philosopher as a higher level being and therefore predestined to lead the society. ‘The subaltern’ in Marx’s point of view has no insight to speak, and should only listen and be spoken for.

<sup>24</sup> For more information about postcolonial feminist theory see the *Feminist Postcolonial Theory. A reader*, edited by Reina Lewis and Sara Mills and published by the Edinburgh University Press in Edinburgh in 2003. The reader includes articles on different aspects of feminist postcolonial theory such as ‘Rethinking Whiteness’, ‘Sexuality and Sexual Rights’, ‘Gender and Post/Colonial Spatial Relations’.

<sup>25</sup>Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) is one of the crucial works of postcolonial theory. Said himself describes *Orientalism* as “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience” (Said 2003: 1). Presenting the East (or the Orient) as one homogeneous entity enables thinking about the West in comparable terms,

and East as “*a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony.*” (Said 1995: 89). We can claim the same thing about the patriarchal system. Gender/sex as well as race/cultural differences are constructed in the colonial times/system<sup>26</sup> in order to reassure the white (heterosexual) male as the standard, ‘the self’. Thanks to the engagement of both third wave feminism and postcolonialism the white skin colour is now also “marked” and has lost its discursive “invisibility”. “*Whiteness is no longer invisible: it is recognised as a cultural construct, an ‘unmarked marker’ and no longer neutral identity.*” (Kossew 2004: 3)

This change in thinking about identity has shifted the way people think about themselves and experience themselves. As a result of that, an individual in the postcolonial situation has to face the problem of how to define her/himself again, and in a different way. Postcolonial and feminist theories (and activism) of the last decennia have altered thinking patterns that have been valid for centuries, and pointed these as (humanly) faulty. On the other hand they do not offer much alternative ways how to define and position oneself in contemporary society as ‘the self’ without the discursive help of ‘the other’.

A solution can be partially found by Homi Bhabha, more specifically in his new concept of identity. According to Bhabha, who clearly uses Derrida’s deconstruction as a starting point, a simple reversion of the position of ‘the self’ and ‘the other’ in the

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as a complex of everything the East is NOT and can never be/become. Orient is thus a hegemonic construct of the West that projects into the East its own ideas of all that is thought to be ‘other’ or different, in another words what is not West (or what the West does not want to be). Said’s work has radically changed thinking about ‘the other’ as theoretical category and pictures the Orient as “*one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other*” (Said 2003: 1). By depicting the Oriental as a single image in the Western discourse, the stereotypical image of the Orient and prejudices against it were being created, empowered and re-duplicated. In *Orientalism* Said uses Foucault’s theory on power and knowledge but does not adhere to him. Using the Foucauldian notion of power, especially the relation of power to knowledge, what interests Said the most is the “scientific” optic that created the Orientalist discourse. The Foucauldian definition of discourse enables Said to include a large variety of texts in his analysis, philology, lexicography, history, biology, political and economical theory, novel-writing or lyric poetry (Said 2003: 15).

<sup>26</sup> Here I imply with ‘colonial’ not the historical period but, in compliance with the theoretical background of this project, rather a state of society when/where the hegeomic system is supported and re-duplicated by a number of othering discursive practices that devaluate one group and prioritize another.



binary is not a solution, because one pole (of the binary) would still suppress the other pole. In the compliance with Derrida, Bhabha proposes a new concept of identity: a fluid identity that is constantly changing, that originates not in one culture, but at the border between two or more cultures. This border Bhabha calls 'the liminal', and the identities that originate at this border 'liminal identities'. It stands for the space in-between cultures, a space where new identities and new cultural meaning originate. 'The liminal' can often be found in postcolonial situations and spaces, but marks also the never-ending process of origination of new identities, their endlessness and openness. This new sort/concept of identity is called 'hybrid identity'<sup>27</sup>. A decision for 'the liminal'(ity) results according to Bhabha in destabilization of solid authentic cultures on the behalf of the unstable, changing(able) and hybrid (Huddart 2006: 6-9). The process of hybridisation, the process of constant change and adaption is more important than hybridity itself for Bhabha.

What I would like to show with this project is the way the literature written by women has changed. In order to do so I have compiled a research corpus of contemporary women's literature in Dutch and Afrikaans, including authors of different cultural background, age, skin colour or sexual preference. I want to take a look at how (and whether) contemporary literature is influenced by the third feminist wave and postcolonialism and what picture of the society it mirrors, and creates/offers in the same time. Whereas the authors of the second feminist wave were still under the influence of the patriarchal narrative structures<sup>28</sup> we can clearly see an alternative to the traditional patriarchal model of power distribution. The authors I have been able to analyze till now have abandoned the patriarchal father-son narrative and offer an alternative to it. The mother-daughter narrative is not dependant on the existing narrative structures and comes with new possibilities for the plot. The aim of this project is to show how contemporary women authors have written themselves out of the Oedipal plot. They offer a radically different narrative, narrative of the motherhood, and create affirmative and clearly proclamative texts of post-second wave feminism.

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<sup>27</sup> *Hybridity*, both as a theoretical tool and historical and cultural occurrence, is not linear, flat narrative of cultural exchange and balanced competition, but a twisted multi-layered imperial tale of forced encounters and unequal relations. *Hybridity* concentrates multiple, contradictory forces involved in shaping cultures and identities (Acheraiou 2008: 2).

<sup>28</sup> As, among others, Blau DuPlessis, Hirsch and Fenoulhet show in their work.

## **1.2. Terminology**

Before I can work deeper on crucial theoretical notions of the project in the following chapter I would like to pay attention to the terminology that will be used in the course of the text. Exactly as was the case with postcolonial(ism) and/or feminism and feminist (literary) theory most of the terms that are used in the text have multiple meanings, depending on the context. In order to minimize future misunderstandings it is thus very useful to define these terms precisely

### **1.2.1. Postcolonial**

‘Postcolonial’ is in the framework of this project, as should be already clear from the previous paragraphs, understood in its broadest meaning as a state of society without clear division between a clear negative or positive value connected with the poles of binary oppositions as black-white, woman-man, East-West etc. The postcolonial society where the system of binary oppositions cannot be applied any more (unlike the colonial system where the position of each member of the society was precisely appointed) makes it very challenging for individuals to determine their own identity. Women especially, whose identity does not rely on a position in the society, e.g. their job, (as it is still the case by men) struggle with the problem how to determine themselves in a way unrelated to binaries.

### **1.2.2. Identity**

My understanding of ‘identity’ is mainly influenced by the Bhabhian theory and his notion of identity. That means, as already slightly mentioned above, identity as a fluid entity that is always in change and interrogation with its surroundings. Also the process of acquiring the sense of the self in the Lacanian sense, i.e. through language, is of great importance for this project. I will come to the psychoanalytical inspirations the theoretical background of this project later, in the frame of the analysis. At this point it is however important to name a number of notions on identity that are crucial for the correct understanding of the whole research.

Firstly I would like to repeat that identity, as it is conceived within this project, is never fixed or complete(d), but always in formation, fluid and changing. Feminist concept of identities, in accordance with which my understanding of identity has been formed, is analyzed as “*a process, multiplicitous, contradictory and unstable, lacking coherence,*

as well as narrative, a representation”<sup>29</sup>. Or, as it is put in the Encyclopedia of feminist theories, edited by Lorraine Code,

“(…) *cultural identities are multiple and simultaneous: our sense of self is dependent on the interlocking of these identities. Identities are not additive: it is not a question of race + class + gender. Rather, cultural identities are transformative such that our experiences of each identity affect each other.*” (Code 2003: 116).

That resonates with the idea of intersectionality<sup>30</sup> that has also been of great influence upon my thinking about identities. As already mentioned before, we have to take into account gender AND race/culture when thinking about postcolonial women, and also a number of another aspects of identity of these women that also play an important role in the way how they experience their own position in the society. Said describes the ways how societies traditionally define their identities as follows:

“*To a certain extent modern and primitive societies seem thus to derive a sense of their identities negatively. (...) All kinds of suppositions, associations, and fictions appear to crowd the unfamiliar space outside one’s own.*” (Said 2003: 54)

It is thus the challenge of the contemporary society to derive a sense of ‘the self’, of one’s identity in another, more positive and non-discriminative way. I am convinced that literature, that has always played an important role in the discursive forming of nations and socio-cultural identities (and, as Said shows, re-duplicated the orientalist ideas of ‘the other’ as the ultimate opposite of the white heterosexual male ‘self’) can now play a positive role and help to explore the possibilities for new identities.

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<sup>29</sup> [http://www.let.uu.nl/womens\\_studies/summerschool2008/background.php](http://www.let.uu.nl/womens_studies/summerschool2008/background.php) (consulted on 21.2.2011)

<sup>30</sup> This term, coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, points out that there are always more aspects of a person that are crucial for a person’s identity. Someone’s identity comes into existence at the intersection of a number of ‘axes of oppression’, i.e. axes according to which a person can be put into the subordinate position in the colonial/patriarchal hegemony. In the concrete case of colonial system, it is thus not only the skin colour that plays a role while positioning an individual in the system: also “*cultural difference, social authority and political discrimination*” (Bhabha 2007: 246) are decisive. We also have to mention that this position at the intersection of a number of axes is changeable, depending on the actual situation in which an individual finds her/himself.

This connects with the last important remark on identity connected, i.e. that identity of “real people” as well as of literary characters is constructed in a similar way and that they both speak the same language of the unconscious. This is also why we (as readers) can identify with literary characters and understand their thinking and acting. As Nicola King remarks,

*“Identity, of real persons, as well as literary characters, is always constructed by a narrative, the stories we tell about ourselves to the people in our surrounding, but also to ourselves.”* (King 2000: 2).

I will come to the connectedness of “real people” and literary characters later in the text, when discussing psychoanalysis in greater detail.

### **1.2.3. Woman**

Even if it might seem unnecessary on the first sight, it is crucial to explain what is actually being meant by the term ‘women’ and/or ‘woman’ in this project. As I have already slightly touched the subject with the remark about Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1989) and what also should be clear from the comments on binary oppositions and contemporary society, the meaning of the word/term ‘woman’ is not that self evident as might seem at first sight. The “complementarity” of the notion of ‘woman’ has already been criticized by the aforementioned Simone de Beauvoir and, as should be understood from what has been said earlier, the issue is much more problematic than that (see for example Butler’s theory on performativity). This project however still uses this artificial, and unrealistic, division for a number of reasons. ‘Woman’ is in the context of this project only used as a counterpart to ‘man’ in the hierarchizing binary opposition, a structure that is still imposed on people by the majority society. Although literary as well as politically and theoretically faulty, this thinking pattern is still very present in the contemporary society and has to be taken in account when thinking about the interconnectedness of society and literature, which is the actual underlying theme of this project. Furthermore, I agree with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and her idea of ‘strategic essentialism’. As well as other important feminist critical thinker of Indian origin, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Spivak takes the deconstructive approach as a methodological point of departure. However, she has to re-evaluate its connotations:

*“For Spivak, one of the most difficult challenges that deconstruction poses to politically oriented forms of criticism such as Marxism, feminism and postcolonialism is its insistence that resistance and opposition are bound in*

*a relation of complicity with the thing that is being criticized.”* (Morton 2007: 8).

According to the deconstructive method, she points out the inadequate usage of the category woman. For Spivak (and many other feminist/postcolonial thinkers) such usage ignores the plurality within the group. As a consequence, she refers to the variety of identities (e.g. age, gender, religion, geopolitical background, ... ) and pleads for consequent usage of pluralized variant of the term. However, at the same time, she is aware of discrimination and subordination of women as a group, based on the binary opposition ‘men’ – ‘women’ (or more precisely ‘men’ – ‘non-men’), which is why Spivak in the concrete cases, well-founded with common (political) goal, proposes co-called ‘strategic essentialism’. This purely political strategy however cannot be counterchanged with philosophical essentialism (e.g. of the first- and/or second wave feminism) which she strictly resents.

Usage of the term ‘woman’ cannot, and should not, be completely omitted, but it should be terminologically specified when used. The term ‘woman’ in the mainstream discourse often means more than a theoretical category and serves as an umbrella term for anything somehow connected with the female sex. In the context of the representation(s) of ‘women’, three different (and more concrete) terms are of great interest, namely ‘female’, ‘feminine’ and ‘feminist’. This terminological division comes originally from Toril Moi and proves to be very practical for understanding of different aspects of the term ‘woman’. From this reason it is being frequently used by feminist literary critics and feminist academics, among other the aforementioned Pam Morris. I will come back to the distinction between ‘female’, ‘feminine’ and ‘feminist’ later on in the text.

As Morris also does, the term ‘woman’ will be used in the text only as referring to the biological sex of the concrete person. Although this is a very questionable decision to make, due to limited place and for the simplicity, the project will use the distinction between men and women, according to the biological sex, even though I am aware that even biologically the difference between men and women is and can be blurred. This pattern is, at the end, the way how individuals still are perceived by mainstream society, which consequently influences the way how they experience themselves, or to be more precise how they are made to experience themselves. Especially in the colonial and patriarchal system, that are both (as explained on various places in this text) based on a

hierarchical binary the society felt and in many cases still feels the need to make a clear difference between its members, on the basis of one or another axis of oppression, most frequent of which, as already mentioned in the previous chapter, the axis of race and gender.

Using the pattern that has earlier been used to make a difference between people in the postcolonial (patriarchal) society, however, does not mean that I would approve this division, nor the implications of it. It simply enables me to analyze a group of people who were in the colonial society, and till certain measures still are, disadvantaged in the society (put into a disadvantageous position) due to this division. The use of this, though fault and discriminative, artificial division, which is simplifying as such, can however result in a comparable effect as with strategic essentialism, namely to acquire the needed tools and vocabulary and then deconstruct with them the whole system. Basing the analysis on such heteronormative division (while being fully aware of its constructedness and artificiality) will actually help to prove with its own terms the inadequacy of such a division. We namely have to keep in mind that this division is still very lively in the contemporary discourse. In order to deconstruct this binary, we have to depart from its existence.

Since this project is primarily engaged with women writers and women's literary characters, I would like to sum up here shortly some problems of the interrelation of women and literature. The position of women in the field of literature has been a complicated and rather complex one, as it has been the case in many other areas of human activity. Women as readers, writers and literary theorists had (and have) to face great discursive obstacles in order to be included in the literary field, among other because the role of 'woman' in literature was traditionally that of an object.

When woman appeared in book, she was mainly constructed by the (male) author for the (male) public. As feminist film critic Laura Mulvey pointed out on the examples of classical movies from the 1950's, woman appears on the screen to please the men's eye, in Mulvey's words: for the male gaze. A woman has a comparable function in literature: especially in the earlier times, the primal function of women was to be acquired/won/colonized by the main male character. This behavioural pattern was hereby strengthened and normatized in the society. As a result of that women had to deny themselves (their own identity) in order to read/enjoy a literary work. The chapter

Feminist theories in *A Reader's guide to contemporary literary theory*, edited by Selden, Widdowson and Brooker, begins with the following sentence that very well describes this ambivalent liaison between women and literature:

*“Women writers and women readers had always have to work ‘against the grain’. Aristotle declared that ‘the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities’ and St Thomas Aquinas believed that woman is an ‘imperfect man’. When John Donne wrote ‘Air and Angels’ he alluded to (but did not refute) Aquinas’ theory that form is masculine and matter feminine: the superior, godlike male intellect impresses its form upon the malleable, inert female matter.”* (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker 2005: 115)<sup>31</sup>

Till deep in the twentieth century women were kept out of the field of “high literature” by a number of discursive practices that are not dissimilar to the ‘othering practices’ we have been speaking about earlier. A clear standard existed of what was considered to be “high literature” and everything else fell automatically out of the category<sup>32</sup>.

*“(…) the problem for women writing in the 1940s and at the end of 1960s about literary texts was that what ‘counted’ as literature was an inherited concept, derived from humanist and New Critical traditions of Great Britain and the United States. The emphasis was on the inherent qualities of literature, which were presented as being self-evident to any attentive reader. Western Europe had its canon of ‘great’ authors, to whose glories the sensitive reader was attuned.”* (Robbins 2000: 70)

There is a whole body of critical texts by feminist and/or postcolonial theorists around the usage and existence of ‘the canon’. The first, very legitimate, question is who actually decides what/who would (not) be included in the canon. The other is for whom is the canon constructed and what is the use of such an instrument. Here, again, the issue of rigid (male-centred) ideas about literature (used in the way Kristeva has criticized, more on that topic later in the text) arises. It is not surprising, from reasons partially mentioned above, that especially in the earlier times female authors were excluded from (or: not included in) the canon. Thanks to the rigid criteria according to

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<sup>31</sup> Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas are two examples of the typical masculine thinking patterns in the Antiquity. That, however, does not want to say that this would be the only thinking pattern available.

<sup>32</sup> We can think here about the numbers of women’s writers who have chosen a gender-neutral and/or men’s pen-name to pass by the guards of “high literature”, e.g. George Sand, George Eliot, or to name an example from Dutch literature: Andreas Burnier. We also should not forget that also the Bronte sisters originally published under male names.

which literary works have been looked on, any other variations from the male-centred standard were neglected as bad/low quality literature. Even though the obstacles women have to face now when entering the literary field have been minimized, we should keep in mind that they existed and are still partially present in the professional as well as non-professional public<sup>33</sup>.

#### **1.2.4. Female - Feminine - Feminist**

The subject of the terminological division between ‘female’, ‘feminine’ and ‘feminist’ has already been shortly mentioned previously. Even though this distinction might be self-evident, exactly as it was the case with the term ‘woman’, in order to prevent any misunderstandings I prefer to provide a short definition of these terms. In accordance with the abovementioned Toril Moi ‘female’ is understood as biological category, referring to the biological sex and sexual characteristics of the physical body. ‘Feminine’ will be used as a social category, describing behavioural characteristics associated with female body, thus cultural conceptions of female gender. ‘Feminist’ then is a political category, referring to engagement challenging the link between biological body and its cultural (mis)conceptions. I have already pointed out the difference between feminism as activist movement and academic discipline, therefore it seems unnecessary to return to this topic again. As Pam Morris argues in her book *Literature and Feminism* (1993), that is one of the crucial theoretical works for this project, the interconnections between the three abovementioned terms are much looser than it might seem:

*“So, we cannot assume that all writing by women will be necessarily or essentially ‘feminine’ in its perspective and values. Even less can we assume that anything and everything written by women will be-somehow-feminist, that it will share the political assumptions and agenda (...)”.* (Morris 1993: 2).

I will consequently be using the term ‘women’s’ (literature, characters, writers, ...), so that no gender connected images and/or ideas are imposed on the writers, nor their readers.

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<sup>33</sup> One of the most common prejudices about literature written by women is that it is primarily written for other women to read, and mostly falls under the label of “romantic literature”, less quality thus.



### 1.2.5. Writing

I have already touched the subject of literature and writing a number of times. ‘Literature’, though also a commonly used term, might however cause comparable misunderstandings as the term ‘woman’. Julia Kristeva remarks in *Desire and language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (English translation in 1980, original published under the title *Polylogue* in 1977), that literature is a highly political term, since it has the power to exclude, as I also have shortly illustrated above. There will always be someone who defines what has the right to be called literature and what does not. The same reasoning is applied while criticizing the existence of ‘the canon’ that works on the very same principle of inclusion and exclusion (this topic has already been slightly touched above). Kristeva proposes to replace the disputable term ‘literature’ with ‘poetic language’. In this chapter the term ‘literature’ will, however, be used. In this particular case it does not have any qualitative implications about the given piece of writing, but refers to a discursive body in the Bourdieuan sense of the word. Furthermore in the texts the already mentioned term ‘writing’ will be used when discussing a given literary work or oeuvre.

Kristeva’s theories and the way she thinks of the connection between women and writing, and the bodily element she does not want to keep out her thinking about writing, have also been inspirational. To sum up Kristeva’s theory of the maternal body:

*“The maternal body is important in evocations of writing the body – but it is simultaneously a material biological reference point, and a structure that allows a daughter to suckle her mother, or her lover (male or female), or to give birth to their beloved. If we attempt to dematerialise this writing and let it all drift off into the metaphor, then it becomes little more than a poetic, and indeed patriarchal, commonplace (...) If we readers simply attack this writings as ‘biological essentialism’, then we ignore the vital complexity in order to launch our attack.”* (Still 2007: 264, emphasis by J.S.)

Literature is definitely one of the most powerful media to pronounce one’s identity, one of the ways self-definition is being sought. To ignore the fact by whom and under what conditions a concrete piece of literature/writing has been created would mean to deny the context of this piece. Especially in the case of women writers literature/writing is/works as a liberatory practice and by not taking this aspect (and the author) into account, we are actually denying the voice of the author (which is, as I have argued above, a colonial/suppressive practice).

*“As in the case of earlier generations of male nationalists, for a woman to tell her own story was to call into being an image of autonomous selfhood. The written word (...) opens a terrain of relatively free expression to women, into which taboos and secrets may be released.”* (Boehmer 2005: 217)

One of the greatest challenges of women’s postcolonial writing is, as Elleke Boehmer calls it, *“claiming a historical validity for the ordinary”* (Boehmer 2005: 218), pointing on the different scale of interest of (especially postcolonial) women’s writers. Here, she is in full compliance with Jane Fenoulhet and the title of her book *Making the Personal Political*<sup>34</sup>. I want to argue that writing is not only about producing high quality literature, meeting the male-oriented standards. As feminist theorists emphasize, literature (in the sense of production of ‘poetic language’) can work, and works, as a liberatory practice, as should be also clear from Boehmer’s quotes above.

#### **1.2.6. Subject**

In her book *The Mother/Daughter Plot* Marianne Hirsch quotes the Teresa de Lauretis’ definition of experience as *“a complex of habits resulting from the semiotic interaction of ‘outer world’ and ‘inner world’, the continuous engagement of a self, as subject, in social reality.”* (Teresa de Lauretis in: Hirsch 1989: 163). A ‘subject’ is thus someone who has (is granted) her/his own experience, someone whose ability to experience is acknowledged by the society. We have already mentioned the oppositionary term - ‘object’ when speaking about the original/traditional role of ‘woman’ in literature, i.e. that of someone who is there to be watched/acquired/taken/won, ... This definition resonates clearly with Spivak’s theory of ‘the subaltern’ and her claim that ‘the subaltern’ does not have voice in the (neo)colonial society. Even though they are not completely identical, Spivak’s ‘voice’ is very close to the notion of ‘subjectivity’, that is:

*“a terrain where conscious agency and subjectivation are understood in relation to each other. This approach to the self allows us to discuss questions of consciousness and experience, and it enables us to inquire into*

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<sup>34</sup> Fenoulhet implies in her title the slogan "The personal is political" which was frequently used by feminists, especially during the late 1960's and 1970's, during the second wave thus. The phrase has been used/paraphrased a number of times in titles of articles and essays, but also within the consciousness-raising activities.

*models of subjectivation, and notably how subjects get gendered and ethnicized.*”<sup>35</sup>

We however should not confuse ‘subjectivity’ with another term we have already discussed earlier, i.e. ‘identity’. I found a very useful contrastive definition in Kevin Everod Quashie’s ‘*Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (Un)Becoming the Subject*’:

*“subject is a more fluid term (than, say, its counterpart, object), a thing whose indeterminacy is both freedom and peril (as in to be subjected to); and identify is about placement, a sense of repeatability, a way a thing is put to a place”* (Quashie 2004: 7, emphasis by K.E.Q.).

### **1.3. Practical Organization**

This introduction strived, apart from a short outline of the project as such, to provide the theoretical basis for the latter analysis. It summed up shortly the history and development of the postcolonial and feminist thoughts and explained the connection between them. This theoretical introduction seems to me of significant importance, since the discussed issues may in different contexts have different meanings and connotations. Secondly, this problematic is not commonly known and practiced in Czech Republic or in the field of (especially extramural) netherlandistics.

After the theoretical basis has been stated and the major theoretical notions of this project have been defined, our attention will shift to the practical part. That is opened with a chapter on the corpus. The chapter dedicated to the corpus includes introduction to the corpus, sums up and explains the criteria according to which the works have been included, introduces the writers included in the corpus, their work in general and the works included into the corpus particularly. The ‘postcoloniality’ of these concrete works and the importance of these works for the author’s oeuvre and Dutch/South African literature will be also explained in this part. Then the plots of the novels in the corpus will be summarized and the characters (the I-narrators) will be introduced. This part of the dissertation is rather thorough for a number of reasons. Firstly, one of the aims of the project is to introduce two minor postcolonial literatures, even though limited to women’s writing, to a broader public. Therefore paying some attention to the works as such, and not only to their analysis, seems a practical decision. The works in

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<sup>35</sup> [http://www.let.uu.nl/womens\\_studies/summerschool2008/background.php](http://www.let.uu.nl/womens_studies/summerschool2008/background.php) (consulted on 21. 2. 2011)

the corpus are also quite new and not commonly known yet in the field of netherlandistics, nor worldwide, because most of them have not been translated yet. Furthermore, apart from Haasse and Van Niekerk who are in their home countries respected and renowned writers, the authors in this project's corpus are usually not included in the 'canonic literature'. Another reason for this broader explanatory approach is the inclusion of contemporary literature in Afrikaans into the corpus. Even though South African literature is commonly well-known abroad, this knowledge is mostly limited to literature in English which leaves the Afrikaans part of South African literature unseen.

Before I start I would shortly like to remark on the decision for English as a language of this dissertation. Even though one would expect a netherlandistics scholar attached to a Czech university to write either in Dutch or Czech, I have deliberately chosen English for a number of reasons. Firstly English is the only language that all the promoters and consultants, as well as the future public of this dissertation, share. There is also a practical reason since a large majority of theoretical works on postcolonial as well as feminist theory I have been using while working on this project is written or translated into English and uses a terminological apparatus that partially does not exist yet in Czech. Translating and/or making up theoretical vocabulary would, in consequence, take too much time and space that I have needed for the research as such. Also, if we consider the aim of this project to introduce two minor postcolonial literatures to a broader public, English is a more logical choice. The negative consequence of this decision has been that all the quotations used had to be translated into English, since only two of the six analyzed novels have been (already) translated in English. I would like to kindly remind the readers that the translation has been done by myself and has mostly informational value, which has at some points been at the costs of the artistic value of the text.

## **2. The corpus**

### **2.1. Introduction**

In this part, after the theoretical background has been stated and the project has a firm theoretical base on which can be built further, a practical analysis of a number of chosen works of contemporary postcolonial literature in Dutch and Afrikaans will be presented. The books of the corpus include two areas: the Netherlands and South Africa. Per area

there are three works by women writers included in the corpus. To be able to offer as complex picture of the actual situation in the literary field in a concrete area as possible (though restricted to women's writers) I have deliberately chosen for authors with different political and societal backgrounds, of different ages and different ethnicity/skin colours. The three case studies per area should therefore be sufficiently representative to enable to create an image of the present tendencies, topics and issues in the society as well as in literature which, as one of the most important and influential cultural outings, mirrors and at the same time moulds the very same society.

Apart from being able to offer an adequate image of the contemporary situation in the literature of a certain area, in order to be included into the corpus, the concrete piece of writing of a given author had to meet a number of criteria. These criteria will be shortly summarized in the following paragraphs, so that the choice for a concrete novel/piece of writing would be evident.

One of the first decisive criteria, which excluded a great number of very interesting postcolonial women's writing, has been the year of the (first) publication. Since the societal situation which is meant to be mapped within this project changes rather quickly, only books published after the year 2000 have been included. Adding a book into the corpus that has been published before would not provide relevant information since it would blur the image of the actual situation. As a result of this temporal limitation, the corpus contains works published between the years 2000 (*'n Stringetjie blou krale* by E.K.M. Dido) and 2007 (*Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat* by Ingrid Winterbach). With the exception of the just named *'n Stringetjie blou krale* all the works included in the corpus have been published after the attacks of 11 September 2001 which had a great impact on the whole (global but above all the Western) society because it has shaken the self-assurance of its identity. After this moment the tensions in the society intensified drastically, especially those between the autochtonous and allochtonous societal groups which is a very interesting aspect of postcolonial writing in particular<sup>36</sup>. I have decided to include this concrete work of E.K.M. Dido, even though the September of 2001 would make an intriguing outline, because of its descriptive

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<sup>36</sup> The situation in the Netherlands has turned even more complicated after the two political murders from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002 and director Theo van Gogh in 2004 were both murdered by (political) activists who would not approve of their political ideas. The (murder of the) latter is also mentioned in *De verstopene*; this real event forms a (socio-political) atmosphere in which the novel is placed.

character that very well represents the situation of black and coloured women in South African society. The importance of E.K.M Dido as writer in the South African context will be revealed later.

Another decisive criterion for the inclusion into the corpus was the gender of the concrete author. The project strives to explore the ways women in the contemporary society see and experience themselves, as women, people, citizens and members of the society, and the ways how they define themselves in the new socio-cultural conditions of the postcolonial situation. Therefore only women's authors were included. I presume namely that only a person with the (unique) experience of what it is/means and how it feels to be a woman in contemporary society can provide an authentic account on this experience which is exactly what I am looking for in this project. Even though men's authors surely can provide believable, thoroughly worked-out and recognizable women's characters in their oeuvre, there would always be the real-life experience element missing. Which, of course, does not decrease the literary quality of a given work, but is, in consequence, of no use for this concrete project. The greatest emphasis is on the way women see, experience and (re)present themselves as postcolonial beings. The goal is to find a unique/individual women's voice, which can we expect to be subversive to the traditional (patriarchal) literary standards. This limitation to women's authors only, however, as should be also be clear from the previous pages, is not building on essentialism, typical of pre-, first- and second wave feminism.

Furthermore, a lot of attention has been drawn to the criterion of the presence of a (woman's) character in a given book, described (as a character, with inner development) in sufficient measures that would enable an (psycho)analysis of the character. Therefore, only writings with a (from the narrative point of view) dominant woman's character on which the above mentioned would be possible to be explored and analyzed were included into the dissertation corpus. The term 'main character' is intentionally omitted since this is a very disputable figure in contemporary literature. I have been looking for writings that include a woman's character with a personal identity crisis, a character trying to get a grasp on her own body and mind in the challenging contemporary (postcolonial) societal situation. In other words, I have been looking for a woman's character that is aware of the contemporary changes in the society and reacts to these, among other with her need to redefine herself, loose from disadvantaging binary oppositions. This limitation has been rather easy to meet, since lots of recent

women's writing is till certain amount engaged in the struggle for the new unbiased female identity<sup>37</sup>. This fact retroactively confirms the actuality and importance of this particular issue in the contemporary society. Another aspect that is typical (even though not exclusively) for recent women's writing is an inclusion of a certain amount of autobiographical elements in the (fictional) texts. The border between non-fiction and fiction, as well as between autobiography and fiction rather vague and not easy to demarcate in contemporary literature. Authors tend for example to use their personal stories to speak about global issues. A literary genre of literary non-fiction has existed in the Netherlands for a few years<sup>38</sup>. Even though literary theory is much more than a search for linkages between the authors/writers and their literary characters, there can be no doubt that the own life, experiences and perceptions are an important inspirational source for many writers. In their writings they work with (and rework) the inputs they get from the reality around them<sup>39</sup>. From this we can thus see that including fragments from personal life is a very common phenomenon in the contemporary literature. Here, again, we can return to the statement of the second feminist wave which later became a title of Jane Fenoulhet's book, mapping the thematic development in 20th century women's writing in the Netherlands. As a result of the activism of the second wave feminism, the personal indeed became political, but also public, as we can see on the examples from this project's corpus. Whether the concrete character is or is not based on the life of her creator is however of minor importance for the project. It simply presumes some amount of autobiographical elements, but does not search for them, nor tries to link a literary character to its author.

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<sup>37</sup> I would like to remind here the aforementioned quote of Elleke Boehmer about the liberating possibilities writing has (can have) for postcolonial women's writers.

<sup>38</sup> To name a few authors of this very popular genre: Suzanna Jansen, Judith Koelemeijer, Joris Luyendijk, Geert Mak, Annejet van der Zijl, Frank Westerman.

<sup>39</sup> One of the most important Flemish authors Kristien Hemmerechts, for example, kept after the death of her partner one year long a diary which was later published under the title *Een jaar als (g)een ander* (A year like no/any other, 2003). Hemmerechts also published earlier her personal comments to the poetry of her lifelong partner, Herman de Coninck, in the autobiographical essay *Taal zonder mij* (A language without me, 1998) where she reveals the personal background of many of de Coninck's poems and crosses the border between the public and the private.

The 'postcoloniality' of a given work has also been one of the most decisive aspects for inclusion into the corpus of the project. Only those works that do not further distribute and multiply the colonial (and patriarchal) thinking patterns and do not reproduce (and re-affirm) the system of binary oppositions where one pole is thought to have a greater value than the other one were eligible for the corpus. One of the most important added values of postcolonial literature is to offer a different possibility, an alternative view of the society. It has therefore been mainly this subversive aspect I have been looking for in contemporary women's writings in Dutch and Afrikaans. But how does this actually look like in the practice? The notion of a system of binary oppositions is nothing really new. According to de Saussure a binary opposition is an instrument by which language units acquire their meaning and value. Originally, the concept of binary oppositions was used to describe the Western need of organizing everything in a hierarchical structure. In his deconstruction of Western metaphysics Jacques Derrida introduces a system of binary oppositions that forms the basis of the above described processes of inclusion and exclusion. According to Derrida the binary structure constructs the other as a denigrated term against which the self can define itself. Derrida also claims that in the traditional philosophical opposition the binary is not a peaceful coexistence of two opposite terms, but a system of violent hierarchy. This is why he proposes a two-step strategy to deconstruct this binary structure, about which I have already spoken before. The major aim of this deconstructive operation is to shake the whole hegemonic system of binary oppositions. This can however be reached only when 'the other' and the fact of being 'the other' as such is placed in the heart of the subject. To simply turn the poles of a binary, i.e. subordinating the till-now dominant term by the till-now subordinated term, which is a strategy that many anti-colonial and feminist activists (and theorists) proposed, would not be sufficient to break the whole structure.

The works included into the corpus of this project do carry exactly this deconstructive (and therefore subversive) potential as described above. They not only introduce a character that would be in the colonial times, and I use this term in the broadest meaning of the word, depicted as 'the other' from a variety of reasons, furthermore, all these works impersonate characters who are absolutely aware of their otherness/difference. They, however, ignore the negative implications of this position. By staging such a character the deconstructive strategy of destroying the hegemony within the binary is brought into practice. In contrast to the Hegelian economy in which



the subject recognizes itself in ‘the other’, in order to make distance from the other and re-assure her/his own identity, in the deconstructive mode the subject is forced to recognize ‘the other’ in her-/himself. The authors of the works included into the corpus (till certain degree) consciously write, and their characters narrate, from the position in-between. That is exactly the position which (influenced by deconstruction) postcolonial as well as feminist (literary) theory strives to behold. The earlier discussed Homi Bhabha comes indeed into mind, but also for example e.g. Hélène Cixous with especially her work *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975). They both clearly depart from Derridean deconstruction.

An introduction of the works that have been chosen for the corpus of the project will follow. The practical part will respect the above stated territorial division. Firstly the plots of the to-be-analyzed books will briefly be described to enable the latter analysis to follow. Together with a short summary of the plot, reasons for adding this particular work into the corpus will be revealed. Among other, a short explanation of the “postcoloniality” of the given work will be offered. After that the separate characters will be introduced whose ways of searching for an own (women’s) identity are to be analyzed further in the text. Among other the personal background of this character and the reason/process of how she ended up in an identity crisis will be explained. The other characters, however, cannot be left out completely since the factual reason of the identity crisis and also the ways how this character tries to find a place in the contemporary postcolonial society are often based on interaction with other characters: friends, partners, family, but also complete strangers. As we have already stated earlier, identity is not a stable object or thing, something we do have or do not have. It is a never-ending process of constant interrogation with our surroundings – with people around us, the society but also, as (among others) Rosi Braidotti points out, the non-living objects around us. What we (and our public) consider(s) as our identity changes according to the actual situation and position (we should never forget the spatial element while discussing the society and its members!). In different situations different aspects of our identity/personality feel addressed, or interpellated, to use the terminology of Louis Althusser. Depending on the concrete situation different aspects (e.g. gender, race, age, validity, belief, geopolitical background etc.) are foregrounded. This notion is fully in compliance with the theory of intersectionality I have already mentioned. Homi Bhabha further draws attention to the fact that cultural (and personal) identities are

constantly in contact with each other. In this context, Bhabha uses the term 'hybridity', which has as well been already mentioned. It seems however useful to refer to this notion again in this particular context while discussing an individual's identity in postcolonial society. Let us then not forget that identities are in a state of permanent exchange, discussion and, importantly, negotiation. This is how the new, impure and hybrid, cultural identities and meanings come into existence. 'Hybridity', and the process of hybridisation, cannot of course be thought of only in the spatial or geographic framework, it can be as useful in the context of time, pointing e.g. the processes of decolonization and/or emancipation.

Before we can take a closer look on the writing included into the corpus I would like to introduce briefly the writers whose work will be analyzed further on. This will firstly help to create an idea of the authors and their position in the society and the literary field. A short introduction of an author and her work will also enable us to place the concrete analysed work in the context of her whole oeuvre and will point out the major traits of her work.

## 2.2. *Authors of the Corpus*

**E.K.M. Dido** (1951) happened to be the first black woman to publish a book in Afrikaans. She published her *Die storie van Monica Pieterse* (The story of Monica Pieterse) only two years after the first democratic elections in South Africa, i.e. in 1996. For this contribution to South-African literature, among her other contributions to the literary world, she was awarded an Honorary D. Litt. Degree from the University of Western Cape in 2005. *'n Stringetjie blou krale* (A String of Blue Beads, 2000) which is a part of the South-African corpus, is her third book. Also in her later books Dido draws the attention of the South-African public to the position of (black) women in the South-African society. Her next book *Die onsigbares* (The unvisibles, 2003) about the wives of South-African police officers can serve as an example. E.K.M. Dido's contribution to the contemporary South-African society is however not limited to literature: she is also a lecturer in nursing at a college and director of the literary section of the South African art festival Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees.

**Naima El Bezaz** (1974) is one of the first women immigrant authors (and the first Moroccan woman) published in the Netherlands. She has been brought into the Dutch literary scene by the Dutch writer Yvonne Krooneberg who is in the Netherlands well-

known for her sharp opinions and outspoken view on sexuality and relationships. In her second book, *Minnares van de duivel* (Devil's mistress, 2002) El Bezaz touches on the contentious theme of Muslim (women's) sexuality and the erotic which has annoyed the Muslim as well as the protestant public in the Netherlands. *De verstotene* (Outcast, 2006) which has been included in the Dutch part of the corpus continues this trend and includes even more open sexual scenes than the previous book. *De verstotene* is concerned with the Islam, Judaism, anti-Semitism and the feeling of otherness in contemporary society. El-Bezaz is concerned in her whole oeuvre with the position of immigrant (Moroccan) women in contemporary Dutch society. She criticizes Muslim belief and is judgmental about religiosity, sexuality and society in general. Her later, novel *Het gelukssyndroom* (The happiness syndrome, 2008) based partially on her own life, in which she openly discusses the tabooed theme of depression by Muslim women has caused a great turmoil in the Moroccan immigrant group in the Netherlands. El-Bezaz had been threatened with physical violence by domestic Muslim community due to slander and had to leave the public sphere for a while. The author however stays an active participant in the societal discussion in the Netherlands, among other with her latest book *Vinexvrouwen* (The Suburban Wives, 2010) where she takes a critical look at life in the newly build Dutch suburban living areas.

**Hella S. Haasse** (1918) is often called the “grand lady” of the Dutch literature and is considered to be one of the few women's authors whose literary qualities have reached the level of “the great three” Dutch (male) authors Mulisch, Reve and Hermans. That, however, did not happen instantly. As Jane Fenoulhet points out, even though Haasse is the most successful women writer in the male centred literary field, till 1967 she has been a victim of the women's writing label (Fenoulhet 2007: 204). We can only presume how much was this acceptance connected with genderlessness of her themes and her mostly male characters.

Haasse was born in Batavia, in the old Dutch East Indies, and moved to the Netherlands after secondary school. She entered the literary milieu in 1948 with the novella *Oeroeg* that tells a story of a friendship between a Dutch and an Indonesian boy. This book, published on the occasion of the Dutch Week of the Book has gained the status of a classic in the Netherlands. In her following work Haasse has concentrated mostly on historical novels, leaving the theme of the country where she was born and brought up behind. The motif of Dutch East Indies and the latter Indonesia only appears in a

number of autobiographical works that come back to her childhood and growing up in what used to be a Dutch colony. In her (till now) latest novel *Sleuteloog* (The eye of a key, 2002) which can also be understood as a postcolonial rewriting of the novella *Oeroeg*, Haasse returns to the theme of a friendship between a white Dutch(wo)man and a member of the local community in the Dutch East Indies. After *Sleuteloog* Haasse published a collection of short stories *Het tuinhuis* (The gardenhouse, 2006), in 2007 the novella *Toen ik schoolging* (When I went to school) and the feuilleton *Sterrenjacht* (The star hunt) and a year later a collection of shorter texts *Het uitzicht* (The view) but seems to have withdrawn from the active literary work.

**Marlene van Niekerk** (1954) is one the highest praised South-African (women's) writers at this moment. As a former student of and current lecturer in philosophy her work often has a complicated structure and is not easy to digest. Furthermore, Van Niekerk provides a sharp analysis of South-African society in her works. She debuted with *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het* (The woman that has forgotten her binoculars, 1992), followed two years later with a longer piece *Triomf* (The triumph, 1994) for which she has in 1995 been awarded by the Noma Award, a literary prize for a book published by an autonomous African publisher on the continent. In *Triomf* Van Niekerk points out the situation of the societal group of white poor. In *Agaat* (2004) for which she has been (among other) shortlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Award in 2008, she reveals a complex relationship between the white, colored and black communities in post-Apartheid South-Africa. Van Niekerk is also an active literary theorist who can provide, in combination with her background in philosophy, a sharp and deep analysis of her own literary work, but also of her colleagues.

**Nelleke Noordervliet** (1945) made her debut with *Tine of De dalen waar het leven woont* (Tine or The valleys where the life lives, 1987) in which she rewrites the classical work of Dutch (colonial) literature *Max Havelaar* from the perspective of the wife of the main (male) character - Tine. In *Pelican Bay* (2002) she returns to the colonial problematic and criticises the Dutch colonialism and neo-colonialism, specifically in the Dutch Caribbean area. In her writing overall, e.g. *Snijpunt* (The intersection, 2008) or three shorter works published under the title *Veeg teken* (An indefinite sign, 2006) Noordervliet looks at the relation between men and women, the autochthonous and the allochthonous, the privileged and the disadvantaged. Noordervliet writes short stories, essays and literary criticism and is the chair of the organisation

committee of the international literary festival Winternachten which takes place every year in The Hague and tries to bring together prominent writers from all over the world to engage in the debate about the contemporary society from a clearly postcolonial point of view. She is also a regular contributor to the Dutch feminist magazine *Opzij*.

**Ingrid Winterbach** (1948) is a South-African writer and visual artist. After her studies of Afrikaans and Dutch, among other under one of the most famous Afrikaans poets D.J. Opperman. Winterbach became a lecturer at the university and worked as a journalist. She published her debut *Klaaglied vir Koos* (Lament for Koos) in 1984 under the pseudonym Lettie Viljoen under which she continued publishing till 1999. In 2004 Winterbach received the Hertzog Prize for the novel *Niggie* situated in the period of the Anglo-Boer War. *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat* (The book of happenstance, 2007) which was included into the South-African part of the corpus is her eighth novel. It has been awarded with the M-Net Prize, WA Hofmeyer Prize and UJ Prize for creative writing.

### 2.3. *Plots and Characters*

#### 2.3.1. **The Netherlands**

On the following pages three books coming from the contemporary literary scene in the Netherlands will be presented, namely *Sleuteloog* (The eye of a key, 2002) by Hella S. Haase, *Pelican Bay* (2002) by Nelleke Noordervliet and *De verstopene* (The outcast, 2006) by Naima El Bezaz. The attention will be focussed on the three (main) women's characters, i.e. that of Herma in *Sleuteloog*, Ada in *Pelican Bay* and Mina/Amelie in *De verstopene*. Firstly, the plots of the to-be-analysed books will be shortly introduced and then the characters in greater detail. A short history of the characters of Herma, Ada and Mina/Amelie will be offered, the reasons for their identity crisis will be explained and the solutions of this problem will be revealed. The abovementioned characters have been chosen in order to cover three generations of women in the Netherlands, and also three different cultural backgrounds: that of an ex-colonizer, of a white autochthonous woman who has to face the colonial past of her family and of a migrant who is dealing with the other (colonized) side of the story. As a result of that, they offer three quite different postcolonial histories, narrated from three different point of views.

### 2.3.1.1. *Sleuteloog* (The eye of a key)

As already briefly mentioned above, Haasse returns in *Sleuteloog* to the theme of Dutch East Indies, the place of her birth and childhood we already know from her prose debut novella *Oeroeg*. Haasse omitted this personal topic from her oeuvre, apart from her autobiographical works and the novel *Heren van de thee* (The Tea Merchants, 1992) which can however also be seen as one of her historical novels, partially based on historical material (like *De scharlaken stad* (The Scarlet City, 1952), *Cider voor arme mensen* (Cider for the Poor, 1960) or *Schaduwbeeld of Het geheim van Appeltern* (A Silhouette or the Secret of Appelterm, 1989), to name a few). The fact that she has brought up Dutch East Indies in her literary fiction again, and places a narration in the turbulent times of the collapse of the colonial empire exactly as in *Oeroeg* seems to be quite significant. Furthermore, Haasse comes in her (till now) last novel again with the same question as in her first prose work. As pointed out before, *Sleuteloog* seems in a lot of respects to be a postcolonial rewriting of the 1948 novella *Oeroeg*, with more than a half century gap between the two works. A comparison of these two books, *Oeroeg* and *Sleuteloog*, indeed reveals a number of similarities, on the level of plot, but also on the symbolic level, as well as in the way how both the narrations are built. The central plot of *Sleuteloog*, as well as of *Oeroeg*, is a story of a stranded friendship between a white Dutch and a native child in the years between the two world wars in the Dutch East Indies. In contrast to *Oeroeg*, two girls become friends in the later work and the “native” friend character, Dee, is of mixed origin which makes her character even more complex, since her position is literally in-between the two cultures, but also places her a lot closer to Herma. In both books, the narrator is the white Dutch part of the twosome and retrospectively gives an account of the friendship which came to a dead end, as a result of mutual discrepancy. In contrast to the slim novella *Oeroeg*, the narration of *Sleuteloog* also takes a larger timescale in, from the period in-between the wars till the 1970s when Herma loses her friend from sight completely, until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when the act of narration of Herma takes place. Generally, compared to *Oeroeg*, the author (and consequently the narrator) is in *Sleuteloog* much more relativistic, sensitive to other cultures and societal groups but also willing to admit her own faults and guilt. The similarity and at the same time the difference between the two literary works is the most visible in the closing paragraphs of both books where the narrator summarizes the course of the friendship. The author here uses the same

symbols, and even same words: in both cases ‘smoke’ (*rook*), ‘surface’ (*oppervlakte*) and ‘the country of origin’ (*het land van herkomst*) are mentioned. The I-character in *Oeroeg* compares the whole story with smoke that is difficult to grasp and not always reliable. He confesses that he actually never understood his friend, never was able to reach beyond the surface for which Oeroeg always will stand and admits a feeling of injustice that he is made to leave his motherland, despite of his attempts to break through. Whereas Herma, when finished with her writing, states that she can throw the written pages into the fire as a last smoke sacrifice to the friendship, since what she wanted to reach has been reached, and she finally found her inner peace. Even though there were many disputes between the two friends Herma now recognizes a connection under the surface, a link developed thanks to growing up together, and being born in the same country, but above all: culture. Herma knows that she will for always stay connected to her motherland and albeit she never comes back to the country where she was born, it will stay with her - she carries it in her heart and soul. *Oeroeg*, in contrast stays colonial in his thinking patterns and the way how the (native) characters are depicted. In *Sleuteloog* Haasse succeeds in the attempt to offer an other/different point of view, that of the colonized, and can this novel therefore definitely be considered as a postcolonial work. That is not necessarily the case with the above mentioned novel *Heren van de thee* to which some critique has been risen, among other from Maaïke Meijer, that it does not at all consider the postcolonial perspective.

Let us now move to the plot of *Sleuteloog*, and concentrate more specifically on the character of the white narrator that will be the object of the following analysis. Art historian Herma Warner, the I-narrator of *Sleuteloog* is remembers her friendship with a childhood friend of hers - Dee - thanks to a letter from a journalist who is working on a book about Herma’s friend. Dee seems to be an important (but also quite dubious because of her affiliation to terrorist groups) human rights’ activist in South-East Asia. After the Second World War, Dee changed her name to Mila Wychinska (using her mother’s maiden name) and disavowed her rich merchant family which represented an important part (and one of the pillars) of the colonial society. Hereby she clearly distanced herself not only from her family but also from her cultural background as such, and consequently from Herma and their shared childhood – a fact which Herma cannot understand. She also really cannot make sense of the sudden change in Dee’s attitude towards her. Only later she finds out that Dee has been in contact with radical

left group striving for the independence of Indonesia and did not find Herma reliable enough due to her family background. Much later, after her husband's death, Herma also comes to know what she subconsciously sensed for years, namely that her husband had a relationship with her best friend. The awareness of the years-long relationship explains a lot for Herma and also helps her to understand the behaviour of Dee at the end, and actually creates an even stronger feeling of connection with her friend. Before Herma reaches this moment of inner peace and contentment she however has to undergo a long-lasting process of becoming aware of herself, of admitting and accepting. This is realized by the means of notes Herma writes down because of the request of the journalist Bart Moorland. Although she is fully aware of the fact that the annotation of her journey back into the past would not be of any use for the journalist, she keeps working, thinking and writing down. She feels a vague urge to do so, somehow she knows that this has to be done. During this long and painful process of remembering Herma not only discovers a number of (unconsciously created) blind spots in her memory but also has to admit that her relationship with Dee/Mila was far from ideal. As we follow the stream of Herma's memories we are (together with Herma) confronted with more painful facts about the friendship and the amorous relationship between Herma's husband Taco and Dee. Little by little Haasse disentangles a complex of life-stories of a number of people whose lives have been intertwined more than they would have liked. But Herma has only her own memories to rely on, an ebony chest containing all the documents about Herma's past is locked and the key to it, which also gave a name to the novel, cannot be found. Taco is dead and Dee/Mila reported as missing for years. This whole process of remembering, writing down and looking for the lost key goes together with Herma's moving to a residence for elderly people. As if she finally wanted to close this chapter of her life, Herma not only sorts out what she takes with her to the hospice and what can be thrown away, she also prescribes herself a sort of self-psychoanalysis that can help her to deal with her past. At the end, when everything is packed and sorted out, and even the most painful facts from the past of Herma, Taco and Dee have been revealed, a specialist manages to get the ebony chest open: it is empty.

It is not the theme of the previously Dutch colony that makes this novel postcolonial. It is above all the way how Herma, even though she is in the advantageous position of 'the self', positions herself and depicts herself constantly as 'the other'. Her societal



situation, in the colony as well as in contemporary Netherlands, predetermines Herma to occupy the advantaged space. She is white, university educated, coming from a “good” middle class family, and (not without importance) married to a successful scientist. Herma, however, is not comfortable with her being depicted as ‘the self’ and constantly places herself in the disadvantageous position of ‘the other’. Herma also suffers a lot from feelings of so-called postcolonial guilt, she feels to be personally responsible for the colonial violence, physical but also (and above all) epistemological, discursive and cultural. Especially when compared to the I-narrator in *Oeroeg* we can observe a drastic turn in the way a white Dutch character depicts her-/himself in relationship to other members of the (colonial) society. The narrator of *Oeroeg* namely states at the end of the novella that he actually did not really know his friend and never was able to understand him. The disillusioned I-character has even doubts about the whole actual existence of the friendship and is not able to see the fault on his side. He is angry that he has to leave the country which he has always thought of as his fatherland. In *Sleuteloog*, on the contrary, Herma shows a lot of understanding for Indonesians and their striving for independence. In the beginning she thinks of herself as Indonesian and plans to apply for Indonesian nationality after the declaration of independence. When she is told (by her native friend as it was the case with the narrator of *Oeroeg*) that the possibility actually does not apply to her, her feelings are indeed mixed, but cannot be described as anger, nor bitterness. At the end of the plot Herma, in the contrast to the I-character in *Oeroeg*, shows a great amount of understanding for her friend and is able to recognize a link between them which has always been there and connected them. Thanks to the shared experience of growing up in the same culture, in the last period of the Dutch colony. Herma and Dee did share a cultural background that could not be erased by mutual misunderstandings and conflicts.

#### 2.3.1.1.1. *Herma Warner (Sleuteloog)*

Herma Warner, the narrator of *Sleuteloog*, has been born into a white family as a member of the colonial administration of the then Dutch East Indies. She is a renowned professor of art history and now in her late eighties she enjoys her retirement in the solitude of her house. She recently applied for a room in a nursing home for elderly people and is basically waiting for a message from the institution that there is a room free for her to move and spend the rest of her days in there. Nothing seems to disturb

her peace and on the first sight she seems a contented person. That this is only an external impression becomes evident when Herma receives a letter from a journalist asking her about her old childhood friend Dee. As Herma wades into her memories it soon becomes clear that there is a lot hidden under the calm appearance and that this has a lot to do with Dee, but also with the country where Herma grew up and with which she always stayed connected in a way. She also admits that she never felt completely accepted, not in the country where she was born and brought up, and not even in the Netherlands where she has spent most of her life. Herma has always been an outsider, too Dutch for Indonesia, and too Indonesian (“*Indisch*”) for the Netherlands. This feeling of not-belonging however did not really bother Herma. When the letter arrives, she has to question her past, her relation to the two most important people of her life, as well as her recent position in the society which results from the previous two aspects. Herma self is aware of that she needs to remember something, that something has to be done before she really can leave the house and start a new stage of her life.

*“Iets wil geweten, uitgesproken worden, maar ik weet niet wat dat is. Het houdt zich schuil, ergens onder de oppervlakte van mijn bewustzijn. Het heeft daar sinds jaren verborgen gelegen. Als ik eerlijk ben, moet ik toegeven dat ik allang het bestaan kende van dat vormeloze, vage, dat me nooit bedreigde wanneer ik het zelf maar met rust liet. Maar nu is het alsof ik door al die herinneringen aan vroeger op te halen een scheidingswand doorbroken heb. Tegen mijn wil sijpelt het besef bij me naar binnen dat ik vragen moet stellen.”* (Haasse 2002: 61)

*Something wants to be known, pronounced, but I do not know what that could be. It stays hidden somewhere under the surface of my consciousness. It has been hidden there for years. To be honest, I have to admit that I have known about the existence of that formless, vague thing that never threatened me as long as I left it in peace, for a long time. But now it feels as if the dividing wall has been broken through raising all those memories of the past times. Against my will I realize step by step that I have to ask questions.* (my translation)

Herma also senses that what she feels the need to do would not be pleasant at all, and will cost her a lot of energy and pain. She, who seems to never have doubts about her capabilities, suddenly mistrusts herself, and especially her memories. Now she knows, that her own consciousness has been hiding from her, suppressing memories that have

been essential for her life, she understandably has doubts. Still she is determined to do what needs to be done and promises to be honest with herself and her own past.

*“Als ik overlees wat ik tot nu toe naar aanleiding van Moorlands verzoek voor mezelf op papier heb gezet, voel ik me onzeker. Kan ik werkelijk vertrouwen op mijn geheugen? (...) De pogingen om woorden te vinden voor wezenlijke momenten van mijn eigen vroegere leven eisen een grotere nauwkeurigheid, boren een andere laag van mijn geweten aan (want niet in de eerste plaats de creatieve!) (...)”* (Haasse 2002: 58 - 9)

*When I read what I have written down for myself as a reaction to Moorland’s letter, I feel doubts. Can I really rely on my memory? (...) The attempts to find words for the crucial moments of my past life demand a greater punctuality and strike another layer of my conscience (because not the creative one in the first place!) (...)* (my translation)

During the process of remembering and writing Herma slowly reveals her inner fears and doubts, that have been hidden for a long time even from herself, and we, together with her, experience the break-down of her till now stable identity. The first obvious question Herma asks is that of her origin. Even though her both parents were white, Herma accentuates that she never felt like a *totok*, a white (thinking) member of the colonial society. Herma experiences an inner difference between her and her parents and feels different from them (Haasse 2002: 53). Their way of acting, even though they both claim to have sympathy for the native Indonesian people and their desire for independence, is typical of members of the privileged group in a colonial system. The way her father used to snap his fingers in order to call a servant, simply because it was the way how the colonizers treated the colonized, made Herma always feel very uncomfortable, as well as the blindness to cultural differences of her mother.

*“(...) ik kon mij er toch voldoende in verplaatsen om me te schamen voor mijn moeders al te rechtstreekse wijze van benadering. Net zo wist ik niet waar ik kijken moest wanneer mijn vader in mijn tegenwoordigheid met zijn vingers knipte om de aandacht te trekken van een inlandse ondergeschikte.”* (Haasse 2002: 52)

*(...) I have had enough empathy to be ashamed of my mother’s way too outspoken behaviour. Just as I did not know where to look when my father in front of me snapped his fingers in order to attract the attention of one of the native servants.* (my translation)

Her greater empathy, compared to that of her parents, and natural understanding for the Indonesian way of life Herma explains by the fact that she has actually been brought up by the elderly married couple of native servants of her grandparents. When they returned back to the Netherlands for their retirement, Oemar and Idah simply went on serving in the family of Herma's parents. Because the father of Herma has been often away due to his work responsibilities and the mother was most of the time occupied with her charitable activities in the local community it were actually the two old Indonesians who executed the parental role for Herma. Therefore she acquired the native ways of doing as natural and considers herself actually of a mixed origin, at least internally. Another great helper in adopting the native Indonesian way of doing is the aunt of Dee – Non. The very dark-skinned sister of Dee's father lives her life in a very simple, humble way. Her greatest passion are orchids which she cultivates in a large greenhouse behind the family mansion. In her childhood Herma spent a lot of time there helping Non with the care of the flowers. The love for orchids is however not the only thing Non and Herma share: Non is well-known in the community for her abilities to see things that are not visible for normal human sight. In Non's presence Herma has a number of times seen a white "hadji", a ghost of a sacred man, a pilgrim to Mecca. This bond between Non and Herma stays as intense as it was when the white friend of Dee was a child. In the 1970's when Herma visits Indonesia they see together the ghost of Herma's mother, who was killed shortly after the declaration of independence of Indonesia.

*"Nog steeds kon ik dus zien wat Non zag, en als zij erbij was een blik slaan in een dimensie buiten het hier en nu. Ik merkte dat zijn even geschokt was als ik door deze ontdekking, en ook dat die haar, net als vroeger, een zekere satisfactie gaf." (Haasse 2002: 126)*

*So still I was able to see what Non saw, and when she was with me, I could look into a dimension outside of the here and now. I noticed that she was as shocked as me by this discovery, and that it, exactly as before, gave a certain feeling of satisfaction. (my translation)*

We should understand the fact that Herma sees things from another world, the "gift" she has, in the context of the Indonesian / Dutch East Indian reality these days. Even now the tradition of a number of ghosts and spirits, especially the white "hadjis", is very lively and definitely nothing abnormal. That Herma actually believes in the other world

and even “sees” things thus does not make her different but on the contrary a member of the native society. Apart from these abilities Herma has also acquired a taste for native Indonesian batik and Chinese embroidery. Herma has often been on the back porch of Dee’s grandmother when Madam Meijers was choosing the finest examples as presents for her friends, business partners and servants (Haasse 2002: 59). The last has also been a decisive factor when Herma left for the Netherlands to study at the university: she chose the history of art. Later she became an expert on the area of especially plant motifs in the South-Asian decorative art. Herma’s interest in this particular form of art will at the end be one of the aspects that will later help Herma to recognize a bond with Dee. But we, nor Herma, are that far yet.

Herma thus always considered herself as “*Indisch*” and even seriously thought about the possibility of acquiring Indonesian nationality after the proclamation of Indonesian independence. It has been very painful to find out that the possibility only applies to people of (biologically) mixed origin, and that she is therefore excluded. When living in the Netherlands Herma, together with her husband, carries on living this life in-between the cultures. They even let to build an Indonesian-style alcove - “*pondok*” in their garden where they both spend a lot of time. Despite Herma’s considerations to be more Indonesian than Dutch, she is a number of times accused by her friend Dee of *totok* manners and even of racism (Haasse 2002: 7, 99, 133, 136). What Dee however took personally as a offense of her person and origin was actually in the case of Herma mainly naivety and “colorblindness”, natural for a member of the privileged group of the colonial society.

Despite her more advantageous position Herma did however always feel less compared to Dee. The fact that Dee did not find Herma trustworthy enough to share with her openly her political opinions and left her out of the group of her radical leftist friends that strove for the independence of Indonesia has already been mentioned before. But there were other aspects that touched Herma probably even more deeply: next to Dee her own femininity was questioned. Whereas Dee possesses an inborn natural elegance and charm in her fragile slightly exotic body, the typical healthy Dutch appearance of Herma seems a bit clumsy and unfeminine next to her. As Herma self has to state above a photograph of the two friends at a swimming pool, she looks like a good swimmer, sporty, but not elegant. The posture of Dee on the other hand gives a feeling of

unwilling seductiveness (Haasse 2002: 138). Herma self is troubled by this comparison and next to Dee she feels her femininity endangered by the simple presence of her friend, and is till a certain measure afraid of the influence the natural beauty of Dee might have on Taco, her lifelong partner:

*“Dat Taco zei haar mooi te vinden (...) hinderde me, al was ik het met hem eens, en bewonderde Dee om haar wereldse uitstraling en zelfbewuste optreden.”* (Haasse: 166)

*That Taco said to find her beautiful (...) worried me, even though I agreed with him upon that, and admired Dee for her mondaine appearance and self-assured behavior.* (my translation)

Herma unconsciously probably always felt Dee to be possible competition in love and sensed the tension between Dee and Taco who would later become Herma's husband. The knowledge of the existence of a relationship between her best friend and her husband that has lasted for years touches Herma badly. She suppressed this for years, which caused her indefinite nightmares (Haasse 2002: 147) and only admits this double betrayal on her as one of the last things during her psychoanalytic writing process. How deep this wound must have been is also visible on the fact that it is the last thing she reveals in her inner purifying process.

She however is able to put herself in the place of Dee and understands the situation in which her best friend has been for such a long time.

*“Zij heeft mij nooit willen kwetsen, mij geen gezichtsverlies willen berokkenen, zij respecteerte mij als ‘Taco's eerste keus’, zoals het voor hem vanzelf sprak dat ik zijn leven deelde. Maar nooit zou ik aanvaard hebben dat zij zijn ‘intieme keus’ werd. Zij begrepen dat en daarom zwegen zij over hun verhouding, en heeft Dee elk contact met mij vermeden.”* (Haasse 2002: 185)

*She never wanted to hurt me, to make me lose face, she respected me as ‘Taco's first choice’, as it was self-evident to him that I shared his life with him. But I would never be able to accept her as his ‘intimate choice’. They both understood that and that is why they kept silent about their relationship and why Dee avoided any contact with me.* (my translation)

The realization of what has actually been disturbing her all that time brings relief to Herma. She cannot forgive, but she can understand, and more importantly: accept. With

this again the “*Indisch*” part of her personality can be seen. She is able to cope with the knowledge of the relationship of Taco and Dee only through resignation, “*pasrah*”. She accepts her fate. A not very satisfying result, but it finally offers inner peace to Herma she has not been able to find for years, due to suppressed memories, fears and assumptions. There however comes a “sign” from Dee that at the end provides the reconciliation with Dee. At the very last moment before Herma leaves to the nursing home for elderly, she receives a catalogue of an exhibition of the Inada collection of South East Asian decorative art. The young Japanese collector, a son of a Japanese banker and “*a beautiful Eurasian from Indonesia*” (Haasse 2002: 189), not only clearly has the features of Dee but also seems to have acquired, through his mother, a specific taste for Indonesian decorative art, which is very close to Herma’s taste in art. Even though Dee earlier willingly rejected this part of her (cultural) background, she apparently gave the appreciation for native art forms of Indonesia, acquired together with Herma on the back porch of madam Mijers, to her son.

*“Als ik over de middelen beschikt had om een verzameling aan te leggen, zou ik precies zo gekozen hebben. Wat Inada bijeengebracht heeft, is de apotheose van datgene waar ik mijn hele leven mee bezig geweest ben.”*  
(Haasse 2002: 188)

*If I had the means at my disposal to establish a collection, I would have chosen exactly the same pieces. What Inada brought together is an apotheosis of what I have been working on all my life. (my translation)*

The collection of Inada Herma feels is a signal from Dee, through time and place. This denies the alienation and distance between the two women and proves that there has always been a link between Herma and Dee. It is impossible to name, but appears clearly visible on the symbolical level as is the collection of Dee’s son. It is the link acquired through being born and growing up in the same country and culture, through breathing the same air, and sharing the same experience. This knowledge re-assures Herma that she is still part of Indonesia and its culture and consequently proves that a position in-between two cultures does not necessarily have to mean isolation, rootlessness and solitude.

### 2.3.1.2. Pelican Bay

*Pelican Bay* by Nelleke Noordervliet is a story of a white middle-aged Dutch woman, Ada, who undertakes a journey to a further not specified Caribbean island in order to find herself and discover the silenced history of her own family. A murder has been committed in colonial times on a plantation the family of Ada had owned on the island. The parallel narrative to the story of Ada tells the history of Ada's forefather Jacob and his murdered wife Fanny. There are many parallels and overlaps in the characters as well as life stories of Ada and Jacob, but the following summary of the plot as well as the actual analysis will stay limited to the part of the narration that takes place in the present, to the story of Ada thus. Even though the historical line of the novel forms an important part in the structure of the narration and is an interesting literary element, we can allow us to set it aside since it does not have a greater influence on (the development of) the character of Ada which is in the final analysis the major objective of this analysis. Ada plans to find out the truth of the real identity of the murderer of the wife of the plantation owner and eventually to write a book about her findings. There is also another motivation for Ada's journey to the island and another, much more recent but till the same measure silenced chapter of the family history. In a rush of delusive philanthropy (which actually was a way to reassure their own thought-to-be cultural dominance) the parents of Ada adopted an Antillean boy. They however haven't been able to make their white adoption myth true, the adoption was a failure which none of the parents, especially the father could handle. They did not succeed to see a "normal" child in their adoption son and consequently also started treating Ada in an inadequate way. To cover up their failure their parents threw themselves in busy social life including, under the influence of the hippie movement and the search of peace and innocence, free and open love. Both children have been exposed to unbridled sexuality, the hegemony of the flesh and nudity and even included in the sexual games as the bearers of ultimate innocence. That did not leave the psyche of Ada and Antonio untouched. Ada suppressed the memories of her childhood completely and willingly accepted her parents' versions of the stories she vaguely remembered from the past. But when her father, dying of cancer, accuses the already grown-up Ada of a number of things she cannot remember happening at all, or remembers differently, she understandably starts asking questions. Was it really her who chased Antonio away? Did she truly threaten her brother with a knife? Or did it happen the way she remembers



it? But there is no one to ask, her father dies shortly after their last argument after which she refuses to visit him again and her adoptive brother is away. As a result of this maltreatment in the family Antonio disappeared on the day of his eighteenth birthday back to the Caribbean, leaving Ada whom he considers an accomplice in his denigration behind. Both occasions do come in very handy for Ada since she finds herself in an uneasy situation in her relationship with her apparently quite older husband. Ada feels the need to situate herself anew as an individual, independently of her husband. We will later come to her relationship and dependence on her husband in the detailed analysis of the character of Ada later, since this relationship has been of a great importance to the identity of Ada until her arrival at the island. During the stay on the island Ada entangles herself in a chaotic net of human interrelations. She ends up in a relationship with the local police officer Marcus who originally wanted to use her to get closer to Antonio. Her adoptive brother has namely become a drug dealer on the island and a very important figure in the unofficial local society and the island police is after him. Ada, on her side started the relationship on a pure sexual level. They admit their feelings to each other only much later. The situation gets even more complicated since Ada stays in the pension of Marcus' mother - Ma Edith. This recently widowed white woman married the famous freedom fighter King in the times of hard racial repression and became a real Creole and a respected member of the island community. Ada has a number of discussions with Ma Edith during her stay on the island that help her a lot to find her an own position in the society. We will come back to these conversations later in the text while analyzing the character of Ada. During her stay on the island, beside the complicated relationship with Marcus, Ada continues in her search of the truth of her adoptive brother, as well as about the 200 years old murder case. In the course of her quest for the answer to the colonial puzzle Ada becomes befriended with an elderly Jewish couple Kuifje and Bobbie who might know something about the history of Jacob van Wetering and even dispose of some documents connected to his person. But they also have been living too long on the island and are distrustful of white strangers and in return they ask Ada to help them with their project of recovery of the old Jewish cemetery on the island. The fragility of the two old people that are not willing to give up against all the odds, (here is a clear parallel with the character of Ma Edith) moves Ada to promise her help, but above all pushes forward her search for her own identity and place in the world. The attempts to find her adoptive brother and ask him about the issues that plague her seem unfruitful for a long time. Antonio apparently does not want

to be found, spoken to nor asked about his Dutch past. When Ada finally manages to meet Antonio he refuses to provide the answers she is looking for. His childhood is a closed chapter and he has no ambitions to open it again. At the end her brother is willing to talk and fill in the gaps in the memories of his adoptive sister. He confirms Ada's assumptions that her father has not been telling her the truth and even brings stories about the sexual abuse of both of them to the surface. The knowledge that she in the end has been right however does not calm Ada down at all, although it lessens her feeling of guilt of being the reason for Antonio running away back to the Caribbean. She breaks down under the burden of the dark side of the family history. Furthermore she has to pay a high price for the information provided and apparently also for the pain which the remembering of their troubled childhood has caused to Antonio: Ada ends up in the local island jail for drug smuggling. Her adoptive brother worked a package of drugs into her luggage, telling her it contains pictures for their mother. It is however Antonio again who gets her out of the place after she has proven to be reliable since not revealing who actually put the drugs in her luggage. Antonio is able to pay a good lawyer and probably also bribe the local authorities to let Ada out after a while again. The imprisonment seems to be a breaking point for Ada and she learns to accept her past, as well as the past of her family. During her stay in the prison she suffers hallucinations, seeing her father, but also Jacob and his murdered wife Fanny. In this way she is finally able to confront, even though only in her mind, the tyrannical father and speak up for herself. She comes back to the Netherlands with newly found self-assurance, able to accept things she is not able to change. She also finds out that she is pregnant with Marcus' child which means the child would be of mixed blood and which she and her husband will bring up together. The child, free of any racial or other prejudices, symbolizes a new start for both of them.

The postcoloniality of *Pelican Bay* lies in the critique of the cultural superiority of (not only) the Dutch and the colonial history that actually is a direct result of this feeling of superiority. The character of Ada is depicted, despite her financial liability and whiteness, as inferior, a strategy that we already recognize from the short summary of *Sleuteloog*. Ada is (or becomes) fully aware of her position and disregarding this position she is striving to be heard, to gain a voice. She is fighting for her place in society and finally finds it. The author is, besides the critique on white colonial and neo-colonial practices, also critical of the native population of the island and is far from

seeing the things black-and-white only. Noordervliet does not picture a fight of one (white) woman in an inferior society and culture, she depicts a living, though slightly dysfunctional, social organism which a white woman's character joins for a period of time. The local characters are represented from the point of view of Ada, the narrator, but have definitely not their voice and agency taken away from them, even though some of them are, as well as Ada, still looking for their position in the postcolonial society. The implicit motif of the novel is also the search for one's identity, not only by the main character Ada, but also of her counterparts (of different origin and cultural background), on the island, as well as back in the Netherlands.

#### **2.3.1.2.1. *Ada van de Wetering (Pelican Bay)***

Ada, although in an advantageous position, feels misplaced. From the very beginning of the narration she presents herself as 'the other'. Already in the opening scene, in the plane on the way to the island Ada is presented as without any agency, she seems to have lost the power to operate independently. As she comes closer to her destination, Ada experiences a blast of anxiety that makes her to beg the stewardess to take her back home (Noordervliet 2002: 13-14). The anticipation that bad things will happen proves to be right, when Ada has to undergo a humiliating examination by the customs officers at the airport.

*“Nooit was ik zo ontluisterend en zo klinisch snel beroofd van mijn eigenheid. Van mijn warmte. Van mijn complexiteit. In mijn kleren huisde mijn opgevouwen ik. Mijn lichaam was louter object van afkeer en spot. (...) Toen ik weer alleen was en niet meer werd bekeken, keerden mijn fragmenten tot elkaar terug. Ik voelde de barsten. Ik dacht niet dat ik ooit weer heel zou worden.”* (Noordervliet 2002: 19)

*I have never been so humiliatingly and so clinically fast deprived of my self. Of my warmth. Of my complexity. In my clothes resided my folded self. My body was only an object of disgust and mockery. (...) Once I was alone and no more observed came my fragments back together. I felt the cracks. I doubted I will be ever whole again.* (my translation)

She gets to know later that she has been so thoroughly inspected because of her adoptive brother who is a well-known drug dealer on the island. That however does not decrease the feeling of humiliation and denigration Ada experiences. She suddenly finds herself in a situation where she is a minority, e.g. her skin color is regularly pointed to.

She feels herself to be a victim of the island and its society she cannot get any grasp on. The long and painful process starts already at the airport but does not end there at all: a number of times Ada falls in a very humiliating way victim to the island (its society, the local drinks). When she is attacked and robbed on the street, the island seems to have its own version of the story and no one is willing to listen, nor believe the version of Ada. In this, she has no voice<sup>40</sup>.

This feeling is however nothing new for Ada. Her feeling of insufficiency can be traced to her childhood. Ada never felt to be good enough for her parents. Also the fact that they decided to adopt another child was a sign for Ada that she is not sufficient, and cannot satisfy her parents. We also have to name the very complicated relationship with her father whom she was always trying to please but does not have the feeling she ever succeeded.

*“Ik ben zes jaar en heb voor mijn vaders verjaardag een cadeautje gekocht.  
(...) Ik geloof dat hij blij is, maar ik weet het niet zeker.  
Ik ben tien jaar. (...) Ik geloof dat hij blij is, maar ik weet het niet zeker.  
Ik ben dertien jaar. (...) Hij doet of hij blij is. Maar ik weet het niet zeker.”*  
(Noordervliet 2002: 173-4)

*I am six years old and bought a present for my father’s birthday. (...) I hope  
he is happy but am not sure about that.  
I am ten years old. (...) I hope he is happy but am not sure about that.  
I am thirteen years old. (...) He pretends to be happy. But I do not know it  
for sure. (my translation)*

This from the Freudian point of view unsolved relationship was also probably the reason why Ada ended up in an unbalanced marriage with an older man – Huib. Her husband clearly treats her as an inferior (e.g. calls her “*kindje*” – child) and Ada willingly adopts this position whenever she does not know what to do, or is just looking for certainty and support (Noordervliet 2002: 15, 82, 97, 109, 203, 239, ...). The role of Huib in Ada’s life is more the role of a father-figure than of a husband. The trip to the

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<sup>40</sup> I refer here to the Spivakian notion of ‘voice’. In the concrete case of *Pelican Bay*, the island society has, thanks to the anticolonial/independence movement, undergone only the first step of the deconstruction of the binary and the poles have changed places. As a result of that, white people became ‘subaltern’, and were deprived of their own voice. Therefore, there is no vocabulary (none is willing to hear) in which Ada could describe her experience of being attacked and robbed by a black person.

Caribbean island can certainly be seen as an attempt to get a grip on her own life, independently from her husband.

But even on the island, away from the unhealthy uneven interpersonal relationships Ada keeps feeling like a stranger for a long time:

*“Ze raakte los van hen. Dreef weg. De onrust op de bodem van haar maag nam toe, een kleine draaikolk. Vreemdeling was ze. Vreemdeling bleef ze. Overal.”* (Noordervliet 2002: 304)

*She got loose from them. Floated away. The anxiety at the bottom of her stomach rose, a small vortex. A stranger she was. A stranger she remained. Everywhere.* (my translation)

Till the very last moment it seems that all the experienced problems and pain will bring no achievement. Ada was not able to find any convincing evidence for or against Jacob as a murderer of his wife and also was not able to clear the slave Plato of the accusations for which he has been hanged. Not only is there nothing to write in the planned book, but Ada seems to have another proof of her inability. And, more importantly, she still cannot find her own position, nor the answers she has been hunkering after so much. She also stays unsure of herself in her relationship with Marcus and was unable to state her own position within it. At the end Ada succeeds in her attempts to meet Antonio and even bring him to speak about their childhood but the painful stories he reveals do not help to reassure Ada in her position as an independent grown-up woman.

She however keeps interrogating. One of her partners in discussion becomes the old Ma Edith. She seems to rest calmly in her position in-between<sup>41</sup> the cultures which is also the reason why Ada comes for help to her. Ma Edith has learned to accept both parts that shape her identity, the European as well as the Caribbean. She has a simple proposal: compassion. Compassion is the word Ada finally learns to know, and to feel on the island. It is what Ma Edith proposes as a medicine for the island and implicitly also for Ada, struggling with its identity crisis as such, including way too many cultural influences. Finally Ada is however able to find inner certainty and self-assurance, even

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<sup>41</sup> I refer here to Bhabha's notion of 'hybridity', i.e. position in-between cultures.

though it happens in very extreme circumstances at the local jail. And it is again compassion she asks of her father in one of her hallucinations in the local jail:

*“Je was ooit een goede vader. Die heb ik nooit willen vergeten. Werd je angst of je wrok groter naarmate het leven meer van je eiste en jij minder aan de eisen kon voldoen? Had je te grote dromen? Nu die angst geen factor meer is, kun je misschien naar mij en naar jezelf kijken met mededogen. Ik heb de betekenis van dat woord de laatste weken leren kennen, niet omdat ik het heb ondervonden: ik zag hoe groot de behoefte eraan en de noodzaak ertoe is.” (Noordervliet 2002: 401)*

*You have been a good father once. I never wanted to forget that. Did your anxiety or your resentment grow accordingly to your life demanding more of you and you being able lesser to fulfill these demands? Did you have too big dreams? Now when anxiety does not play any role, can you please maybe look at me and yourself with compassion? I have learned the meaning of this word in the last weeks, not that I would have experienced it myself: I saw how great is the wanting for and the need of it. (my translation)*

The people around Ada, among others the already mentioned Ma Edith and the elderly Jewish couple Kuifje and Bobbie, made her understand this simple rule. She also came to know about the necessity of compassion through her adoptive brother, and his old friend, the ambassador. In the virtual dialogue with her father Ada is finally able to name her anxieties and worries. She names the fear to love and to be loved. She confesses to being afraid not to be worth loving, and her inability to love. She accuses her father of treating her, her brother and their mother badly, of not being able to give love and therefore hurting people around himself.

When Ada came to the island, she never wanted to have children, since she thought she would not be able to carry the burden, with the knowledge of what has happened to her and her adoptive brother. After the first meeting with Antonio she states that none of them has children, implying their inability and unwillingness, but also fear of becoming parents self. She however comes back to the Netherlands pregnant, and fully aware of her wish to bring the child up together with her husband.

The pregnancy and the return back to the Netherlands mark clearly a new beginning in the life of Ada, unburdened of the fears from the past. She has no illusions about the past or about her present any more. She admits and is able to pronounce her weak points

and is willing to work on them. She accepts. Even though it is an “*onbevredigende remise*”, an unsatisfactory remise (Noordevliet 2002: 408) as it was the case with her attempt to trace the truth in the murder case of Fanny Fenwick.

### **2.3.1.3. De verstotene (Outcast)**

The main character and the I-narrator of *De verstotene*, a Moroccan woman in her late twenties or early thirties - Mina grew up in a milieu full of taboos. After her father married his second wife, a lot younger woman from Morocco, her mother, till then quite liberal and easy-going, turned into an orthodox Muslim. From then on, Mina has to wear a black headscarf, the television had to be thrown away and only sermons from an old cassette recorder can be listened to. The outer changes reach however the psyche of the sensible Mina less than the cold distance of her mother. This radically changed the life of Mina and her younger sister, who, compared to Mina, was able to find herself in the rigorous belief. The curious and thoughtful older sister had lots of problems to adjust herself to the radical change of situation at home, where the external appearance has become more important than the happiness of the own children. Mina attempts to rhyme the radical and rigid belief of her mother with liberal modern Dutch society and she tries to understand the Koran and apply it to her reality. That is, however, not appreciated by the mother who does not consider her belief something you should think about. On the day of her eighteenth birthday gets Mina beaten up because of her essay on women and Islam and is thrown out of the family home. Since then she suppresses her Moroccan origin, together with the cultural background, and also her memories. To get rid of any Moroccan connotations, she also changes her name to Amelie Celine. She seems to find the certainty, love, attention and family warmth she has been looking for since her childhood in the relationship with Mart. They live together in a nice neighbourhood in Amsterdam, Amelie has a more or less satisfying job, they have a social life which Amelie has always been dreaming of, travelling a lot and acquiring trendy objects for their flat. Mart however suddenly breaks the relationship during their trip to New York, leaving her for another woman. At the very moment the world Amelie has been so carefully building and keeping together falls apart. The whole identity of Amelie bursts like a bubble and there is suddenly nothing to lean on. She ends up again without any certainty in her life, since all the acquired certainty till now has only been external and not in or from herself. Confronted with the emptiness of her

existence she loses all interest. Mina claims sick leave and asks her doctor to prescribe her great amounts of sleeping pills, pain killers and antidepressants. Mina suffers from serious depression, spends her days in bed, eating and watching television. In the nights she goes out to party, trying to forget with alcohol, throwing herself into anonymous sex adventures. After consultation with her doctor, she starts seeing a psychotherapist but does not change anything about her new acquired lifestyle. One of her one-night stands is a handsome Jewish man Samuel with whom Mina falls in love. In order to be able to meet him again she is even prepared to reveal the password of her work computer and with it all the information about the clients of the company she works for. Since the password was her real name, she reveals also her true identity and ends up in a spiral of events that cannot have a happy ending. She was able to carry out her passion for Samuel who, however, stays uninterested. After he finds out about her Muslim background, he rejects Mina completely. Mina is, once again, an outcast, she has no job, no friends, no family, no partner. When she finds herself to be pregnant with the Jewish Samuel she sees no other way out of her crisis than suicide. At the very last moment she changes her mind and decides to bring up the child alone, with the help of her old friend Elsa to whom she is ready to reveal her real identity. At the very last moment, when Mina wants to step back from the balustrade of her balcony, she slips and falls down.

*De verstopene* offers a close look on the situation of Muslim/Moroccan women in contemporary Dutch society. The postcolonial value of the work is again in the way the character of Mina is depicted. The I-narrator of the novel is, in comparison to the two previously mentioned characters, a woman of colour, an immigrant, someone who never had a 'voice' in the colonial literary tradition, and in the colonial society in general. The simple fact that she dares to speak for herself, that she takes the chance to change her role and position in the society is subversive as such. She, of course, struggles at first to reach this aim. The first step she takes is, understandably, the simple denigration and denial of her own cultural background, as often has been the case in the history of decolonization. When that does not prove to be an efficient way to position herself in the society she at the end tries to come up with a new conception, acknowledging her own cultural background, and at the same time building further on it and combining it with other (cultural) inputs. The culturally interesting and innovative element is bringing up the tabooed Muslim hatred by the Jewish people and contrariwise the abjection of Jews in Islam. The (also sexual) emancipation of the Muslim women is a



very popular theme in the contemporary society and as such is not new, but El Bezaz succeeds without any doubt in presenting it with daring openness, that can shock but also open many eyes.

#### **2.3.1.3.1. *Mina / Amelie (De verstopene)***

In contrast to the two previously analyzed characters, Mina (or Amelie how she lets to call herself), the narrator of *De verstopene*, is trying to suppress her own cultural background completely. After her, physically but above all psychically, painful experiences with her own culture and family Mina tries hard to banish all aspects of Moroccan culture and way of living (and with these her own past) out of her life. She even decides to change her name into Amelie in order not to be taken for a Moroccan. In here we can clearly see a resemblance with the character of Dee from *Sleuteloog*. The act of changing one's name in order to leave behind one's personal past is a phenomenon we encounter frequently as a topic in postcolonial literature<sup>42</sup>. Mina, however, keeps her original/primary name Mina Boughari as a password for the computer at her workplace (El Bezaz 2007: 170) which points to the ongoing attachment to her culture, family and past. From the outside her change seems complete and thorough. She straightens her curly hair, dresses and behaves as an autochthonous Dutch woman. She is regarded to be of Dutch origin even by the Moroccan immigrants (El Bezaz 2007: 62). Amelie remarks with a touch of irony that she knows Dutch grammar better than her autochthonous colleague (El Bezaz 2007: 128) and sarcastically notes the flawless Gooi accent of her Surinamese colleague, without even thinking of her (also) allochthonous origin. Her change is that complex that she even looks down upon (other) immigrants and their descendants. Despite her will and the determination to suppress all Moroccan elements in her life Mina however enters the Moroccan grocery shop once in a while to buy some merquez sausages or mint. Then she enjoys the spicy taste of the sausage and the strong sugary mint tea with mixed feelings, combining homesickness, joy and guilt in the privacy of her home. Also, even though only once a year, on the day of her birthday, she subjects herself to her inner sorrow and pulls out a cardboard box from under the bed to look at the few things that she has reminding her of her life before she became Amelie Celine. Among others, it includes an album with pictures of her sister and the new

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<sup>42</sup> Another example could be the character of Nomsa/Nancy in *'n Stringetjie blou krale* from the corpus of this project, or the character of Mariam/Mara in Rachida Lamrabet's *Vrouwland* (2007).

family of her father with whom she had a good relationship and for whom she still has warm feelings. When Theo van Gogh is murdered in Amsterdam by a Moroccan immigrant, Amelie feels the need to defend Moroccan immigrants against the rage of her friend Elsa. It seems very significant that that Mina did not reveal her (true) original identity not even to the closest people around her, i.e. her partner Mart, but above all her best friend Elsa.

*“‘Niet alle Marokkanen zijn criminelen,’ zei ik moe. Ik wilde stoppen met deze discussie. (...) Ik voelde me aangevallen en ik moest me inhouden om de strijd met haar niet aan te gaan. Ze wist niet wie ik was, hield ik me voor, of waar ik vandaan kwam.” (El Bezaz 2007: 156)*

*‘Not all Moroccans are criminals,’ I said wearily. I wanted to stop with this discussion. (...) I felt attacked and had to hold tooth and nail not to start a fight with her. She did not know who I was, I reminded myself, nor where did I come from. (my translation)*

No matter how she calls herself or how much she tries to suppress her origin, Amelie apparently still feels to be Moroccan. The imprinted prejudices from her childhood rises to the surface when she finds out that the man by whom she felt attracted to is a Jew. She even gets nauseated and had to spit up because of the fact that she is just going to have sex with a man from the “cursed nation” (El Bezaz 2007: 176).

*“Ik dacht dat ik ervan verschoond was, maar ik realiseerde me nu dat ik bang was voor die man, aan paar meter verderop, die bij een ander kamp hoorde. Mijn moeders woorden hadden me toch weten te raken. (...) Elk woord uit het verleden deed mijn lichaam pijnlijk sidderen en samentrekken, en ik voelde een beklemmende angst, omdat ik deed wat eigenlijk verboden was, wat door de Koran werd verworpen. Vroeger wilde ik provoceren om te tonen dat ik vrij was en dat wat ik deed de ultieme onafhankelijkheid belichaamde. Maar nu was ik er niet meer zo zeker van. Niet omdat ik seks had met een joodse man, maar omdat het veel erger was dan ik ooit had kunnen bevroeden.” (El Bezaz 2007: 177-9)*

*I though I have cleansed it up but now I realised that I was scared of that man, a few meters away from me, who belonged to the side. My mother’s words had an influence on me after all. (...) Every word from the past caused my body to tremble and clench and I felt a pinching anxiety because I have been doing something which was actually forbidden, rejected by the Koran. Earlier, I wanted to provoke to show that I’m free and that what I have been doing represented an act of ultimate*

*independency. But now I was not that much sure. Not because I have been having sex with a Jewish man, but because it was much worse than what I even could conceive. (my translation)*

Through these smaller events Mina/Amelie comes to know that her strategy of negating and suppressing her cultural background does not work and does actually contribute to her depression. Furthermore, she also begins to understand that there is another piece of her personality silenced and suppressed, this time in her unconsciousness, and even more painful than the history of becoming an outcast. But let us get back to the moment of the actual breaking point, to the moment when the acquired new identity of Amelie Celine proved to be counterproductive and even self-destructing.

As Amelie Celine Mina has acquired another identity and is quite successful and satisfied in her new life. After she had run away from her family in Amsterdam, she stayed some time in Rotterdam and finished high school through evening courses. Education, together with other aspects of her new life, was supposed to gain her a better, advantageous, position in society. The new Amelie Celine had to be better than the environment from which she came from, she had to prove that she can do better. She admits she has been looking consciously for a man who would be earning enough to be able to take care for her (financially) (El Bezaz 2006: 224). Mina in the new form of Amelie Celine wants to escape from her cultural background which she blames for what has happened to her, but also from herself, from her “bad luck”. She is convinced that if she can become a member of the other group (the Dutch, the autochthonous, the successful) she can become free and happy.

*“Ik wilde gelukkig zijn, bij de andere groep horen, bij de uppsen, omdat zij konden doen wat ze wilden, want zij waren niet afhankelijk, zij waren echt vrij. Maar wat ik ook deed ik bleef gevangen.” (El Bezaz 2006: 247)*

*I wanted to be happy, to belong to the other group, with ‘the upps’, because they could do whatever they wanted, because they were not dependant, they were really free. But whatever I did I stayed imprisoned. (my translation)*

This image of success and happiness is actually more than anything else a message that Mina/Amelie is trying to communicate to her surroundings (and unconsciously also to herself). At the same time, however, she presents herself from the very beginning as an outsider, as someone who does not fit, and is actually convinced of this fact to such an

extend that she does not even make real effort to do so. On the first day upon her arrival from New York she remarks with some bitterness when her colleagues do not ask her to go with them to have some coffee after the work:

*“Ik was een einzelgänger. Een vreemde eend in de bijt die ze nu ook liever niet meer mee wilden. Ze zouden niet weten hoe ze met me om moesten gaan, en omgekeerd wist ik het ook niet.”* (El Bezaz 2006: 46)

*I was an einzelgänger. A stranger in their midst whom they now preferred not have around. They did not know how to interact socially with me, and I did not know how to do that with them either.* (my translation)

But then the crisis comes. Her longtime partner breaks up with her, admitting that he has been having another relationship for three years. When Mart, her ex-partner informs her that he is going to get married to a woman with whom he has been having a parallel relationship for three years, (El Bezaz 2007: 182) she experiences a deep feeling of misplacement. Consequently, she has to leave their shared flat in the prestigious urban area of Amsterdam. For Amelie, who has since she was eighteen put so much emphasis on the impression she leaves on others, this means a terrible decline of societal position (note also the amount of emphasis that is put by the I-narrator on the account of designer and/of expensive objects in the apartment she has shared with Mart, see for example El Bezaz 2006: 39-40). Also the fact that she has been left by her partner who never asked her to marry him, despite of all the years they have spent together, is more than Amelie apparently is able to bear.

The real crisis however comes when Amelie, now without any support or certainty, comes across her sister in the tram on her way back from work. After the breakup she simply goes to work and experiences her daily work routine without even thinking about Mart. She states that with a certain satisfaction. It is exactly the meeting with her sister that causes the collapse, or to put it more accurately, it works as an accelerant which causes the fragile equilibrium of Amelie's psyche to break into pieces. The look in the eyes of her sister reminds her vaguely of another dark story from her past, till now safely suppressed in her unconsciousness. Now that the external certainties of partner, job, friends, good address etc. that held together the fragile made-up personality of Amelie Celine have broken in pieces, the real reasons for the identity crisis and the serious depression she suffers, comes to the surface.

Amelie takes sick leave and throws herself in an ocean of selfpity. Suddenly the strong woman who seemed to be able to do almost everything, the hard worker and the person with great self-control breaks down. With a large portion of self-irony Mina, or what has been left of Amelie, describes her state of mind and her ridiculous attempt to solve the problem by simply ignoring it.

*“Als er een paradijs bestond, dan was het een eindeloos groot, zacht bed, met een kast van een televisietoestel en voedsel dat vanzelf je mond in liep zonder dat je lichaam uitdijde. Twee dagen lang lag ik niets te te doen. (...) Ik sliep veel, kijk tv, at grenzeloos chocola en dronk dikmakende cola als water.” (El Bezaz 2007: 53)*

*If heaven existed it would be an endlessly big soft bed, with a monstrous television set and food that flows automatically into your mouth without you fattening up. Two days long I laid there without doing anything. (...) I slept a lot, watched tv, ate infinite amounts of chocolate and drank the fattening coke as if it was water. (my translation)*

Mina stays in this state of body and mind with the help of painkillers and sleeping pills her doctor, sensing a burn-out, prescribes for her. She floats in an artificial and chemically maintained bubble of self-protection. When the pills do not help to reach the desired state of mind, Mina goes out, trying to forget with the help of alcohol and anonymous sex, in a silent protest against her rigorous mother. Suddenly she has nothing to do, she is on long-term sick leave, she has no family, no partner, no friends (she managed even to chase Elsa away), no obligations to anyone but herself. This situation turns out to be a two-edged sword and Mina soon realizes that she is just trying to feel relieved in order not to feel the pain and the anxiety of the emptiness.

*“Jarenlang had ik maar doorgeraasd, omdat ik een droom najaagde, een droom die blijkbaar niet voor mij bestemd was.” (El Bezaz 2002: 53)*

*For years I have been working like crazy, because I was chasing after a dream, a dream that apparently was not intended for me. (my translation)*

Mina admits that she has been chasing a shadow, an external appearance. She spent most of her grown-up life pretending to be someone she actually has not ever been and is therefore not anyhow better than her mother whom she has been blaming her whole life. The awareness of the delusion she has been creating and supporting in herself for

years makes Mina look again at her past and her family history with new unprejudiced eyes and finally to be in state of self-reflection.

*“Mijn verleden en mijn ervaringen hadden me getraind in het wegdrukken van de beelden die bij mijn herinneringen hoorden. Later leerde ik ook niet meer te voelen wat ik vroeger had gevoeld, en gestaag sleep ik de scherpe randen weg tot een zoetgekleurde film die slechts deels bij mijn ik hoorde. Als er iets gebeurde wat me niet beviel, of als ik heel slecht de emoties erachter begreep, dacht ik er gewoon niet meer aan.” (El Bezaz 2007: 126)*

*My past and my experiences have trained me in suppressing of images that belonged to my memories. Later I also learned not to feel what I have felt then, and gradually the sharp edges smoothed down to a rose-coloured movie that belonged to my own self only partially. When something happened I didn't like, or had problems to grasp the emotions behind this happening, I simply did not think about that. (my translation)*

But now she has to think, she has to remember and understand. The meeting with her sister started a process she is not able to stop. With the help of her psychotherapist she undertakes a painful journey to reconcile with her past, and her sister. She, indeed, considering her complicated personal and family past, had to carry a lot of emotional luggage. Suppression, even though she claims to be very well trained in it, does not seem to be an option. Mina has to face the true version of the history she has viewing through rose-tinted spectacles for years. It has not been her family who abandoned Mina, it is she who had left the family, and above all her younger sister who had been dependent on her. After Mina rejected both going back and answering her desperate letter, her younger sister decided to consider her as not part of the family anymore. Above all, she had to live with the shadow of being the family outcast, a woman who slept with non-Muslim men and stayed unmarried and who did not put the family into a good light.

Becoming aware of her actual behavior to her own family causes that Mina finally to see her “heroic” departure from the family in a very different perspective. Together with the fact that the man she loves does not want to have anything to do with her, precisely because of her Muslim origin she had been trying so hard to erase, brings her to a state of pure despair. That she sees a solution in suicide is fully in accordance with the character of the opportunistic Amelie. Mina however decides finally to take control of her own life, and to raise the child on her own, as a Muslim, aware of her/his cultural

background, but at the same time not burdened with any of the prejudices with which she herself had to struggle. The fact that Mina at the end slips and falls down from her balcony can be understood as irony on the part of the author and does not change the meaning of the development she has gone through during her narration.

### 2.3.2. South Africa

In this part we will take a closer look at three South-African novels in Afrikaans: *Agaat* (Agaat or The Way of Women) by Marleen van Niekerk, *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat* (The Book of Happenstance) by Ingrid Winterbach and *’n Stringetjie blou krale* (A String of Blue Beads) by E.K.M. Dido. As we have already done with the first, Dutch part of the corpus, the plots of the three novels than constitute together the South-African part will firstly be summarized briefly and after that the I-narrators of the three novels will be introduced, with most of the attention paid to the way they search their identity in the new postcolonial situation, how they define themselves as women in a situation where they cannot rely on the hierarchical system of binary oppositions.

All three novels have been published at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Afrikaans, and two of them were translated shortly after that into English. The oldest of the three novels out of the South-African part of the corpus, *’n Stringetjie blou krale*, however has not been translated yet. On the other hand, *Agaat* has been translated and published in English twice – for the South-African public, and for non-South.African public<sup>43</sup>. The three novels chosen cover three different groups of Afrikaans speakers in South Africa and therefore form a representative example of the contemporary situation in the Afrikaans speaking literary field, as well as the situation of Afrikaans-speakers in South Africa.

The characters of Kamila de Wet in *Agaat*, Helena Verbloem in *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat* and Nomsa/Nancy Hendriks in *’n Stringetjie blou krale* function as three examples of the way women in South Africa (of different cultural backgrounds) might face the challenge of stating one’s identity in the altered situation of postcolonial society. As we have already stated earlier, one’s identity is always and constantly a process of negotiation with her/his surroundings. The identity of an individual changes according to the character of the person/institution with whom/which the concrete

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<sup>43</sup> The South-African English translation stays closer to the original and leaves a lot of domestic terms untranslated and/or unexplained.

individual is in contact at the given moment. Also different aspects of an individual become important and visible, depending on the situation. In the following analysis, thus, the attention will be focussed on not only the I-narrator self, but also to the other characters with whom she negotiates her identity.

### **2.3.2.1. *Agaat* (Agaat or The Way of Women)**

*Agaat* with its more than 600 pages in the original version is the longest of the three works of the South-African part of the corpus, as well as of the whole project corpus. It tells a story of the exceptional lifelong relationship between two women and the men around them: white rich farmer's daughter Milla, her black adoptive daughter/maid Agaat, Milla's husband Jak and their child Jakkie. The only daughter of a rich farmer's family marries a good-looking lawyer in order to get a hold of a farm at Grootmoedersdrift that has been passing for generations from mother to daughter in their family. The marriage is not really happy, since the macho Jak has a lot of difficulties with his manipulative and goal-oriented wife. The couple also stays childless for a number of years. A great change in their life comes when Milla, in the beginning of the 1950's takes a black girl from the family of her mother's workers with the idea to make the girl her own daughter. Milla decides to do that, disregarding the opinion of her mother, her husband and her friends. The girl had been mistreated by her biological family and Milla is convinced that she can offer her a better life. With this impulsive decision Milla challenges the racial prejudices of the society, her family and her own. When she finds out that she is finally pregnant herself, Milla however decides to make the little Agaat a nursemaid to the child. The used-to-be daughter stays since the birth of Jakkie in the outer room of the house and step by step becomes a mother as well as sister of the boy. Agaat is able to win Jakkie's heart and gets closer to him than his biological mother ever manages. Exactly as Milla once made Agaat her own, the nanny now possesses the son of Milla. The boy stands in the middle of power war between Milla, her husband Jak and the maid, all of which are trying to win Jakkie for their side, using any possible means. When Jakkie grows older the special position of Agaat in the family is a reason of a lot of critique and disapproval by the society which has accepted the racially exclusive laws of Apartheid. Jakkie, actually brought up by the black woman, cannot understand that and this therefore causes a lot of tension in the family. Later, even though (or maybe because of) being trained to be a navy pilot who also took part in the Border War, Jakkie flees the country. His nationalistic father decided to



report Jakkie to the police but had a fatal car accident on the way which has left Milla and Agaat on their own. Agaat has gained some autonomy at the farm but stayed officially always as a maid and help to Milla, even after the end of Apartheid. The relationship of the two women becomes even more entangled when Milla suffers from a fatal neuron disease and Agaat is the one who is taking care for her and who will eventually bury her.

The novel is, with the exception of the prologue and epilogue which are told by Jakkie, narrated from the present by the elderly Milla, paralyzed by the motor-neuron disease. The woman, now in her seventies and aware of the fact that she does not have much time left, takes the last chance to tell the story of her and Agaat. One of the motivations of Milla seems to be the already mentioned 'colonial guilt'. Milla narrating from her deathbed is, however, not the only narrative voice in *Agaat*. In the course of the narration in total three voices of Milla are interchanging: the voice of the slowly dying old woman, the voice of the younger Milla in the crucial moments from her past and finally the voice of Milla from her diaries, self-righteous and arrogant in her feeling of superiority (Viljoen 2005: 175). Van Niekerk opens the narration with the image of Milla paralyzed by the slowly proceeding disease. In the course of narration Milla jumps on the basis of associations from past to present, disrupted by excerpts from her own diary that are read to her aloud by Agaat who clearly takes the opportunity to hold a figurative mirror for Milla and confront her in this way with her past.

Lying on her deathbed Milla feels the urgent need to take account of her life, her marriage and more importantly her motherhood, to Jakkie as well as Agaat. She has to admit that she has not always been that ideal woman, wife, nor mother as she hoped and claimed to be. Milla is also confronted with "her version" of the story, since Agaat keeps reading whole chapters from the notebooks in which Milla has been noting the record of her marriage and above all, the story of Agaat for her. She however has never been able to write down the very first moments of Agaat's life at Grootmoedersdrift and the story of finding and "taking" Agaat. Now Milla is physically unable to escape she has to face her own lies and failures. She is also aware of the fact that this is her last chance to put things right and say what she needs to. Assisted by Agaat who pronounces her own words aloud for her Milla finally tells the true story of the two of them, farming at Grootmoedersdrift (which can be translated as Grandmother's drift and/or passion), on a farm that descended for generations in the female line of Milla's family.

A relationship of love and hatred has developed between the two women who seem not to be able to live with or without each other. Despite Agaat's affection to her, Milla cannot move now nor raise her voice, she is subjected to exactly the same treatments Agaat had to undergo as a girl as another form of confrontation with her colonial past. Milla is fed spinach and steamed prunes to encourage bowel movements exactly as Agaat was as a child or is made/helped to speak with the help of the old duster handle which Milla has used earlier to punish Agaat, and more importantly to make her speak. It seems that Agaat's revenge on Milla that had begun years ago with the act of taking Milla's child and the later emotional theft has now finally reached acimex. Agaat seems to have decided to show Milla her faulty behavior by repeating precisely what has been done to her, mocking her with her faults and past. Even though Milla is at the moment when the actual narration takes place already attached to the bed and cannot move much more than her eyes, Agaat manages to work with all her senses, letting her (for the last time) feel the softness of a mole skin, smell flowers from the garden or soil from the farm, taste her or Jakkie's favourite meal. *Agaat* as novel works on the sensual and emotional system of the reader (Cochrane 2005: 215) and *Agaat* as literary character definitely works (or even plays) with Milla's senses and emotions.

Milla and Agaat are mutually dependent, which is now because of the condition of Milla more visible than ever before. Even though the situation and the power relations have changed completely and it is now the white woman who is reliant on the younger black woman, they are both aware of the fact that their lives and identities are intertwined. Their existence makes sense only through the existence of the other. Despite their mutually encouraged hardness and the inability to pronounce their feelings they both seem to be aware of the unique chance they have been given and to try to make the most of it. *Agaat* is a story of Apartheid on a small scale and at the same time a moving account of an intimate mother-daughter relationship full of understanding and affection.

In *Agaat* Van Niekerk returns to the traditional South-African literary form, 'die plaasroman', the farm novel. She however provides this literary bearer of traditional Afrikaner values with a new, and different, meaning, and makes it a very challenging postmodern literary work. In *Agaat* Van Niekerk problematizes not only the system of Apartheid as such but also the position of women within this strongly patriarchal system, as well as the dubious position of white people in South Africa after the end of

Apartheid<sup>44</sup>. She pays a lot of attention to the outer societal pressure from the white Afrikaner farming community. She describes the great pressure on an individual in a colonial society regarding her/his unchangeable place and the struggle of the very same individual to place her/himself after the release of such a hegemonic system. The postcoloniality of *Agaat* is, among other important aspects, in the way Van Niekerk was able to embody and personalize the takeover of the power in South Africa. It is indeed no coincidence that the first symptoms of the disease of Milla fall in the same time as the fall of Apartheid and the first democratic elections. Exactly as it is no coincidence that *Agaat* has been born in the year when Apartheid was officially proclaimed in South Africa. In the course of the narration (black) *Agaat* literally takes complete control of Milla's (white) body. She decides when Milla eats and defecates, but also when she can and is allowed to speak, she is the one who grants (and takes!) Milla a voice, the opportunity to be heard. The power the former servant has over the white woman's body is one of the typically postcolonial elements in the novel. The whole process of pronouncing and remembering the deeds and events from the past also has a great resemblance with the Reconciliation Commission<sup>45</sup> that took place after the end of Apartheid and meant to make peace between the people of the new South Africa.

#### **2.3.2.1.1. *Kamilla de Wet (Agaat)***

The literary character of *Kamilla de Wet* is a very complex and dubious one. She has been formed by the white Afrikaner tradition where racism and sexism have been of great influence. We have to keep in mind her position of the colonizer (as a white

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<sup>44</sup> There is no precise date of the official end of the system of Apartheid. In 1990 the National Party slowly started to dismantle the system and political prisoners were set free, among other Nelson Mandela whose political party ANC took over the power in the country. The first free democratic elections took place four years later, in 1994. In this context I however understand under the term 'end of Apartheid' a change of societal situation, which is of greater interest for this concrete project. After the end of Apartheid the position of white people, who were kept in power by the system, changed drastically since they were not the standard, the norm, any more. Van Niekerk has touched the theme of the position of white people in South-African post-Apartheid society also in her earlier work – *Triomf* (1994).

<sup>45</sup> The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has been a public restorative justice court after the end of Apartheid. In front of the TRC victims as well as offenders of crimes against human rights were supposed to bring out testimonials of these deeds in a public hearing. The commission, free from legal and/or criminal prosecution, also had the right to grant amnesty.

person) and at the same time of the colonized (as a woman). Like most of the white women in (post)colonial society she has to face a dilemma: she is made co-responsible for the colonial violence as a bearer of the white skin colour and at the same time she feels to be disadvantaged by men. White women do inhabit an ambivalent position in the colonial as well as postcolonial society. They are aware of their advantageous position compared to black and coloured women, as well as they experience the suppression within the patriarchal hegemony.

Milla strived her whole life for independence. She however never succeeded in setting herself free from the subjection to her own mother to whom Milla always runs for advice and approval. From her mother, who was clearly the dominant one on the parental couple, Milla also got the impression that independence can only be gained through power. Power is therefore the motor, and most of the time the main motivation, for Milla's deeds. At the same time she tried hard to prove herself to the mother and satisfy the high demands her mother has had on her. She also was not able to abandon her abusive husband who, as she believed, brought her societal status. The marriage with the handsome lawyer meant for the ambitious Milla a way to get hold on a farm she dreamed of owning since she was a child, and, importantly, the figure of a husband strengthened her position in society, through which she consequently gained more power, and independence. Under the influence of her mother Milla believed that she can gain power (and herewith also independence) through manipulating other people and making them dependent on her. She did not succeed, not with her husband, nor with Agaat. Because of that her identity has always been dependent on other people around her - her mother, her husband, and above all Agaat. Milla needs/needed a public. Without having people around on basis of whom Milla could position herself, she feels lost and without a feeling of herself.

Milla's identity as well as the identity crisis can only be understood when also taking Agaat into account. Through Agaat Milla has made the attempt to free herself from the will of the authoritative mother, doing for the first time in her life something that has not been approved by her. She also thought that becoming a mother herself, even though not biologically but through adoption, will put her into a more equal position towards her mother. As it however turned out later, the decision to adopt a black girl did not assure the position, nor the identity of Milla. On the contrary, she has put herself into an even more complicated position. Milla strives to make Agaat stronger and

resistant as she would self like to be, keeping the girl locked for days in her room without food as a way of punishment. At the end Milla succeeds in creating the ultimate Afrikaner woman from the molested foundling: Agaat knows all the (white) farming rules by heart, she can embroider and cook and quotes whole passages from Bible. Agaat fully meets the societal demands on the white Afrikaner woman ideal that Milla has all her life been striving to achieve. Ironically enough, Agaat also acquires a certain aversion to black people, exactly as her “mother” has. Milla however never manages to gain the respect of her adoptive daughter after she has been made a maid, pushed away, to make place for the biological white child.

Agaat always somehow threatened and questioned the identity of her adoptive mother. Milla put a lot of emphasis on outer appearance but the simple presence of Agaat – the proof of her incompetence and misjudgment of society, the eye witness and the victim of her cruelty in one person – puts a question mark behind her ambition. The tense relation between Milla and Agaat gets even more complicated, as already mentioned above, when Jakkie is born. It is namely Agaat who gets the child out of Milla, she holds him and claims him to be hers. *Jy is myne*, You are mine, she says, exactly as Milla did when she took Agaat from her biological parents. But it is not only this symbolical appropriation in which Agaat follows the example of Milla, she also shows to Jakkie the very same things she has been shown as a child, she teaches him the same rhymes, they play the very games together. Jakkie grows very soon so accustomed to Agaat that even his own mother remarks one would say that she is the real mother (Van Niekerk 2004: 306).

*“Voel my in hr skadu haar mindere by verre in geduld & vindingrykheid.  
Voel swak vir die taak.”* (Van Niekerk 2004: 212)

*Feel myself in her shade her inferior by far in terms of patience & ingenuity.  
Feel weak in the face of the task.* (Van Niekerk 2008: 174)

Milla, the biological mother, feels less of a mother than the woman who has been so severely raped in her childhood that she cannot bear children herself, the woman with one underdeveloped hand, and most importantly the black servant. The femininity and motherhood of Milla is questioned next to Agaat’s perfection and self-control. Firstly the femininity of Milla was doubted because she was not able to get pregnant for a very long time. When it finally happens, her child is physically and emotionally stolen, which Milla experiences most painfully when she finds out that Agaat has been offering

her breasts to the baby, while she has lost the milk. Till her death Milla will be tortured by the question whether Agaat really had milk or whether it was (just) a symbolical act. In both cases Agaat has had a more intimate mother-son relationship with Jakkie than Milla had, which makes Agaat in the eyes of Milla, even though misformed and of the “wrong” skin colour, more woman than Milla self ever was.

The life of Milla is however bound with that of Agaat, their sense of themselves and their identities are interdependent. That is clearly visible in the part of the narration when Milla is bound to her bed dying slowly and focalizes the events taking place around her. Suddenly, behind all the rules, discipline and system a real affection comes out. The mutual competition makes place for something else none of them would be willing to pronounce aloud. In her last days Milla becomes fully aware of the fact that Agaat gives sense to her life, and contrariwise. She only exist next to, and through, Agaat and without her presence it seems as if she was absent as well.

*“As Agaat my alleen los, soos vandag, is ek niemand. Tussen my en my geen spleet van verskil. (...) Ek is minder as ’n dak. Ek is ’n geut.” (Van Niekerk 2004: 106)*

*When Agaat leaves me alone, like today, I am nobody. Between me and me no fissure of differentiation. (...) I am less than a roof. I am a gutter. (Van Niekerk 2008: 87)*

In Agaat Milla is able to see herself as in a mirror. In the later stages of her disease it is through Agaat that Milla is able to speak and make sense of her past and her present. And it is again Agaat who makes Milla face her own delusions in her diaries. Through and thanks to Agaat Milla is able to see her past with new eyes and admit her real motivations. The pressure of Agaat also makes Milla finally write down the truth about the arrival of Agaat at the farm of Grootmoedersdrift and the real story of capturing, taking and acquiring the little girl, even though it happens only in Milla’s mind since she is not able to hold a pen, nor speak anymore. The real story however goes further since we also get an account of Agaat’s version of the story she has been telling Jakkie every night before he went to bed. Again, it is however not the version of Agaat we, as readers, get to know, it is Jakkie’s interpretation of it. Agaat stays in the whole course of the narration, with the exception of direct speech, without voice, we only get the interpretations of her thinking and/or behavior by other characters of the novel. She

therefore stays an unknown, mysterious character whose real motivations are hidden. She is the ultimate 'other'.

This very same person who spent the last year of Milla's life reminding her of her every bad deed, every time she crossed the line or has not been sincere to others or herself organizes the funeral in the end exactly as "*Ounooi*", the old lady, would wish. By using the moral and cultural attributes she has been made to acquire as a child Agaat mocks the traditional Afrikaner values of Milla and at the same time gives a tribute to her.

It is at the end the son – Jakkie - who places these two extirpated women in context. In the prologue to the novel he names them his white and his brown mother, admitting that they both have made him what he is. Thanks to Milla he acquired the love and appreciation for music, Agaat introduced indigenous music and traditions to him, both aspects being for him of a great use as an ethnomusicologist. Although his parents have stayed rooted in the soil of South Africa, Jakkie became a member of the new generation. He departs from the white Afrikaner tradition and his second mother's indigenous roots, but at the same time takes a step further and is able to create some distance from the culture in which he has been brought up. Jakkie takes in through his free will the position in-between the cultures from which he comes, being aware that he does not belong, nor wants to belong, to South Africa only. He also, even though living in Canada, does not feel Canadian. He stays intercultural.

His biological mother comes to the same conclusion. At the end through the painful process of remembering and admitting Milla finally understood and revealed how (not only) racially prejudiced she was. After all she is able to see and accept that the times of Apartheid are definitely over and that the system has been at fault and inhuman, as well as her own practices she applied on Agaat "to make her human". Milla gets rid of her prejudices and observes the elevation of black people, together with the decay of her own white body. In her last will when she was still able to speak Milla stated that Agaat is to decide what to do when she is not able to pronounce herself anymore. Alone she decides she prefers to give herself over to the (black) hands of Agaat, and staying at the farm with which all her life is bound, rather than go to a hospital. Milla is the last generation in her family of white Afrikaner women farming on the farm of Grootmoedersdrift, and she accepts it as a fact expecting no pity. In her last will she decides clearly that Agaat, not the biological son, inherits the farm,. In Agaat the

farming tradition, although altered, will go on. The intellectual heritage of his mother will continue in Jakkie.

Agaat is experienced by Milla (and thus represented for the reader) as the ultimate uncanny other. Milla can never really grasp the woman she has brought up. Even though Milla claims to be able to guess what Agaat is thinking or what her motivations are, we (as readers) never get the chance to compare Milla's version with what Agaat actually is thinking. The character is furthermore made inapprehensible and mysterious by her mysterious (magic) powers thanks to which Agaat has some characteristics of a native healer. Furthermore, there will always stay questions on which Milla till her death could not get an answer from Agaat. Was she the one who mysteriously set fire every time there have been problems on the farm or in the family? Did she really have milk when she was (pretending to) breastfeeding Jakkie? Agaat however does not have much voice in the novel and even though Milla claims to be able to read Agaat's mind her own opinion, as well as her version of the story how she actually came to Grootmoedersdrift, will stay unknown, or at least uncertain.

#### **2.3.2.2. Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat (The Book of Happenstance)**

Helena Verbloem, the I-narrator of *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat*, has been appointed as a lexicologist to assist in a project that tries to compile a dictionary of words in Afrikaans that have been forgotten or fallen into disuse. Because of this appointment Helena has to move to Durban which causes a lot of change in her till then settled life, among which she has to part temporarily from her lover and partner. The project is situated in a natural history museum where Helena gets to meet its personnel. She spends a lot of time in the coffee room of the museum observing their behavior and discussion. As a white Afrikaner female speaker with a philological background Helena does not really fit in this community. She however gets more interaction with the group. Gradually she becomes entangled in a conversation with the museum's paleontologist Hugo Hattingh through whom she hopes to understand the meaning of life. The situation gets even more complicated when Theo Verwey, the leader of the project on which she has been working, suddenly dies. Helena not only has to face her never pronounced amorous feelings for the lexicologist, but also faces a dilemma whether to leave the project unfinished or continue the work on her own.



The most important change in her life however comes when her apartment is broken into and Helena's beloved collection of shells is stolen. Confronted with this material as well as emotional loss Helena has to face the other losses she had to suffer in the past. Since the police does not seem to take interest in the burglary, Helena decides to take the situation into her own hands and tries to find out what happened to her beloved belongings and who the person is who stole the shells and defecated on her carpet. Assisted by the museum translator Sof Benade, whom she compares to Mr. Vercueil from Coetzee's *Age of iron*, she hopes to find out the true story of the crime that shattered her whole existence. At the same time Helena starts getting phone calls in the middle of the night from a man who claims to have known her earlier, in her twenties, when she was an ambitious promising young author. The stubborn search for the shells and her inability to let go and to admit the real reasons for her grief complicate her relationship with her partner. In the end Helena is finally able to give in and face the real loss she has suffered much earlier.

The narration starts with Helena finding Theo's dead body in the office. From this moment the history is told retrospectively, with chronology only in the last two chapters describing Theo's funeral. The discovery of the dead body, with implications that it might have been a murder (Winterbach 2006: 7), and the coroner's conclusion that the death of Theo Verwey has been (naturally) caused by a massive heart attack (Winterbach 2006: 268) and the long descriptions of the funeral (Winterbach 2006: 279 – 301) form a frame for the narration. Constructed in this way, the narration resembles a mourning process, the period between the loss (death) and acceptance and farewell (funeral). This narrative frame also clearly shows what the most important motives of the novel would be.

Like in her previous novels, also under the pseudonym Lettie Viljoen, Winterbach pays a lot of attention to her language with the help of which she elaborates a complicated structure of symbols and themes. In the concrete case of *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat* a lot of attention should be, in my opinion, be paid to the names of the characters. To begin with, Helena's surname means "to hide away" or "hidden" in Afrikaans, surname of her partner could be translated as "worth (doing)" and the name of the man who tries to contact Helena after 27 years literally means "from the ashes" as if it implied the mythical Phoenix. The names Sof(ia) and Theo, both originating from Greek and meaning wisdom, resp. God's gift, are also significant.

Intertextual elements are also of a great importance in the novel. We have already mentioned Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron*. The relation Helena has with its narrator, Mrs. Curren, will be explained later in the text. Helena refers a number of times to a novel she is reading at the moment. From the context we can find that she means *Cosmopolis* by Don DeLillo but she never mentions the title and always speaks about the book as the book about the rich man (e.g. Winterbach 2006: 19). It will be also explained later that Helena uses the novel she is reading as an instrument to address Theo. Theo seems to be fascinated by the main character of the novel, the rich man, with whom he also has a lot in common, among other a passion for art and beauty. What fascinates Helena in the character of Eric, the rich man, is probably his ultimate loss. Within one day he loses his whole fortune, and at the end also his life. A passage that interests both Helena as Theo is the description of the funeral of Eric's favourite Sufi rapper (Winterbach 2006: 25). The way Helena experiences and describes Theo's funeral at the end of the narration makes us think of the description of the abundant funeral of the Sufi rapper. During the course of the narration different characters refer repeatedly to a number of literary works, e.g. Kafka's *Das Schloss*, Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*, *Der Tod in Venedig* by Thomas Mann, and the *Bible*. Not only do all these literary works work with the theme of loss, they have yet another role in the narration. The characters use stories, tell stories, to comfort the other, to reach and address in a number of places. Helena tells Theo the story of the rich man and Theo also uses the story to communicate with Helena (Winterbach 2006: 30, 245); Sof tells Helena the story of the origin of *Ulysses* in order to comfort her on their way to Ladybrand (Winterbach 2006: 185); Helena looks for answers in the Bible (Winterbach 2006: 85) and her sister Joets finds a way to communicate between her and her younger sister Helena in William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (Winterbach 2006: 314). Helena also refers to the book she begun to write (Winterbach 2006: 31) at various times in her narration. Again, there is a visible motive of loss. Interestingly Helena begins to write shortly after her shell collection has been stolen, and she received the first phone call from Freek van As, both occasions reminding her of her life before the unsuccessful marriage.

The postcoloniality of *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat* can be observed on many levels. Firstly it is the subtle play with the system of binary oppositions. Winterbach manages to problematize death and life, evanesce and infinity, but also low and high (culture, society) or body and soul. Further, Winterbach raises the problem of white

Afrikaans speakers in the contemporary South Africa, which will also be explained further in the text.

#### **2.3.2.2.1. *Helena Verbloem (Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat)***

The search for a own identity probably begins for Helena Verbloem in *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat* when her collection of shells is stolen. It almost seems that for Helena the burglary and the consequential loss her precious shells is a much more serious crime than the sudden death of her colleague Theo Verwey. The shells, as she claims, enable her to meditate and bring her closer to God and they are the quintessence of pure and simple beauty. Therefore it were not only the concrete shells that have been harmed but beauty as such. Helena admits that she feels an enormous affection for her shells. She can let herself go emotionally with shells, lifeless objects, which she apparently is not able to do with living people. She claims that through the shells God's creation makes sense to her, maybe the reason why she has after the loss of the shells a deepening understanding of the origin of life. She, however, before she discusses the topic with the museum's paleontologist, firstly interrogates Theo Verwey, the man for whom she has enormous respect. It is actually he who advises her to consult Hugo Hattingh. There is an urgent need in the character of Helena to understand, but above all to be assured that there is a greater system behind everything. When the shells as a proof of something greater, disappear, she throws herself in thinking about the theory of the big bang and the evolutionist theory of the origin of life.

Although she shows great interest in the origin of life, Helena at the same time apparently prefers to keep the living world at a safe distance. She is not really able to bond emotionally with other people. Helena can speak to Theo and communicate with him only by the means of a novel she has been reading. By reminding him of the novel she tries to start a conversation a number of times. She also addresses Theo with the help of particular word cards she is sorting out. This leads often to bizarre conversations, but for Helena the communication seems satisfactory. Helena admits she has been thinking and dreaming about Theo in an erotic way but never explicitly names her feelings for him. Those are however obvious from the way she acts, her continuous attempts to start a conversation with him, and also from her reaction to Theo's death.

Typical for the character of Helena, as well as for her narration, is the precision of language. She feels the urge to name everything precisely, which also corresponds with

her profession as a lexicologist. Interestingly enough, Helena did not study lexicology or linguistics, she originally wanted to become a writer. She even published a novel in her early thirties which has been the reason why the family stopped communicating with each other, since they found the characters in Helena's novel to similar to their own personalities. In the course of the narration Helena starts writing again and begins on a new novel. She also quotes from the novel in a number of places in the text which gives an impression that her novel is an attempt to put her own personal history into words since the novel is obviously inspired by the life of her parents (Human 2009: 9).

This need to name everything precisely originates from her need for order. In the course of her narration there are often explanations, specifications or clarifications added in brackets. This seems to be Helena's manner of dealing with her deep rooted feeling of uncertainty as if she was not sure whether the chosen word is appropriate or describes the situation/feeling sufficiently. Language seems to be the universal measure through which the world, Helena's past, her complicated interpersonal relations, and above all for her own identity is organized. It is no coincidence that Helena and Theo spend the most time with the words connected to death and loss, "*dood*" and "*verlies*" which both are of great importance for the plot of the novel. Another theme that seems to thrill Helena is life as such. She believes that once she can understand precisely the way how life on the Earth has originated it will help her to understand it on the spiritual level as well. Therefore she spends a significant amount of time discussing both the spiritual as well as the material aspect of life with Theo Verwey and Hugo Hattingh, as already mentioned earlier. In the same way she also tries to find words to describe her own personal history, her past and her present.

As already mentioned before, Helena points a few times sarcastically on her resemblance to Mrs. Curren, the main character of Coetzee's *Age of iron*. She quotes Mrs. Curren when stating she also has "*grief past weeping*" but is not hollow as a shell yet (Winterbach 2006: 155). Helena admires (maybe even envies) Mrs. Curren for her ability to let go, to part from her earthly belongings and become empty as a shell (the metaphorical image of shells not being without importance for Helena), although Mrs. Curren refers to the emptiness in a more literary sense since she states that her disease has eaten her out from inside (Coetzee 1990: 112). Like the main character of Coetzee's novel, Helena has problems with positioning herself as a white woman in South-African society, in these times, but especially after the end of Apartheid. The situation of Helena

is even more complicated because of the fact that she is Afrikaans speaking, and a linguist, trying to preserve a language thought by many South-Africans to be THE language of Apartheid, a politically incorrect language. The dubious position of Helena as Afrikaans speaker becomes visible in a number of moments of the story. It is very clear for example when she is asked by Mrs. Dudu, the director of the Institute of Regional languages, to sort out the novels in Afrikaans in the library of the museum. More place has to be made for novels in other languages than Afrikaans, and importantly, all books published before 1990 have to disappear. One of the most important aspects of the character/identity of Helena Verbloem in *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat* is thus her mother tongue, Afrikaans. Helena, as writer and as linguist, always strives to name the surrounding world and the people with whom she interacts precisely. The most important reasons for the identity crisis of Helena Verbloem are those she cannot pronounce, name, bring under words or label precisely.

Helena is apparently aware of her dubious position as a white Afrikaans native speaker and is able to reflect on that. The self-irony and a great amount of self-reflection seem to be typical of the character of Helena Verbloem. Having reached a certain point in her life, Helena sums it up as follows:

*“Ek sou my lewe in vyf tydperke kon verdeel. My kindertyd, my troebel jeug, my twintiger- en vroeë dertigerjare – die tydperk van roekeloosheid en dwaling. Die tydperk van ontnugtering, wending en inkeer (my huwelik). En daarna die tydperk waarin ek steeds verkeer – die afloop, die begin van die laaste fase.”* (Winterbach 2006: 134)

*“I could divide my life into five phases. Childhood. Turbulent youth. Misguided twenties and early thirties. The unhappy phase of my ill-fated marriage. And at the present the advent of the final phase: the beginning of the end.”* (Winterbach 2008: 130)

After the passionate and carefree period of her twenties and early thirties came disillusion and betrayal of her marriage. Helena also never refers to her ex-husband and daughter other than as to “my (gewese) man”, my (used-to-be) husband and “ons/my kind”, our/my child. Their names are never mentioned. We can understand that the child is now a grown-up woman, but Helena does not mention her often, simply stating that the child already has her own life. Even though she speaks about the ex-husband as if he belonged to someone else’s life, to a life of another Helena with whom she further has nothing in common, Helena speaks with love of her daughter. The few times she

mentions her, we can feel warmth and compassion. It is a very physical, painfully intense, sort of love with which she recalls her daughter (Winterbach 2006: 40). Even though Helena has warm feelings for her child, and thinks about her a lot, even with painful intensity, and remembers every detail of her body, with its smells, even the different variations of her voice, she does not speak about her often, and mentions her only a few times in the course of the narration. This is in a sharp contrast with the frequency in which she speaks about other people in her life, including her husband. That would imply that her daughter is the only person for whom Helena is able to have feelings. Because of her own protection, Helena decides not to mention her daughter too often, as she has chosen to become emotionally attached to shells, in place of other people.

The fact that her ex-husband and the child are never named in the course of the narration is in a sharp contrast with e.g. the lovers of Helena. Above all Frans de Waard, her present lover and companion, is always named by his full name, but also Abel Sonnekus, Felix du Randt and other people that are or have been a part of Helen's life. Helena always uses the whole name, naming the person by her/his first name and the family name. She usually adds also her/his function or a short description, which however is repeated every time the person appears in the narration, e.g. one of her ex-lovers, Felix du Randt is always described as sexy, freckled, warm, foxy, etc. The way Helena does (not) speak about her ex-husband and her daughter implies the depth of the wounds that were left in her mind. Furthermore, Helena speaks about her present partner Frans de Waard, "*my minnaar en metgesel*", her lover and companion, as she keeps naming him in the course of the narration, in a very pragmatic way. She appreciates the positives of the relationship and the pleasures he can offer her, physically, as well as intellectually, but never mentions any feelings for him. During the narration Helena repeats that he is the ideal partner for her and the best she could have even imagined with her. He is implicitly compared with her previous lovers and partners, among others her ex-husband, but at the same time the credits he gets are mostly practical and pragmatic. In the present the only emotions Helena is willing or able to invest are aimed at her shell collection.

Helena actually refers to the shells as her family a lot of times, and points out that both her parents as well as her sister are dead, her brother disappeared and her child, who never has a name in the story, has her own life somewhere abroad. Even though she, as

she claims herself, has been in an overly satisfactory relationship, her interest and passion goes in the first place to the shells. When Helena has to move to Durban because of her appointment by the lexicological project, she carefully chooses a number of shells out of her collection to accompany her. These are arranged on the night table next to her bed and create for her the feeling of home. The break-in shows Helena how fragile this surrogate family construction was. Therefore, the actual reason of her emotional tremor is what the shells were supposed to compensate for and hide. Helena is made to face her inner and suppressed fears and wounds. When police does not take enough interest in the search for the stolen shells Helena decides to look for them on her own. Her tireless search for the shells is supposed to fill the gap the loss of them has left behind, as the shells were supposed to fill the gap caused by the unsuccessful relationships, among other that with her mother and sister and her marriage.

The shells are indeed the key to the identity crisis of Helena Verbloem. They stand for what she chooses not to tell and suppress. She deliberately decides to mourn for the loss of her shell collection in place of mourning for other, previous losses in her life.

*“Ek beweën my skulpe soos Rachel haar kinders. Ek is beurtelings moorddadig kwaad en terneergedruk. (...) ’n Vrou wat tekere gaan oor skulpe asof sy niks beters het om oor te treur nie. Ek het heelwat om oor te treur, maar op die oomblik treur ek oor die skulpe.”* (Winterbach 2006: 40)

*“I weep for my shells as Rachel weeps for her children. I am alternately murderously angry and depressed. (...) A woman going on about shells as if she has nothing better to mourn. I have much to mourn, but at the moment I am mourning for the shells.”* (Winterbach 2008: 39)

In the course of the narration Helena has to admit that her deep grief might not be only because of the violation of her shell collection and becomes aware of the suppressed emotions from the past. We can observe a clear developing tendency towards the loss of the shells. In the beginning Helena simply cannot understand why other people would not have sympathy for her loss. Secondly, after she had to encounter an absolute incomprehension of her feelings from her closest people (her lover Frans de Waard) as well as from strangers (the police officers), she tries to explain the deep meaning and importance of the collection for her. At this moment, Helena however is not able to provide the real reason for her grief and keeps explaining that the shells are a source of aesthetical and emotional pleasure, help her to meditate and remind her of God’s

presence. Later she can provide a logical reasoning but is not ready to believe in this logical reasoning that there might be something more behind her grief yet. Therefore she also refuses to search for help by a specialist.

*“Ek weet wat ’n terapeut sal sê. Agter elke verlies lê ’n vroeër verlies. Die verlies van my skulpe is ’n voorwendsel (’n jakkalsdraai, ’n verbloeming en bewimpeling), ’n poging van die geslepe psige om die vroeër, pynliker verliese te verdoesel.”* (Winterbach 2006: 157)

*“I know what a therapist would say. Behind every loss lies an earlier loss. The loss of my shells is a pretence (an evasion, a cloaking and veiling), an attempt of the cunning psyche to obscure earlier, more painful losses.”* (Winterbach 2008: 153)

In the whole course of the narration Helena has also been receiving calls from a man she was supposed to meet a few times years ago, in her twenties and early thirties before she got married. This unknown man not only keeps Helena from sleep, since he always calls late in the night, but more importantly, he is reminding her of her old self, of the self-confident, passionate and erudite Helena who had great dreams and ambitions. This reminder of her previous life makes her deal with the changes she has undergone as a person. Furthermore, after she has made two unsuccessful attempts to acquire more information about the circumstances of the burglary in Ladybird where some of her shells have been found, Helena is prepared to let go. She yet tries to buy new shells and recreate her collection but that is more a symbolic act than an actual attempt to restore the order of things. After the heated discussion about her absent-mindedness of the last weeks with Frans de Waard she is able to describe her feelings clearly:

*“Waarvan wend ek my gesig af? Wat wil ek nie onder oë sien nie? My moeder se leed? My vader se onartikuleerbare berou? Joets se verydelde lewe? Die kortstondigheid van ons aardse bestaan? Die weerloosheid van alles van waarde?”* (Winterbach 2006: 276)

*“What I am averting my face from? What do I not want to open my eyes to? My mother’s anguish? My father’s remorse he could not articulate? Joets’ thwarted life? The transience of our earthly existence? The vulnerability of everything of value?”* (Winterbach 2008: 271)

Now that the course of Helena’s life has been affected by the robbery and the phone calls reminding her of her long forgotten past she starts questioning herself, her life and her position in society. She looks back on her past and the past of her family. Helena is



at the end able to name and pronounce her worries and fears. She decides to stay in Durban till the end of her appointment and keeps working alone on the linguistic project. The relationship with Frans de Waard gets back to its old tracks and everything seems to be as it was before the events that have shaken the life of Helena. But under the surface Helena has made an enormous progress. “*My skulpe het ek ter ruste gelê*” (Winterbach 2006: 333), “*My shells I have laid to rest*” (Winterbach 2008: 327), states Helena Verbloem. She also came to terms with her relationship with her deceased mother and sister, is not haunted by dreams about them anymore and accepts their death and disappearance from her life. Four weeks after Theo’s death she even has been contacted again by her brother whom she is supposed to meet soon. Her brother names her warmly “*sister*” and claims that he is back in the living world, back from his wanderings (Winterbach 2006: 328). In this way Helena would be able to restore the communication within the family.

Compared to the other novels in the corpus, the development of the character of Helena Verbloem in *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat* is the most subtle. After the end of her appointment in Durban Helena simply returns back to her previous life, and to her partner Frans de Waard. The only external/visible change that her stay in Durban has caused, is that she started to write again, as already mentioned earlier. In the course of the narration Helena has however undergone the whole (psychoanalytical) process of dealing with loss: from shock and disbelief she went through phases of anger, negation, searching and negotiating till final acceptance (Human 2009: 6). Even though she makes an attempt to buy a substitute for the shells she has lost (Winterbach 2006: 219), she is already aware that the new shells cannot really cover her loss. At the end of the narration she is ready to “bury” Theo and his attempt to save/conservate the disappearing language/words and also the people she has lost in the past and whom the shell collection was supposed to replace.

### **2.3.2.3. *’n Stringetjie blou krale* (A String of Blue Beads)**

The third book of the South African part of the corpus tells a story of Nomsa/Nancy Karelse and the search for her real identity. A coloured woman Nancy, being plagued by terrible nightmares which she cannot grasp, looks for help to psychoanalysts and psychiatrists but no one seems to be able to help her. In these dreams Nancy is being chased by a creature that tells her in the Xhosa language to come back home. After an

ultimatum from her husband Nancy goes to her parents to ask for advice. They, apparently in a shock from the description on Nancy's dreams, call a sangoma to help. The native healer explains to Nancy that the cause of her nightmares is her suppressed real identity. Nancy was born in a kraal in the East-Kaap province in a Xhosa family as Nomsa, a fact she seems to have forgotten completely. In order to get a (better) education an elderly coloured couple Jan and Siena promised to take care of her. After some time they however declared Nomsa their own child, and made her officially a coloured person. When the family moved to Kaapstad the last links with her past were broken completely and Nomsa/Nancy gradually (for a certain measure deliberately) forgot her roots. She finished her studies and became a teacher at a nursing school. She also got married to a coloured man Bennie and together they have two children.

This discovery of her real origin starts a whole chain reaction. Firstly Nancy has to face her own racism towards black people, and subsequently her husband's racism that causes the family to fall apart, since he cannot stand the idea that he has actually been married to a black woman and even had children with her<sup>46</sup>. He divorces Nancy and finds a much younger woman of a desired racial background with whom he soon gets engaged.

As readers we follow the story of young Nomsa that lead her to Kaapstad and that of grown-up Nomsa/Nancy that leads her back to her original family and her roots. Together with Nomsa/Nancy we experience her identity crisis and her way of dealing with it. Firstly her real life story has to be told and then Nomsa/Nancy is obliged to take the journey back to the kraal where she was born and make peace with her ancestors. After her family obligations are fulfilled, Nomsa/Nancy is free to start a new life of her own.

*'n Stringetjie blou krale* carries a didactical element/message. At the end of the story when Nomsa/Nancy succeeds in her desire to find a balance between her Xhosa roots and her present, her husband is "punished" for his racist prejudices and the behaviour towards his wife from who he got divorced. His car is robbed and he is shot. It seems to be the irony of the writer that Bennie is indeed shot by a black person. The projectile hits the spine and Bennie ends up paralyzed from his waist down. The children when

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<sup>46</sup> The Apartheid laws against (sexual) contact between the races resonate clearly in Bennie's attitude.

they finally come to know the real reason for their mother leaving the family refuse to visit their father in the hospital. His much younger fiancée seems not to be able to face the future with a paralyzed husband.

Apart from this somehow unnecessary didactical insert *’n Stringetjie blou krale* describes vividly the dilemma facing many South Africans. E.K.M. Dido captures on a small scale the identity crisis and the conflict between the roots and one’s present and future which is very typical for a postcolonial society. She manages to describe and unmask racial prejudices in all groups of contemporary South-African society. Her critique is not only aimed at the white or brown people. Dido shows that prejudice exists in every community and that these prejudices cause misunderstandings.

#### **2.3.2.3.1. Nomsa / Nancy Hendriks (*’n Stringetjie blou krale*)**

The I-narrator of *’n Stringetjie blou krale* literally has two identities that, at least at the beginning of the narration, mutually exclude each other: the coloured woman Nancy Hendriks, married Karelse, and the Xhosa woman Nomsa. As a result of that she also happens to have two families, and two pairs of parents. As Chris van de Merwe in his review of the novel points out<sup>47</sup>, the situation is even more complex since Nomsa is a child of her father’s second wife. In practice she thus has three mothers, all of whom she respects and to whom she feels/has an emotional attachment. With her own family breaking apart as a result of her husband’s racism, she suddenly ends up on her own, not knowing where she belongs to, nor where she comes from. Or to be precise, at the beginning of the narration Nancy finds out that what she supposed to be her identity and “her place” in the society was not real. The postcolonial identity crisis based on the suppression of own past is therefore the most visible in this last character from the South-African part of the corpus.

The narration as such starts in the middle of the plot with the dreams, or to be more precise, nightmares of Nancy. At the beginning of the narration Nancy has been plagued by her nightmares for a few weeks already, tearing her hair out and scratching herself till she bled. In this recurring dream she is always chased up a hill by an unknown creature trying to strangle her. Every time the dream lasts a little longer, so that in the dream with which the narration of Nancy begins, she is addressed by the creature in

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<sup>47</sup> <http://www.oulitnet.co.za/seminaar/bloukraledido.asp> (consulted on 3.12.2010)

Xhosa telling her to go home. We can together with her experience the horror of finding out that it is a black person chasing her:

*“Ek dood amper net daar van nuwe vrees. Dis ’n swart mens! Ek gaan deur ’n swart mens vermoor word!”* (Dido 2000: 8)

*I almost die at the very same time from the new dread. It is a black person! I am going to be murdered by a black person!* (my translation)

Nancy makes a (for her logical) step from a black person to murderer, as if it made the fact she is going to die even worse and more gruesome. Such racist prejudices seem to be typical for coloured/brown as well as white people in South Africa, during but especially after the Apartheid period. This kind of reasoning Nancy apparently got from her husband Bennie. As already mentioned earlier in the plot summary, *’n Stringetjie blou krale* is in a number of aspects also a didactic work, and therefore it can be seen as the least literary one of this part of the corpus. In contemporary postcolonial literature, as also previously explained in the introduction to the corpus, the literary value is not the only parameter by which a text/writing should (can) be evaluated. Postcolonial texts are often socially and culturally engaged, therefore while analyzing this kind of texts this aspect cannot be forgotten or negated. Nomsa/Nancy’s husband Bennie is from the beginning depicted as a negative character, the clear opposite to Nomsa/Nancy. Together they form a very oppositional couple with the dominant (even abusive), selfish, racist, sexist macho man and the soft-hearted, submissive, loving, supportive wife. In the course of the whole narration Nomsa/Nancy however constantly repeats that Bennie has always been a good husband and father. His behavior changes dramatically when he comes to know that his wife is actually black. It seems that the fact that his wife is black (and therefore of less value) gives Bennie a reason to abuse her. We will come to this moment of the narration later in the text. Bennie’s reaction to his wife’s nightmares is thus consistent with his character, rather harsh: he threatens Nancy that if she does not let herself be hospitalized, he will take the children away from her.

Being put in front of such an ultimatum Nancy seeks help by her parents. They, clearly understanding immediately what the reason for the problems might be, call a sangoma to help. The native healer keeps repeating the same question, asking her to tell about her childhood., Nancy is firstly simply irritated, not wanting (or more precisely not wanting to know) what the sangoma is asking. Her acquired racist prejudices are visible while interacting with the sangoma. Nancy is clearly disgusted and does not want to undergo

the healing procedure. The sangoma however keeps insisting on her question and Nancy finally remembers. The string of blue beads that the sangoma has around her neck between strings of white beads, and a pipe she is smoking plays an important role in the process. These two objects remind Nomsa/Nancy of her (biological) mother.

The first hurdle Nomsa/Nancy has to cross is that of her own acquired racism, from a great part taken over from her husband Bennie. She admits she does not even have black friends, only colleagues (Dido 2000: 20). She also immediately starts worrying what her husband's reaction would be. Her worries are well-founded since Bennie left his job in order not to have to work under a black person, claiming that he would rather sit in a gutter than to work under a "darkie" (Dido 2000: 130).

*"“Wat gaan van my word?” (...) “Wat van my man?” wil ek weet. “ Hy verdra nie swart mense nie. Hy kry die apiestuipe as hy my moet sien. Ek wil nie eens van sommige van my bruin kollegas praat nie!””* (Dido 2000: 24)

*“What’s going to happen to me?” (...) “How about my husband” I want to know. “He can’t stand black people. He will get mad if he has to see me. And I don’t even want to speak of some of my brown colleagues!”* (my translation)

From the first reaction of Nomsa/Nancy, we can conclude that she is at the first bothered about the reaction of her surroundings. She does not really doubt the message the sangoma brings to her, but she is worried about the people around her. She is unconsciously aware of the fact that identity and belonging has to be negotiated with one's surrounding and that she would have to defend her roots in the face of a racist and prejudiced public. But no one can choose her / his own background and the truth about Nomsa/Nancy's part needs to be told and accepted. With the help of the herbs the sangoma throws in the fire Nomsa/Nancy remembers and starts telling the story of her losing/forgetting her Xhosa identity, in order to be accepted into the brown community.

*“Dis nes die mure van Pa en Ma se huis om my wil weg val. Ek knyp my oë styf toe. Ek sien ons kraal lê, by die andere krale wat die laer uitmaak. Die avonduurrook ... vader tog, ek wil nie terug nie, maar ek móét terug in hierdie lank verlore land van my.”* (Dido 2000: 26)

*It feels as if the walls of my dad and mum's house were falling apart. I clench my eyelids firmly. I see our kraal lying, next to other kraals of the lowlands. The evening hours' smoke ... oh god, please, I do NOT want back, but I have to go back to the land I've lost a long time ago.* (my translation)

In contrast to the previously analyzed novels of the South-African part of the corpus, the I-narrator of *’n Stringetjie blou krale* finds out very early in the plot the reason for her identity crisis and the reason why she would not fit in the society and would not feel at ease in her present situation. Already at page 26 out of the 240 pages, in the first tenth thus, of the novel Nomsa/Nancy gets to know about her suppressed identity. Compared to the characters she is aware of her real identity almost from the beginning. The task that stands before Nomsa/Nancy is to tell her story, firstly, to the sangoma, and at the same time for herself because there is a lot she has to remember and say aloud.

Assisted by the sangoma, Nomsa/Nancy tells the whole story of the transformation of the black Xhosa girl into a brown village girl Nancy. One of the first visible changes, apart from clothes, was her hair. Unlike girls and women of her kraal who were supposed to have their heads shaved, the adoptive mother of Nomsa/Nancy let her hair grow. Before the hair was long enough to weave into braids Siena combed it and tied up with ribbons.

*“Toe my ma’s die groot linte sien en nog boonop hoor dat ek ’n bietjie Afrikaans kon praat, het my mama net haar kop gesak en niks gesê nie. Mam’omkhulu het haar sê gesê. Kliphard, voor antie Siena, het sy vir my gesê: “UngumXhosa Nomsa. Ungakulinge ulibale. UngumXhosa.” Jy is ’n Xhosa, Nomsa. Moet dit nog nooit vergeet nie. Jy is ’n Xhosa. In my gedagtes het ek die woorde in Afrikaans agternagesê.” (Dido 2000: 81)*

*When my mothers saw the ribbons in my hair and on top of that heard that I speak some Afrikaans, my mother just sank her head and did not say anything. . Mam’omkhulu said what she wanted to say. Aloud, in front of auntie Siena, she told me: “UngumXhosa Nomsa. Ungakulinge ulibale. UngumXhosa.” You are a Xhosa, Nomsa. You mustn’t forget that. You are a Xhosa. In my mind I repeated those words after her in Afrikaans. (my translation)*

The little girl Nomsa understood the new situation in the village where she was supposed to live from then. She sensed immediately that if she does not fit in, the community will make her life difficult. This was also probably the moment when she decided to suppress her identity, and when she started feeling ashamed of her family, and her mothers who still regularly came to visit her (Dido 2000: 81). The next step is that Jan and Siena let her be officially declared as their own child.

*“Dis hoe ek Nancy Hendriks geword het. Sonder my toestemming. Sonder my ma’s se wete of toestemming. Teen die einde van my eerste jaar in die*

*dorp was ek 'n bruin mens. Gedruk en gestêmp tot in Pretoria. Ek was Nancy Hendriks en my wettige ouers was Jan en Siena Hendriks.” (Dido 2000: 90)*

*This is how I became Nancy Hendriks. Without my permission. Without letting my mothers know or asking for their permission. Within my first year in the village I became a brown person. Registered and stamped as far as in Pretoria. I was Nancy Hendriks and my legitimate parents were Jan and Siena Hendriks. (my translation)*

Even though Nomsa/Nancy has been warned and asked by her mothers not to forget her past and where she came from she gradually presses the idea deeper into her unconsciousness. Nomsa becomes Nancy and gives in to the pressure from her new surroundings as well as her own need to fit in. The last connection with her origin is broken when the family Hendriks moves out of the village. Nomsa/Nancy has only been eight years old when she had to leave her kraal and under the pressure of circumstances she has in the meantime absolutely forgotten about her roots. She finishes her studies, finds a job, meets a man of her own (thought to be) colour and gets married.

Nancy therefore suffers a great shock after the birth of their second child. The boy she gives birth to is the darkest shade of black.

*“Pa se vinger het eintlik bleek teen die swart gesiggie gelyk. Ek wou nie na die kind kyk nie. Ek wou uit die verskliklike nagmerrie wakker skrik en vind dat ek 'n kind het wat nes sy suster lyk. Maar ek was wakker. En die kind het nie soos sy suster gelyk nie.” (Dido 2000: 123)*

*Dad's finger actually seemed pale against that little black face. I didn't want to look at the child. I wanted to wake up with a shock from a nightmare and find out that I have a child that look exactly like his sister. But I was awake. And the child didn't look at all like his sister. (my translation)*

Nancy does not even want to breastfeed her own child, so shocked is she by his skin colour. She claims that that child cannot be hers, since both she and her husband are fair coloured. While still in the hospital she asks the doctors to sterilize her, so that she cannot give birth to any more children with such a dark complexion. To her husband she however explains that there will be a great health risk if she had any more children. It takes Nancy a lot of time to develop feelings for her son.

Once the story of Nomsa/Nancy's childhood has been told, the sangoma advises Nancy to go back to her kraal as soon as possible to fulfil her duty to her parents and family and pay the debt. She however is not prepared to take such a decision and returns back to her husband and children. After three weeks the nightmares come back, together with hallucinations during the day. This makes her tell her husband Bennie about her real origin. Again, in compliance with his role as a negative character in the narration, he shows his deep racism. His very first reaction on hearing of his wife's origin is to vomit the breakfast out. Since the moment he gets to know that he is actually married to a black woman, he refuses to touch her and makes her leave the house and the children, telling her that they would not want a black mother. Soon, he requests a divorce.

After this Nomsa/Nancy finally decides to go to her kraal, to visit the land of her ancestors. She however comes too late. When she finally finds the kraal where her brother lives, she only gets to know that both her mothers died two years ago. There is a ceremony

*“Toe ons later na die kraal toe terugstap, bly daardie gevoel van rustigheid by my. Ek weet dat my ma's my vergewe het. Ek voel dit in my hart. Die tweede en belangrikste gedeelte van my pelgrimstog is voltooi. (...) Ná die etery sing die vrouens weer en klap hande. Ek klap net so hard. Oor die jubel in my hart. My ma's het my vergewe! My mense het my aanvaar! Ek is weer een van hulle. My pelgrimstog het ek suksesvol voltooi.” (Dido 2000: 198)*

*Later, when we descend back to the kraal, the peaceful feeling stays with me. I know that my mothers have forgiven me. I feel it in my heart. The second and the most important part of my pilgrimage is accomplished. (...) After we have eaten the women sing again and clap their hands. I clap as hard as they do. Because of the joy in my heart. My mothers have forgiven me! My people have accepted me! I am one of them again. My pilgrimage has been accomplished successfully. (my translation)*

At the end Nomsa/Nancy fulfilled what her dreams, or her unconsciousness, demanded of her to do. She returned and did what she has been asked by her ancestors. She also managed to be accepted again by her family in the kraal. She however does not abandon the life she has been living till then completely, since after the duty has been paid she returns back to her adoptive parents, her actual family. She knows she will be coming back regularly and will never allow the bond between her and her family and roots to



break again but at the same time Nomsa/Nancy is aware that she does not belong in the kraal any more. Her place is with her children and Jan and Siena.

To see clearly the result of the process Nomsa/Nancy went through in the course of the narration, let us have a closer look at the last lines of the novel. We immediately see the shift to awareness of her own roots and her place in the society. She has also been able to deal with the fact that she actually has two pairs of parents, and in practice three mothers, since her biological mother has been the second wife of her biological father. Nomsa/Nancy accepts her heritage and the culture where she came from. She departs from this cultural basis and combines it with the background of Jan and Siena in which she has been brought up, and the education she has been able to enjoy thanks to her adoptive parents. As a reminder of her origin she now openly, and proudly, wears the string of blue beads that has brought her back to her roots.

*“Met elke tree wat ek verder van Bennie af gaan, weet ek dat ek van my onlangse verlede af wegstap. My meer as twintig jare se verlede. Hoe verder ek stap, hoe ligter raak my tred by die besef dat Bennie geen meer houvas op my het nie. Ons deel net die kinders. Dis al. (...) My hande gaan onwillekeurig na die string blou krale om my nek wat ek nou pal dra, en ek klem die vas. Dankie, Mama. Dankie, Mam’omkhulu, vir die geleentheid wat julle my in die lewe gegee het. Ek, Nancy Nomsa Karelse, gaan saam met my kinders en Ma en Pa sonder geheime die toekoms in. Ek weet waar ek vandaan kom – en dit maak my sterk.” (Dido 2000: 240)*

*I am aware that with every step I make further from Bennie I become more distant from my recent past. My past of more than twenty years. The further I get the lighter my steps become with the knowledge that Bennie has no grasp on me anymore. We only share the kids. That’s all. (...) My hands reach unwillingly to the string of blue beads that I now wear openly around my neck and I grasp them firmly. Thank you, mother. Thank you, Mam’omkhulum my father’s first wife, for the opportunity you gave me into life. I, Nancy Nomsa Karelse, together with my adoptive parents and children make a step forward into the future. I know where I come from – and that makes me strong. (my translation)*

After the first shock following the knowledge of her real identity Nomsa/Nancy has been able to find certainty and assurance exactly in this knowledge. She claims to be fully aware of her position, as well as the journey that took her there. She accepts the position in between two cultures and is able to get certainty from this very position. Nomsa/Nancy grew up in a system with two roots, and now that she is aware of this fact

she is able to work with it and use it for her own prospects. We however have to keep in mind that Nomsa/Nancy would probably have been less keen on accepting her Xhosa identity if it still were in the Apartheid era. She left her black roots once in order to be accepted by the community and to acquire a more advantageous position in the society, and it is to be suspected that her return to Xhosa identity and the pride in her roots would not have happened that easily if Nomsa/Nancy had she not known that she would be accepted by the society.

*'n Stringetjie blou krale* seems to be a description of a journey in many aspects. There are the actual transfers of Nomsa/Nancy from the kraal to the village, from the village to the city and back, and there is also a much more important transfer from Xhosa to a coloured person and above all, from a coloured person to someone with an in-between cultural identity. Nomsa/Nancy did not simply return to her Xhosa indigenous roots, forgetting her coloured-person-phase: she inhabits the space between the two cultures and seems to feel comfortable in this liminal position.

#### **2.3.2.4. Conclusion**

Now, with the summarized plots of all the works from the corpus in mind, we can provide a short comparison of the characters of Herma, Ada, Mina/Amelie, Milla, Helena and Nomsa/Nancy. Even though they come from different socio-cultural background, resemblances between the characters of the corpus as well as narrative strategies are clear. The narration begins in the present of the I-narrator and works retrospectively, with a number of returns to the crucial moments in the past of the I-narrator. There is always a moment/impulse that makes the I-narrator to return to her past, that literally shakes her out of her daily routine (and denial). She is made to reconsider her past, remember the decisive moments in her personal history and finally find out the reason for her identity crisis, or the reason why she feels misplaced in the society. There is in all three cases a rather painful process of remembering, admitting and (very importantly) pronouncing the forgotten, suppressed or silenced moments and events that had a large impact on the I-narrator's present situation. Importantly, these decisive moments in all three cases involve another person or people. It were interactions with other people (a public with which one's identity is interrogated) that caused the identity crisis and the search of the I-narrators's identities again involves other people on basis of whom the identity could be stated.

In the Dutch part of the corpus we could see how the writers handle and problematize the relationship between the different groups in the society. In the three examples of literary characters from South-African literature in Afrikaans we have been able to observe a clear tendency to problematize the relationship between white, coloured and black people especially after the fall of Apartheid. Compared to part of the corpus from the Netherlands, we can see that the axis of race has gained more importance which is a logical consequence of the Apartheid system. Even after the official end of this hegemonic structure the relations between different (racial) groups in South-Africa stay tense, complex and rather problematic, also because of the combination of multiple axes of oppression that keep some groups of the society in isolation. On a more universal level we can however state comparable issues when it comes to one's identity in postcolonial society.

We can say that all the authors have chosen a comparable narrative strategy for their works. A woman character, and narrator in the same person, tells a story of her search for herself and her place in the contemporary postcolonial society. The act of narration is in all six cases also a kind of therapeutic writing or talk. In the course of the plot the character in all three novels has to deal with a trauma from the past, a suppressed piece of personal/family history. At the same time she experiences a number of dramatic on-the-edge situations that help her to process the trauma and finally find herself, the inner peace and re-conciliation with her own past. They also find (or strive to find) their own place in the society and accept their own personal (and family) history. As should be clear from the above summarized plots of the novels, it is never the woman alone who has to live through the events of the plot. As already stated, especially when it comes to identity, the situation always includes more people. An individual namely always needs a public to be able to define her/his own identity. Therefore the individual characters become engaged in series of inter-reactions with people around them. The power relations are different in every single of these interactions and so is the oppositional role distribution and as a result of that, the identity of the analyzed characters. In the course of the narration, Herma, Ada, Mina/Amelie, Milla, Helena and Nomsa/Nancy have to negotiate their identities with their partners, but also with other individuals they encounter in their search of their identity. When the public changes the power relations change as well. Herma verbalises herself quite differently when she interacts with the journalist Bart Moorland, her friend Dee, or her husband. Ada takes a different position

every time she interacts with her husband Huib, her lover Marcus, her brother or father. Mina/Amelie defines herself differently when she is in contact with her colleague Esther, her ex-partner Mart, her lover Samuel, or her psychotherapist. Milla takes another position when interacting with her doctor, her husband Jak or her friends. Helena is willing to show different facets of her personality to her friend Sof, to her lover Frans, or to her boss and colleague Theo. The same can be said about the character of Nomsa/Nancy.

In all the three narrations, even though they do differ a lot from each other in a number of aspects, it seems quite difficult to define who actually is ‘the other’ or who ‘the self’ in the interactions of the main character and other characters. This phenomenon, i.e. disintegration of the clear binary oppositions, and the consequent fading of the dividing line between the two poles of a binary, is, as already mentioned above, very typical of postcolonial literature, and is at the same time meeting the aim of Derridean deconstruction that wants to destroy the hegemony in the binary system. The aspect I called “postcoloniality” of the given novels has however been already discussed separately with each work and there is therefore no further need for elaboration of this topic apart from this short reminder.

### **3. Practical part**

#### ***3.1. Introduction***

Let us now take a closer look on the narrative level of the novels from the corpus and see how the six postcolonial stories of the search for one’s identity are actually realized. We have already discovered similarities on the thematic and also theoretical level, with all six novels coming up with a new concept of the notion of ‘the other’. The similarities in the narrative approach have been mentioned – all the six novels have a central I-narrator (a woman) who is shaken out of her daily routine (and denial of her past) and looks retrospectively to her past in order to find reconciliation with this past, but also with herself. When looking at the novels of the corpus, in the differing narrative strategies and varying plots we can observe a pattern in the way the story is built up. In all the six cases the narration begins in the present time of the I-narrator and works retrospectively, with a number of returns to the crucial moments in the past of the I-narrator. The story is however not narrated backwards in a time consequence: the connections between the two consecutive events in the narration are of an emotional

manner. The narration seems actually to be based purely on associations, suggesting a loose stream of consciousness of the I-narrator. As already marginally mentioned earlier (e.g. in the case of the character of Herma Warner in *Sleuteloog*), the order in which the events are narrated goes from the moment of realization of one's discomfort in the present situation pass a number of stops in the past of the character till the most painful event in the history of the I-narrator, i.e. the event that actually caused this discomfort (trauma). There is always a moment/impulse that makes the I-narrator return to her past. This catalyzing moment escalates the feeling of uncertainty and discomfort the I-narrator has been feeling some time already and makes her realize that there is a clear discrepancy between what she thought to be her identity and position in the society and the actual situation. Also after this catalyzing moment they become suddenly aware of the contrast between what they (in the past) wanted to become/reach and what they actually became/reached.

In all six novels of the corpus the I-narrator is made to reconsider her past, remember the decisive moments in her personal history and finally find the reason for her identity crisis, or the reason why she feels misplaced in society and in the situation she finds herself. It is a rather painful process of remembering, admitting and, very importantly, pronouncing the forgotten, suppressed or silenced moments and events that had a large impact on the I-narrator's present situation. Importantly, these traumatic moments in all three cases involve another person or people. It were interactions with other people (a public with which one's identity is interrogated) that caused the identity crisis and the search of the I-narrators' identities again involves other people on basis of whom the identity could be stated. As already mentioned earlier, our identity is constantly changing, interrogated and in interaction with our surroundings. Therefore, when the characters in the analyzed novels are shaken out of their routine and the relationship with their surroundings is altered, they have to formulate themselves again, build up new relationships, or redefine the already existing ones in order to be able to grasp the notion of themselves, what they are, again. Or: to build up and redefine the existing interpersonal relations in a way in which they feel themselves comfortable, in a way in which they do not have to deny, negate or suppress (anymore) what they are and, importantly, what do they feel to be.

To be able to come into this reconciliation with themselves, which is in all six cases clearly connected with a suppressed, silenced or forgotten past, the I-narrators have to

undergo a process which seems to follow a similar progress in all the analyzed novels. The narration of this process is interestingly enough also realized in a comparable way in all the novels from the corpus, which is the reason why I would like to pay further attention to this in the analysis. Firstly, as already mentioned, there is always a **breakpoint** in which the character realizes she does not feel comfortable in her present situation. She becomes aware of the discrepancy between what she thought to be/become and what she actually is/became. That happens in all six cases through an external impetus. The I-narrator (or to be more specific, the unconscious of the I-narrator) is reminded of a traumatic experience which happened in her past through an object, a person, or a situation. In none of the analyzed novels, however, does the I-narrator immediately remember the reason of her trauma, since it has been negated by and suppressed for years in her unconscious. Once the process of remembering and pronouncing has started the I-narrator realizes that the crucial moment in her personal/family history that needs to be remembered and pronounced has something to do with an **object**. This object represents a key to her past and symbolizes that what has been forgotten or suppressed. This object (or set of objects in the case of Van Niekerk's *Agaat*) works as a helper or motor in the narration and helps the I-narrator to re-remember the traumatising moment from her personal/family history and herewith to accept this trauma with no longer having the need to suppress this. Only when she is willing and ready to admit this, the reconciliation with the character's own past can be done, and the search of her own identity can be substantiated. By fully accepting the existence of a traumatising experience in her past the I-narrator is able to understand her feeling of discomfort and inconvenience in her present (postcolonial) situation and position in the society (towards other people in the society, the public with which her identity has to be interrogated thus). The **act of reconciliation** with the personal and/or family past will be the third narrative moment we will take a closer look at in this analysis. This narrative moment comes, logically, at the end of the narration, when the suppressed trauma has been rediscovered, pronounced, accepted and absorbed.

### 3.2. *Psychoanalysis*

In the following part I will be using a psychoanalytic approach, or to be more specific some psychoanalytic elements, to find out more about the analyzed characters, their motivations and behaviour. Before I can do so, a little theoretical detour should be done, in order to prevent possible misunderstandings. The relationship of feminist (literary)

theory and psychoanalysis has namely a long and complex history. Psychoanalysis can be understood (used) in a number of ways within feminist theory, among others as an analysis of the patriarchal system, or in the theory of the subject when the individual is cultivated in order to be included in the social order, which is mainly based on the masculine order. Without Freudian analysis, sex roles and their social values cannot be seen as ideological/political effects, consequences of the reproduction of power relations. I will be using the concept of psychoanalysis mostly in the sense of a form of therapy or talking cure, as a process of finding words for suppressed emotions and trauma's and healing through pronouncing these words. However, also other meanings and connotations of psychoanalytical concept, especially the semiotical, are overtly used in the text. Furthermore we cannot forget that psychoanalysis, among other, is a theory explaining how the subject comes into being, which is very important for this project in two different ways. Firstly it is essential for the construction of the I-narrators and their personal development, and secondly, but not less important, for the novels as such, and the message these novels spread for "our reality". The affects (emotions) the subjects have are in paradigmatic compliance with what we feel and how we experience ourselves (in "our reality"). There is a direct connection between what people do/think and what is being told/narrated, i.e. which stories/plots/narratives are available in the public/mainstream discourse. A subject tries to understand her/himself by identification with an existing story. Therefore the number of possible identities (positions one can take in) is limited by the number of available narratives in which one can describe her/his particular position. By creating a new subject, offering a concept of 'the subject' that differs a lot from what has been till now/then thought as possible, contemporary postcolonial women's writing opens new possibilities for ways the subject is thought about in contemporary society. Apart from that, the way the stories of the novels are narrated resembles a psychoanalytical treatment with the moment of realization, process of remembering and pronouncing, and finally the moment of reconciliation. Also, when coming closer to the crucial moment which has been the reason of their discomfort, the I-narrators fall into repetition, while trying to omit the inevitable moment of acknowledging the problem. The characters of the I-narrators in the corpus are furthermore constructed in a way that actually puts them in a kind of "analytic situation" in two different ways. Firstly the characters are put in this psychoanalytic setting by their authors, in order to enable understanding of the characters for the readers. Secondly, the characters put themselves in such a setting knowing that this will

enable themselves to discover the reason of their discomfort in the current situation. In all the six cases, the I-narrators undergo in the course of the narration a process which we could consider as a psychoanalytical session with themselves, in order to find out the reason of the above mentioned discrepancy between their reckoned identity (and position in the society) and the real situation. They subjugate themselves to an auto-analysis to understand their uncomfortable feeling of non-belonging. Herma in *Sleuteloog* even writes her feelings down for herself, clearly aware that her notes are of no use to anyone else (Haasse 2002: 49). Milla in *Agaat* attempts to do the very same thing, trying to rewrite her former diaries, but due to her disease it is done only in her mind. The act of writing is in both cases clearly connected with the process of becoming a subject. We also come back here to psychoanalysis as “talking cure” – if we let people talk, things do come into being, new meanings are created (since named). This is closely connected with the Lacanian notion of ‘the self’ encoded in the language. For Lacan, language structures not only our conscious social life, but our unconscious life as well. According to him

“(…) by studying a subject’s dreams and speech patterns (including the studying of particular figures of speech or slips of the tongue), one can illuminate features of the split in the subject’s imaginary register.”  
(Makaryk 1993: 398).

In the case of the six analyzed characters we witness a slow process of becoming aware and then finally understanding. While writing (Herma in *Sleuteloog*), talking to their analyst (Mina/Amelie in *De verstotene*), their friends (Helena in *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat*), strangers (Ada in *Pelican Bay*) or simply to themselves (Milla in *Agaat*) the I-narrators experience a journey back in time, into their unconscious, and with the help of this discover the reason for their identity crisis. Interestingly enough, most of the analyzed characters visit or consider visiting a psychoanalyst themselves to help them out of the uncomfortable situation in which they find themselves. They also use psychoanalytic vocabulary to speak about their situation, and to analyze their own position. This is another reason why some knowledge of the concept of psychoanalysis is required for the full understanding of the novels in the corpus. Herma in *Sleuteloog* for example mentions a Freudian slip when thinking about the reasons why she cannot (or does not want to) find the key of her ebony chest:



*“Een van de redenen waarom het niet-vinden van de sleutel een freudiaanse Fehlleistung van mij kan zijn, is deze: dat er in mijn kist een schoolschrift van Dee ligt, met dagboekantekeningen die onze vriendschap – of wat ik daarvoor hield – op losse schroeven hebben gezet.” (Haasse 2002: 130)*

*One of the reasons why the not-finding of the key from the chest can be a Freudian Fehlleistung is this: it contains Dee’s school notebook with diary entries that have shaken our friendship entirely – or at least what I considered to be our friendship. (my translation)*

Ada in *Pelican Bay* has been treated by a psychiatrist as a child when her parents thought she was not coping with the appearance of another child in the family. She also remembers this moments later when she tries to understand precisely what her attitude towards her brother actually has been (Noordervliet 2002: 200). Mina/Amelie in *De verstotene* is seeing a psychotherapist on the advice of her general practitioner. The sessions with the therapist, and the moments she remembers (though does not always mention to the therapist) are of crucial importance in her personal development, and in the process of remembering and uncovering the suppressed moments from her personal past. The therapist is also the only person Mina/Amelie is willing to tell about her Moroccan background. When she finds out at the end that she has actually turned her back to her sister (and not the other way round as she made herself to believe) Mina/Amelie runs to her therapist (El Bezaz 2006: 246). Milla in *Agaat* has also been seeing a doctor because of her nerves, and has been on medication. Later Milla suspects Agaat of drugging her with her own medicine in situations when Agaat does not want to be disturbed or distracted by her master/mother. Helena Verbloem in *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat* is a number of times advised to see a psychotherapist. She refuses to do that, mostly because of self-protection, since she is sensing what the therapist would probably say to her. She admits that she knows that the psychoanalyst would imply that behind the loss of the shells is an earlier (and greater) loss, but seems to know that she would not be able to digest the truth yet. Nomsa/Nancy in *’n Stringetjie blou krale* did in the first place consult a psychotherapist and also psychiatrist when trying to get rid of her nightmares. It is of a great importance for the narration, as well as for the story as such, that Nomsa/Nancy finally finds the answer after consulting a sangoma, a native healer. As her own identity is rooted in two different (and at the beginning mutually excluding) cultures, her cure is also finally realized with the help of a combination of the traditional Xhosa and the Western/modern medicine. To sum up, all the I-narrators are, or in the course of the narration become, aware of their

psychical/psychological issues. They search for professional help, are advised to do so, or consider that as liable option. Whether they finally make the decision to ask for help of a psychotherapist or not, is not important. It is however important for this project that they have conscious awareness of the problem they have with their personal position and are willing to do something about it. Among the characters from the corpus Herma Warner, the I-narrator of *Sleuteloog*, seems to be the most emotionally/psychically stable, partly because of her higher age that enables her to create distance and approach her problems with perspective, something which e.g. Mina/Amelie from *De verstotene* would not be capable of yet. Even Herma, however, has doubts about the state of her mind and questions her memory and (un)conscious, especially at the beginning of her narration (Haasse 2002: 58, 61, ...).

The analysis that will be done further in the text might on first sight look like a classical psychoanalytic critical approach. I am aware that the analyzed characters are textual constructs, but believe also that psychoanalytical critical approach to these characters can reveal a lot about the contemporary society. After all, they have been created by authors – people living in the contemporary postcolonial society, with “real life experience” of it. The literary characters that are analyzed within this project do get their meaning thanks to their connectedness with the contemporary society. Even though the analyzed characters are fictional, the situation is not that different from what happens during a psychoanalytical session or an identity crisis in “our/this reality”. Furthermore, the logic of psyche (the language of the unconscious, thus) works exactly the same way by fictional characters as for living individuals. This is also the reason why we, as readers, can identify with the literary characters of the novels we read, and have no problems with understanding of what we might call “their mind”. Their problems and the crisis they have to face are recognizable and understandable for the readers. Also, we have to keep in mind that Freud himself used literature as basis for his theories of human psyche and found it therefore a usable material. It seems almost unnecessary to emphasize that literary works had a large impact on the forming of Freud’s theories. Freudian psychoanalysis also had, and still has, a great impact on literary works, and the way we produce meaning out of them. Theory and literature do influence each other, which is also an important point I would like to make with this project, arguing that contemporary women’s literature is informed by postcolonial and third wave feminist theories and applies these in practice, offering a new (and different)

concept of ‘the subject’. As I would like to show further, through the works of this project’s corpus (and I would like to argue that this phenomenon definitely is not limited to these six novels) contemporary women’s writers have written themselves out of the Oedipal plot, they do not fall in the trap of the father – son narrative (as it was often the case by the previous generations of women writers) and instead of that come with a new notion of womanhood and motherhood.

### **3.3. Analysis**

Let us take a closer look on the outlined three steps on the way searching own identity the I-narrators make in the course of the narration – the breakpoint, the object connected with the trauma from the past, and the act of reconciliation. Although the writers and their narrative strategies differ, we will also be able to find interesting conjunctions and similarities. As was also the case with plots of the novels in the corpus, the recurring pattern in the narrative structure suggests that this phenomenon might be wide-spread.

The following analysis will handle each of the above-mentioned narrative moments separately. Exactly as was done in the previous part, when introducing the novels in the corpus and their characters, the I-narrators, I will proceed novel by novel. A short conclusion will be provided after each narrative moment in order to sum up the most notable information gained by the analysis. This analysis will be then be followed by a short outline of the notion of motherhood in the analyzed writings, since that seems to be one of the most important moments in the novels of the corpus. On the concept of motherhood we can also observe the greatest narratological shift in comparison with women’s writings from previous generations.

#### **3.3.1. The breakpoint**

##### **3.3.1.1. Sleuteloog**

Herma Warner in *Sleuteloog* is made to think about her past, especially on the history of her friendship with Dee Mijers, or Mila Wychinska as she preferred to be called later, as a reaction to a letter from the journalist Bart Moorland. In this letter the journalist makes an assumption that they might have been schoolmates and asks Herma for any details about the childhood of the human rights activist. Herma states in the very beginning of the narration that she would never have begun writing and remembering her past without this letter (Haasse 2002: 7). The letter made her think back on her

colonial past which she would rather (un)consciously omit. She also seems immediately discomfited by this request and the necessity to place herself back in time. Herma has also doubts not only about whether she can provide any useful information to the journalist but, as already mentioned earlier, also doubts her memory. Even though she clearly has information about Dee (Mila Wychinska) no one else in the Netherlands can provide, she questions it and claims that the life of Dee, as well as hers, has been determined by factors that are dated and of no importance any more. As we can see, Herma instantly makes the connection between Dee and her/their childhood. Even though Herma has known Dee also as a grown up woman, her first memories and associations are from the shared childhood. Furthermore, Herma seems to deny the adult part of their lives since it would inevitably point at the relationship between Dee and Taco (I will come to this aspect later on). Dee clearly stands for the cultural background of colonial Dutch Indies where they have both grown up: Herma immediately implies a characteristic they have both acquired as a result of the childhood in the culturally heterogenous colony, namely the rootlessness and inability to completely take root somewhere.

*“Alle stadia van afscheid nemen en ontwennen heb ik doorlopen. Wat ik in mijn geboorteland zintuiglijk en emotioneel beleefd heb, ligt verankerd op de bodem van mijn bewustzijn, het bepaalt mij, maar ik kan er niet meer bij. Dat ik nergens ooit helemaal thuishoor heb ik aanvaard als mijn natuurlijke staat van zijn.”* (Haasse 2002: 7)

*I have got past all phases of taking leave and becoming unaccustomed. What I have sensually and emotionally experienced in my homeland lies imbedded at the bottom of my consciousness, it determines me, but I cannot reach for it. I have accepted the fact that I never can completely belong somewhere as a natural state of my existence.* (my translation)

Even though Herma seems perfectly contented with her situation and culturally “rooted” in her surroundings (she also occupies an advantageous social position, due to her academic career path and good financial conditions) she apparently still feels insecure, unstable and culturally misplaced. Herma longs for the country where she was born, though it psychically does not exist anymore, as well as for her friendship with Dee, who has thrown away this part of her personal past. With this Dee/Mila not only erased the friendship as such but also negated the whole notion of a shared childhood, cultural background and roots. For Herma, who on the contrary has based her identity and the notion of herself on this cultural background (e.g. as a theme of her scientific

research), this act could not be understood, nor accepted, since it would destroy her own sense of herself. The letter from Moorland makes her realize that which she has unconsciously felt for a long time already and at the end she decides to start the process and finally pronounce the facts she has been avoiding for years.

Apart from the problematic question of Herma's 'cultural origin', Herma omits the topic of Dee/Mila because of the relationship between Herma's husband Taco and Dee. Even though Herma has been given a number of clues in the course of the years, she always suppressed that idea, and now she that is made to bring up her memories of Dee again, she is probably unconsciously sensing that she might not be able to negate this part of Dee's life in her mind anymore. She however also senses that this unconscious knowledge of her husband's infidelity has to be brought into light, so that she can "move on" and close this painful chapter of her life story. Acknowledging the relationship that has existed between her husband and her best friend also makes the final reconciliation with Dee possible. When Herma does not deny this relationship anymore, she can much more easily understand the distance Dee tried to create. Herma understands the uneasy situation in which Dee has been kept by Taco's inability to decide and choose one of them (Haasse 2002: 172).

In addition to the obvious start in the form of the above mentioned letter by Moorland we can also discover a more symbolic event that makes/forces Herma Warner to return to the past in her memories and occupy her mind with events that have been forgotten for years. This is the fact that Herma stands at the point of moving to a retirement home for elderly people. This situation forces her literally to sort out and clean up her belongings and choose a few she wants (can) take with her to the home. During the course of the narration we follow Herma as she sorts out, classifies, throws away and puts in place her material belongings, as well as (and much more importantly) her memories.

### **3.3.1.2. Pelican Bay**

The memories of Ada in *Pelican Bay* are challenged by the death of her father. The description of Ada's feelings towards her father imply that the relationship is cold, reserved and far from ideal but there is one concrete thing the father did that started the emotional turmoil in Ada. Shortly before he dies (the nearing death being clearly the motivation) he criticizes Ada's behaviour towards her adoptive brother more than

twenty years ago. After a long time in which the unsuccessful adoption of the Antillean boy in the Van Wetering family was a completely forbidden topic her father suddenly breaks the silence and comes with a story quite different from what Ada remembers.

*“Als een elektrische schok voer het schrille ‘je broer’ door mijn lijf. Het jarenlange zwijgen was doorbroken. Dood breekt wet.”* (Noordervliet 2002: 36)

*The poignant words ‘your brother’ go through my body as an electric shock. The years of silence have been broken through. The death breaks the law.*  
(my translation)

The father finally, and unexpectedly, breaks the silence that reigned around the topic for years. The parental failure in the case of the little Antonio also seems to be one of the reasons for the break-up of Ada’s parents, even though they would never admit it themselves. This unsuccessful adoption experiment, and the whole existence of Antonio was forbidden to talk about. Now when the father at the end pronounces the name of her adoptive brother, Ada is shocked by the context in which it is said, since she remembers a different version of events. Ada, remembering only vaguely the narrow connection she and her have shared, suddenly has to face an accusation of mistreatment of her younger adoptive brother, and even physical threats and violence. Ada’s father blames her for Antonio’s disappearance the day of his eighteenth birthday, claiming that she has chased him away with her inability to accept another child in the family. He even says that there is something he has to forgive her before he dies, and that he feels guilty that he has not been able to do that much earlier. *“Ik wil over een paar dingen met je praten”*(Noordervliet 2002: 36), I want to speak to you about something, her father opens the uncomfortable discussion. Ada’s first expectations are that her father wants to apologize for his misbehaviour during her childhood and for being “a bad father” and she also tries to avoid the topic (clearly not wanting to be reminded of her traumatic childhood) by replying that everyone makes mistakes and that there is nothing he should apologize for. In her mind she remarks to herself that she would feel very disappointed if it happened since it had to have happened much earlier (Noordervliet 2002: 37).

At the very same occasion the father also hands over important family documents to Ada, among others the adoption papers of her adoptive brother, herewith transposing the burden of colonial guilt/shame that lies in the Van Wetering family onto Ada (I will come to this point later in the text). It is however above all the fact that she has been

accused of bullying her adoptive brother that makes Ada return to the suppressed past in her mind and to try to reconstruct the whole story again. The accusation shakes Ada in such a measure, mainly because she remembers the events in a very different way, that she refuses to visit him again and not much later he dies. The description of this last visit of Ada to her father, shortly before his death, and the last dialogue between them can be found in the novel under the title 'Prologue 3' (Noordervliet 2002: 33). It is one of the reasons for her visit to the island that Ada mentions to herself while being interrogated by the (customs') police at the airport upon her arrival on the island. The other (previous two) prologues describe the discovery of the murdered body of Fanny Fenwick and the arrival of the adoptive Antillian boy in the Van Wetering family at the beginning of the 1970's. These three moments together form the motivation for Ada to undertake the journey to the island. However, logically, the newest occasion must have been decisive, actually combining all of them.

On a more unconscious level Ada is also reminded of her suppressed experience of sexual abuse in her childhood by her parents and their family friends. As readers, however, we come to know this fact much later in the text, together with Ada when her adoptive brother reminds her of her suppressed experiences of sexual abuse during their childhood. Only then, when Ada is made to recollect her childhood memories, the father's mistreatment is known to its full extent and the reserved behaviour of Ada towards her father and her unwillingness to come anywhere near his person makes complete sense for the reader. The visualization of her father's penis Ada has in her mind when coming to visit him shortly before he dies also suddenly gets a new meaning. Ada compares it to a dark-brown dead mole, adding it is unthinkable that it ever stood erect (Noordervliet 2002: 36), implying his inability to hurt her anymore. This is, however, not completely true since she can still be hurt emotionally and psychically. At this moment Ada still has a long way to go before she accepts her past (family history) and cannot be hurt by it any more.

### **3.3.1.3. De verstotene**

The breakpoint in *De verstotene* is also connected with another family member of the I-narrator. Even though the narration suggests differently, the real reason for Mina/Amelie's breakdown is an accidental meeting with her sister in a tram. The narration, as already mentioned, is opened with the break-up between Mart and

Mina/Amelie in New York. Mina/Amelie does not seem to be that shocked by the fact that her year-long partner leaves her without any explanation. After their return from New York (and the same night Mart moves out) she simply goes back to work and to her normal everyday life. She even has to state, not without some satisfaction, that she did not even think of her ex-partner at all at work the day after the break-up (El Bezaz 2006: 44). The separation from her year-long partner, and therefore the fall in social status, advantageous position and financial security that are directly connected to him certainly prepared the ground, so to speak, for the emotional breakdown which has been a result of the accidental, though hoped for, meeting with her sister. The end of the relationship with Mart cut Mina/Amelie off from most of the aspects on which she has been basing her identity since she became Amelie Celine. Because of that she basically has nothing else to lean on than her silenced/negated roots. Without Mart's social status, expensive art and decorative objects and apartment at a good address (we also cannot forget the simple existence of a heterosexual relationship with a white autochthonous man, as a white autochthonous woman) Mina is not, cannot be, Amelie Celine anymore. Therefore she is forced to face her background, those aspects of her identity she has been (un)consciously forgetting/negating for years again. When she unexpectedly, in this moment of vulnerability, exposed without the identity layers of Amelie Celine, runs into her sister on her way back from work, unable to base her notion of herself on anything else than her origin, this event works as the final straw, the catalyser that reminds her of her painful (and unresolved) past.

*“Een gesluerde jonge vrouw liep door het gangpad. Haar helderbruine blik kruiste de mijne. De schok die door me heen ging, voelde ik tot diep in mijn hart. Mijn maag trok zich samen en felle steken doorkruisten mijn borst alsof mijn adem de weg kwijt was. Ik zag dat ook zij was geschrokken.”* (El Bezaz 2006: 47)

*A young woman in a veil went down the aisle. Her light brown eyes crossed with mine. I felt the shock that went through me till deep in my heart. My stomach shrunk and sharp stings pierced my chest as if my breath has lost its path. I saw that she also was in shock.* (my translation)

Mina/Amelie was, of course, shaken by the unexpected break-up with partner who has planned to leave her a longer time ago without her noticing anything. With losing of her partner she has also lost most of her societal position which she was striving for since the time she fled from her family. It is however the moment when her eyes accidentally



crosses with the eyes of her sister in the tram that she realizes that something has gone wrong and something has to be said aloud. From this moment Mina/Amelie starts acting irrationally (for the external public) and starts to feel discomfort about her contemporary position in the society, living a life of an autochthonous person, even though she has Moroccan roots about which she had not told anybody, not even her partner Mart or her best friend Elsa.

For a long time in the course of the narration the reader is made to believe that the meeting with her sister reminds Mina/Amelie of how she was mistreated by her family and makes her reconsider her Moroccan background and, together with that, her silenced Muslim identity. As we come to know later Mina/Amelie has been keeping letters from her sister at the bottom of the shoe box together with the family album but absolutely suppressed the existence of the letters from/in her memory. The sudden encounter might remind the unconscious of Mina/Amelie of her behavior towards her sister. We only understand at almost the complete end of the narration that the Moroccan/Muslim background and the mistreatment by own family have not been the only silenced aspects in the past of Mina Boughari, we realize that she did not behave the way she made herself (and together with her the readers) believe she did. Mina/Amelie is not simply an innocent victim of a rigid societal group that has chased her away; she also has done “bad things” and was actually herself the reason why the communication with her sister came to a dead end. Mina/Amelie has been protecting herself from the feelings of shame and guilt, unable to bear the fact that she has left her sister on her own. From a great part Mina/Amelie can only blame herself for being alone at the end of the narration since her sister claims that she is dead to her. Becoming aware of this, together with the unwanted pregnancy from a (cursed) Jewish man, is the actual reason why the I-narrator at the end of *De verstopene* decides to commit suicide.

#### **3.3.1.4. Afaat**

While it is new life in the case of Mina/Amelie, the breakpoint that makes the I-narrator in/of *Afaat* reconsider her past and recall and narrate the decisive moments of her life is clearly her disease and nearing death. She finally realizes that she does not have much time left and feels the need to do things she has been postponing for a long time already, one of which is the real story of Afaat’s arrival at Grootmoedersdrift and the act of taking her away from her biological parents and family. Due to the character of the

event (and Milla's disease) we cannot speak about one specific moment in the course of narration. In the case of Milla there is more a continuous process of becoming aware of her own mortality and the actual imminence of her death. As her own body slowly deteriorates Milla slowly comes to realize that she will inevitably die. Together with losing control of her own body, the ability to walk, speak, write etc. Milla realizes the necessity of putting things in order.

She knows that her version of the story, as presented by her to the surrounding community and preserved in her diaries, is not right and that it has to be corrected before it is too late. This awareness also might influence the decision of Milla to stay at the farm, claiming that she wants to be taken care of by Agaat, and that Agaat later, when Milla cannot speak (for) herself, Agaat is the one who makes decisions.

*“Ek het geteken. Sy het geteken. Niemand kan ons dwing nie. Dis ons twee wat aan mekaar gewaag is.”* (Van Niekerk 2004: 43)

*“I have signed, she has signed. Nobody can force us. It's the two of us who risk each other.”* (Van Niekerk 2006: 36)

After hearing her diagnosis Milla, with the approval of Agaat, made the decision and, as she puts it herself, took the risk, the risk of being hundred percent dependant on Agaat, and Agaat being absolutely dependant on her. Not that this situation would be that new to these two women, however, by signing an official document that actually for the first time legalizes and openly declares their mutual dependency both Milla and Agaat make the first step in becoming fully aware of it and accepting it. Milla is absolutely conscious of the fact that with/through this agreement she and Agaat are “condemned” to each other.

When the disease is proclaimed by Milla, both women take actions and prepare the house for what will happen there in the near future - a room at the ground floor is cleaned up, doors are removed etc. Within these preparations euphemistically called “*die groot opruim*”, the great clean-up (Van Niekerk 2004: 20) Milla also asks Agaat to burn her diaries as the last effort to escape from her past, and the proofs (black on white, in her own handwriting) of her personal faults. Agaat however does not do what she has been asked to. She will later use these diaries to confront Milla with the made-up (hi)stories in her diaries. Hereby she will actually help her to tell (find the words) for the real story, to accept who she really was/became. This, at the end, will help Milla to

become reconciled with her past, and with Agaat who has been a crucial part of her personal history, and identity.

It seems that Milla is aware of the painful and lengthy path that lies ahead of them, but knows that it has to be done. They both have agreed, taking the last chance they have to be together. Interestingly enough, in the case of *Agaat*, the catalyser, talking about of the incurable disease thus, does not mean a breakpoint only for the I-narrator Milla. Also Agaat with whom (the identity of) Milla is narrowly connected understands this occasion as a reminder of things that have to be done/said when there is still someone to tell these things to, someone who can make a change. While Milla takes the chance to make her own image better, and to rewrite her diaries (and memories), Agaat seems to understand the disease of her master/mother as a possibility to take revenge on Milla and the years of her absolute dominance. She subjects Milla to precisely same treatments, behaviour, educational strategies, punishments etc. that Agaat had to undergo under Milla's auspices when she was a child. Her exact repetition of Milla's deeds takes almost surreal and ridiculous proportions. It seems as if Agaat was laughing at Milla by taking such good care of her, fulfilling all the tasks with incredible precision, meeting fully the assigned standards. She even sleeps in the hallway, even though she does not have to (Van Niekerk 2004: 23). The question is whether it is to tease and mock Milla, reminding her of her deeds in the past, or real affection and care. As readers, we however never get a clear answer to that, since Agaat stays without her own voice, nor focalizes during the whole narration.

As already mentioned above, Milla understands the determination of her disease as a last chance to tell/write the history of her, and implicitly of Agaat, again, and this time right.

*“Nou moet ek begin. Nou moet ek skryf. Nou moet ek dit die moeite werd maak. Wat ek ontken het.*

*Ek maak my op. Ek soek in my na aangryppunte. Raaigras, klaaslouwbos, watteltakke om my te anker teen die afgrond. Kanniedode. Ek voel in my.*

*Daar is nog vegetasie, daar is water, daar is grond.*

*Om te begin het ek 'n aanloop nodig. Die aanlopp is net so belangrik soos die daad self.*

*(...)*

*Maar my aanloop hier is nie myne nie. Hy is vir my uitgestippel op die oppervlaktes van die kamer soos Agaat dit ingerig het. Niks is aan die*

*toeval oorgelaat nie. Die dood is haar doel. Sy het dit uitstekend voorberei. Self sou ek dit nie beter kon doen nie.”* (Van Niekerk 2004: 18 – 19)

*“Now I must begin. Now I must write. Now I must make it worthwhile. What I unleashed.*

*I gather my resources. I try to find handholds inside myself. Rye grass, klaaslow grass, wattle branches to anchor myself against the precipice. Diehard species. I feel around inside me. There’s still vegetation, there’s water, there’s soil.*

*To start I need a preamble. The preamble is just as important as the action itself.*

(...)

*But the preamble here is not mine. It’s been marked out for me on the surfaces of the room as Agaat has arranged it. Nothing has been left to chance. Death is her objective. She has prepared excellently. I couldn’t have done it better myself.”* (Van Niekerk 2006: 15 – 16)

Milla is aware of the necessity to write the real story down, to talk about the silenced moments of her (and Agaat’s) life. She knows that she has to start when she is still physically able and that she is running out of time. Milla is however also conscious of the fact that Agaat will be the helper in this process, and that it will actually be Agaat who will decide the rules. Milla is aware of the ‘setting’ and understands Agaat’s agenda of revenge. This time Milla wants to do it right, making the right preparations before the work can be done, exactly as a good Afrikaner farmer would do. In the quoted passage we can clearly see how Milla feels bound to be with the “her ground”, the earth of Grootmoedersdrift when comparing herself to the soil. We could also claim that she compares herself and Agaat to the “*diehard species*”, those which stay in the ground in any circumstances. The objective – the death – is clear to both of them, and they in their free will decided to get there together and face it as two excellent examples of real Afrikaner women.

### **3.3.1.5. Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat**

On contrast to Agaat where the ‘breakpoint’ comes slowly and gradually, the catalyzing moment is very clear in *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat*. It is the break-in in Helena’s apartment and the subsequent theft of her shell collection that makes Helena face her past and the painful loss she had to suffer earlier. As it also has been the case in the previously analyzed novels, the breaking point moments are placed very early within the narration, and the emotional trauma from the past which this breaking moment will

remind the I-narrator will be revealed (both for the I-narrator as for the reader) close to the end of the narration when she has already undergone the whole “talking cure” process of finding words for events that have never been put into words before.

The impact of the loss of the shells, and the potential trauma from the past that yet has to be discovered, is clear from Helena’s first reaction to the break-in. When Helena comes back to her apartment she immediately knows that it has been broken into. Her first (and only) concern are the shells:

*“Ek gee nie om wat daar gesteel is nie, ek doen nie eens die moeite om te kyk nie – wat my hart breek is my skulpe! (...) ek het hulle oor die jare met groot omsigtigheid uitgekies en aangekoop. Ek hoor my eie stem kerm: Ek kan dit nie gló nie! Die geluid kom diep uit my keel, uit ’n plek waar woorde nie gewoonlik gevorm word nie; ek voel hoe my keel vernou en die klein beentjies in my strottehoof pynlik teenmekaar aandruk.”* (Winterbach 2006: 10 – 11)

*“I do not even take the trouble to see if anything has been stolen – what breaks my heart is my shells! (...) I have selected and bought them with great care. I hear my own voice moaning: I cannot believe this! The sound comes from deep in my throat, from a place where words are not usually formed. I can feel my throat constricting and the small bones in my larynx pressing painfully against one another.”* (Winterbach 2008: 10-11)

Even though Helena can get a lot of aesthetic pleasure in objects around her, she is not interested in the material damage that has been done. The only thing that really interests her (and shakes her emotionally) are the shells. Her private space has been ruptured and offended in a very brutal way – one of the burglars has defecated on her carpet – and still Helena does not even seem to care. While she simply cleans up and washes the carpet, she is not psychically strong enough to go to her bedroom and face the real damage of her shell collection. Helena experiences sorrow from the loss of the shells as physical pain. The sound she produces seems to come from deeper, rudimental layers of her person. The pain is so deep and sharp that it cannot be described in human words or sounds. Here, again, we could speak of Freudian ‘Urverdrängung’, the suppression of the unrepresentable. Helena clearly could not find vocabulary to speak about the emotional trauma from the past, therefore she replaced it (filled the blank space) with the shell collection. Now it has been partially stolen, its consistency violated, Helena is made to face the verbally unrepresentable trauma again, and finally find words to describe it, to pronounce what has been unconsciously haunting her for years, this

emotional trauma is also the reason she was not able to create and sustain a truly emotional relationship with another person.

The event that preceded this violation of Helena's privacy and emotional space is moving away from her partner and the stable life she has had there. In a way this two-step process of firstly misplacement and then the unexpected breakpoint resembles the way Mina/Amelie in *De verstotene* has been made to face her past. Firstly, Helena, as well as Mina/Amelie, has been displaced from her natural (and familiar) environment and then exposed to the impact of the real world. Due to her position as an assistant to the Afrikaans linguistic project Helena becomes aware of her isolated position. Moving apart from parting from her year-long partner Frans de Waard and her work at the project of words disappearing in Afrikaans make Helena aware of her particular position (as white Afrikaans speaker) in contemporary South-African society and make her feel marginalized.

#### **3.3.1.6. 'n Stringetjie blou krale**

The narrator of *'n Stringetjie blou krale* also has to fight for her own position (with)in South-African society. Nomsa/Nancy is shaken out of her daily routine by nightmares in which she is chased by a creature up a hill. The dreams that started with a vague feeling of fear get more elaborate and longer every time Nomsa/Nancy has had it. In the course of the time the uncertain feeling of fear evolves into a whole scenario in which she is chased up a hill by a black person who tells her in Xhosa to come home. In these dreams Nomsa/Nancy hurts herself from falling on her knees, running with her bare feet on rocks and between prickly bushes. When she wakes up, usually shaken by her husband who cannot stand her screaming, she really feels pain in her knees and feet, has scratches on her arms and her hair is plucked out.

As already mentioned earlier, it is in a great part the attitude of her husband Bennie, who cannot stand being waken up every night by the scream of his wife, that makes Nomsa/Nancy search for help and leave her home till she gets better. When the medicine she got from her psychiatrist does not help, Nomsa/Nancy looks for shelter with her (adoptive) parents Jan and Siena who then contact the sangoma. The process of remembering is here in *'n Stringetjie blou krale* the most guided and helped by a second person of all the novels. Like the analyst that has been working with Mina/Amelie in *De*

*verstotene*, the native healer also leads Nomsa/Nancy towards the suppressed part of her personal history by a combination of listening and asking the right questions.

As Nomsa/Nancy realizes later, the dreams actually start occurring after she went to a workshop in Bisho about cultural heritage and preserving culture and traditions in the westernizing South Africa where she was representing the college she works at. Nomsa/Nancy is amazed by how much she actually has enjoyed the event, admitting that she appreciated every day of the workshop. She feels most intrigued by the last speaker of the last day who pleads for pride in own traditions and of where people came from. Nomsa/Nancy is fascinated by his way of presentation, jumping with pride and excitement in native clothing, apparently self-conscious and self-assured.

*“Daardie aand kon ek nie aan die slaap raak nie, maar die het my nie gepla nie. Ek kon nog nooit gou in ’n vreemde kooi aan die slaap raak nie. En toe ek wel in vroeë oggendure aan die slaap raak, het ek die eerste keer die nagmerrie gekry. En binnein die nagmerrie kon ek nog die langsteelpyp se rook ruik.”* (Dido 2000: 138)

*I couldn't fall asleep that night, but that didn't bother me. I have never been able to fall asleep immediately in other / different beds. And when I finally got some sleep in the early morning hours I have had the nightmare for the first time. And in that nightmare I could still smell the smoke of the long pipe.* (my translation)

Apart from the message that clearly addressed Nomsa/Nancy's unconscious there was also the pipe he has constantly smoking which has shaken her. I will return to the meaning of the pipe and its importance for the process of remembering in Nomsa/Nancy later, later in the text. After being confronted with a Xhosa who is so comfortable with his origin, so proud of his roots, so aware of his traditions, Nomsa/Nancy is made to face her own 'betrayal' of her own family and people by deleting this part out of her personal history. This fact, however, she is only able to recover three months later after numerous questions by Sisi MaRhadebe, the sangoma, and her herbs. Only when she is fully aware of her suppressed Xhosa roots Nomsa/Nancy fully understands which impact the passionate presentation of the old Xhosa man about cultural heritage, roots and preserving the tradition has had on her unconscious, and why she actually felt so reached by this particular speech.

### 3.3.1.7. Conclusion

We have looked briefly at each novel and took a look on the breakpoints in the narrative that make the I-narrators return to their past and try to tell their story, something that they have never done before themselves. They try to find words for an experience for which words have to be found out yet. In all six cases the I-narrators end up in a situation that gives them no other option than to face what they have been suppressing (not willing to see / name) till then. They become aware of the fact that they have to find words for their stories, and bring these stories into words in order to get a grip on themselves again. As already stated above, all the moments that the I-narrators have been made to reconsider themselves and their past have been caused externally. Some of the moments were unexpected and abrupt, e.g. the sudden meeting with the sister in *De verstopene*, some came about slowly, as it was the case in the slowly progressing disease of Mila in *Agaat* where no one decisive moment can be stated precisely. Some of the breakpoints had a ‘preparatory phase’ before that removed the self-protecting layers of made-up stories/identities (I would like to remind the reader here of the earlier connection discussed between identity and narrative) and left the I-narrator bare, exposed and prepared for the process that has to come. Therefore the reactions of the characters to this catalyst also differ. Ada and Mina/Amelie used the word “shock” in the description of the situation, Mina/Amelie, Helena and Nomsa/Nancy have experienced this moment of realizing with physical pain. In all the cases, however, the I-narrators were put into a situation by external events that woke their unconscious.

### 3.3.2. Objects connected to the identity crisis

Let us now concentrate on the second narrative moment which can be found in all the six novels of the corpus, namely the objects connected with the trauma from the past. By helping to “exhume”, to reveal the trauma these objects actually help the I-narrators to come into terms with themselves again, these objects help the I-narrators to find their identity, and consequently to find words to name this new, recovered, notion of self.

#### 3.3.2.1. Sleuteloog

The object that plays this above described significant role in Hella S. Haasse’s novel is an antique Indonesian ebony chest. The chest has been in Herma’s family since she can remember and always stood in her father’s study. Her father enjoyed to tell the story of how he got this beautiful antique piece from an assistant district chief of the Dutch



Indies colonial administration in exchange for his robust travel luggage with a zinc layer. The chest was actually a gift of friendship from an Indonesian aristocrat to Herma's father and as such it symbolizes the cooperation between East and the West, something with which Herma will be engaged a lot during her whole life.

*“Hij wilde niet van extra vergoeding weten, omdat, zoals hij zei, de ‘ziel’ van de kist geen geldelijke transactie verdroeg. Mijn vader begreep de wenk, en verzekerde hem dat er alleen goede dingen in bewaard zouden worden.”* (Haasse 2002: 117)

*He did not want to hear of any extra compensation, because, as he put it, the ‘soul’ of the chest would not bear any financial transactions. My father understood the hint and assured him that only good things will be stored in the chest.* (my translation)

Herma's father has been aware of the symbolic value of the chest and the antique piece has obtained a very special position in the family, containing important family documents of all kinds: a piece of newspaper with Herma's birth announcement, her school reports etc. It has actually contained the whole of Herma's life. Non has kept the chest, and very importantly all the documents and materials it contained, during the Second World War and later until the chest finally reached Herma at the beginning of the 1960s. Herma suspects that Non actually knew what the chest contains and that it would prove Dee's disloyalty to Herma (Haasse 2002: 131). It has also probably been Non who put the incriminate documents in the chest as if she wanted Herma to know.

Herma has not opened it since the death of her husband, almost seventeen years ago from the time when the narration takes place (Haasse 2002: 9). Herma did not even feel the need to open the chest in all those years since it has more of a symbolical meaning for her: the ebony chest was “*Indië*”, Dutch Indies, and all it meant. There seems to be another, unconscious reason why Herma actually never felt the need to open the chest since it contained, among other documents, also Dee's school notebook with diary entries that speak openly of her feelings of anger and jealousy towards Herma whom she scorned for her ingenuousness and “colour blindness” she could only afford because of her advantageous racial and social background.

Herma refers to the contents of the chest a number of times in the course of the narration, from the very beginning<sup>48</sup>. She uses the chest as an affirmation of the reliability of her narrative, not only to Moorland but above all to herself. She doubts her own memories and consciousness and always refers to the chest as the bearer of the absolute truth. The chest is also the theme of the last letter from Moorland to Herma which also closes the novel. In this last letter Moorland informs her that he managed to get the chest open, but there was nothing in there however. He also wants to let Herma know that a friend of his succeeded in translating the inscription on the eye of the key. It says:

“AL WAT JE OOIT ZAG OF HOORDE, AL WAT JE DACHT TE WETEN, IS NIET MEER DAT, MAAR ANDERS.” (Haasse 2002: 191-2, emphasis by author)

ALL YOU EVER SAW OR HEARD, ALL YOU THOUGHT TO KNOW, IS NOT THAT ANYMORE, BUT SOMETHING ELSE. (my translation)

This quote of the famous Sufi mystic poet Farid al-Din Attar could, even though placed at the very end of the narration, be the motto of the novel. “*Een staaltje van oosterse wijsheid!*”, what an example of Eastern/Oriental wisdom (Haasse 2002: 192), is Moorland’s comment on the quote. This is also the last line of his last letter to Herma Warner which forms an epilogue to the novel.

After Herma finally at the end of her narration verbalizes her fears and unconsciously sensed facts, Moorland manages to get the chest open, and finds out that it is empty. Her husband has apparently destroyed the documents during the last days before his death, probably because he wanted to protect Herma from the truth. He did not want his wife to know about the passion he felt for her best friend and the bitter feeling Dee had for Herma because she felt herself to be a “second rank” person in the colonial society. Even though he was actually the one who has caused the friendship between Herma and Dee to break up, by this deed Taco figuratively restored the order, he burned the documents speaking of Dee’s hatred of Herma and his passion for Dee, and hereby made the further existence of the friendship possible. There is nothing that would confirm Herma’s presumptions, no one whom she could ask. All she thought to know is

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<sup>48</sup> Herma refers to the chest for the first time on page 9 and refers to it regularly till the very end of her narration (page 187 out of 190). At the same page the narration of Herma ends, and is followed only by the letter from Moorland which closes the novel.

not that anymore, but something else. The materials to which she has been referring in the course of her narration have disappeared. But they are not needed any more since Herma can base what she is, her identity, on something other than documents from the past. She has found words to describe her position, the narrative of herself.

### 3.3.2.2. Pelican Bay

In Nelleke Noordervliet's *Pelican Bay* the object connected with the suppressed family history is a chest with the documents about Jacob Rivers and Ada's adoptive brother, both of them documents connected with her family's colonial past. The fact that both documents are stored/hidden together implies a similar position in the family discourse – the family is partially ashamed of what has happened (the documents need to be hidden) and at the same time proud of their colonial history (the documents have to be preserved and handed over to the next generation). The act of handing over the documents takes place at Ada's last visit to her father before his death, which has already been discussed earlier.

We come across the marine chest quite early in the narration when Ada comes to visit her father, dying of cancer.

*“Toen ik de deur van zijn huis opendeed, vergat ik mijn blik neer te slaan en stond ik oog in oog met mezelf. Betrapt. In de hal recht tegenover de buitendeur hing een levensgrote spiegel boven de schiepkist met de uitgesneden monogram van de Middelburgse Commercie Compagnie.”*  
(Noordervliet 2002: 33)

*When I opened the door, I forgot to divert my look and suddenly stood person to person with myself. Caught. In the hallway, just above the marine chest with the engraved monogram of the Trade Company of Middelburg, hang a full-length mirror opposite the door. (my translation)*

The mirror clearly stands for the image of Ada she is not wishing/willing to see. The image of herself in the mirror makes her feel uncomfortable, she cannot stand the sight of her own person. That points clearly to unsolved issues from the past, probably connected with sexuality, and embarrassment about her own body (and sexuality). Then she unnecessarily postpones the moment when she has to face her own father, spending a great amount of time in the kitchen. After she finally enters the room her father hands the documents over.

*“Alles zit hier in. Ook de papieren van ... je broer.”*

(...) *Hij overhandigde me de map.*” (Noordervliet 2002: 36)

*‘It’s all there. Also the papers from ... your brother.’*  
(...) *He handed the folder over.* (my translation)

Interestingly enough, Ada’s family added the official adoption papers of the Antillian boy to the marine chest, already containing the documents proving the colonial history of the family, and proving that the family “has right” to some land in the Antilles. This act not only removes the colonial evidence from sight but paradoxically puts both documents in the same context and gives them a new meaning. The fact that the father hesitates a while before he calls Antonio Ada’s brother should also be taken into consideration. Before he dies Ada’s father clearly feels the need to handle the old (and unresolved) family affairs. He breaks years of silence and again opens a topic which has been forbidden in the family for a long time. The burden of the colonial guilt (and shame) has been officially handed over to Ada. It is she now who has to deal with the family past. Ada actually has no other choice than to accept this task, which is also the reason why she heads to the Antilles.

At the end these above mentioned documents proving the colonial guilt of Ada’s family are exactly the same means that lead her to liberation and recovery since they make her meet her brother. After the last visit to her father has Ada been asking herself a lot of questions about her/their childhood. These documents enable her to look for her adoptive brother and ask him what the truth is. As already mentioned before, Antonio is at the beginning not willing to talk about the subject at all, he even avoids Ada on the island in order not to have to answer her questions. When he finally is able to talk, he reveals to (or reminds) Ada the sexual abuse of both of them as children and the maltreatment by their parents and the friends of their parents, exposing the children to sex and nudity which none of them could process. After remembering the events that happened during their childhood, including her being threatened with knife by the father, Ada remarks that neither she, nor her adoptive brother, has children. Implicitly she wants to say that none of them has been able to face up to their childhood abuse, and might even be scared that they would become the same as their parents have.

*“Het speeksel liep in mijn mond, ik kreeg kramp in mijn maag. Nee, natuurlijk was ik het niet vergeten. Ik had alleen maar gedacht dat ik het me verkeerd herinnerde, omdat ik een fantast was, een pathologische*

*leugenaar, zoals mama zei. Ik had het toegedekt met nog vreselijker herinneringen om mezelf af te leiden van die eerste ervaring weerloos te zijn. (...) Er brak iets in mijn hoofd. Er ontstond een trechter, een draaikolk waarin van alles wegzonk, alsof een stad verkrumelde op de rand van een scheur in de aarde. Gerommel klonk. Geraas. Mijn oren zaten dicht, mijn ogen namen de wereld niet meer waar, de druk in mijn schedel nam toe, mijn hart ontplofte, het leek op paniek, maar was er het tegenovergestelde van, zoals liefde en haat in hun hevigheid totaal anders maar niet van elkaar te onderscheiden zijn. Het was woede (...)*” (Noordervliet 2002 350 – 52)

*Water came into my mouth, I got cramps in my stomach. No, of course I didn't forget that. I've just thought that I remembered that wrong, because I was a phantast, a pathological liar as mama said. I've covered that with even worse memories in order to distract myself from the first experience of being defenceless. (...) Something broke in my head. A funnel emerged, a maelstrom where everything would be sucked in, as if a city fell in little pieces at the edge of a burst in the earth. I heard a rumble. Din. My ears were shut, my eyes didn't perceive the world around me anymore, the pressure in my skull grew, my heart exploded, it resembled panic, but it was the opposite of it. Like love and hatred cannot be differentiated from each other in their intensity. It was wrath (...).* (my translation)

Ada experiences this moment of remembering, as already pointed out before, in a very bodily way. The author describes the intense feeling Ada is having disturbingly literally, letting the reader empathize with the character. I will come to this intense presence of the bodily element later in the conclusion. What I would like to emphasize now is the impact this knowledge has on Ada. The I-narrator of *Pelican Bay* becomes aware of (or is made to realize) her childhood trauma quite late in the course of the narration, Antonio is actually only willing (or psychically prepared) to tell the whole truth to Ada only shortly before her departure. Therefore there is not much place left in the novel for Ada to process this trauma. As it has also been the case, during the whole course of her narration the character of Ada has been preparing herself to discover the truth, she is not caught unprepared. The final moment of remembering is only a point of the progress that Ada has been making in the course of her narration. When she is told by Antonio about the events she has been keeping hidden in her unconscious she is thus able to find words for this experience, speak about it and then, in the end, process it.

### 3.3.2.3. De verstotene

Mina/Amelie in *De verstotene* has also broken all the bonds she has had with her family and has to formulate her identity again on a different basis. She went even so far in her negation of her family and cultural background she has got from her family that she has decided to erase any Moroccan and/of Muslim signs and aspects from her life. She has changed her name, straightens her hair and acts as an autochthonous Dutch woman. Not even to her best friend or yearlong partner she has not been able to tell the true story of her origin.

But once a year, on the day of her birthday, Mina/Amelie breaks the silence partially and opens the Pandora's box of her past. She takes a photo album from under her bed where she keeps it and looks at the pictures of her family. From the moment when she run away from 'home', her family and her cultural roots, Mina/Amelie does not celebrate her birthday, she wants to stay alone and deepen herself in the emotional pain and the feeling of loneliness and abandonment she experiences. On the occasion of her birthday she treats herself to food that is rich in fat and sugar, feeding her body's fat layers (and herewith punishing herself, not far from being a bulimic), but mostly her pain and depression. In a way Mina/Amelie enjoys these desperate feelings, fully embodying the role of the victim – of her rigid mother, weak sister, disloyal partner, overambitious colleague, prejudiced lover, ... She looks at the pictures of her sister, and her father's second family, his second wife and her half-sisters with mixed feelings of love and hatred.

In contrast to Nomsa/Nancy in *'n Stringetjie blou krale* Mina/Amelie was well aware of the origin and roots she has been suppressing, because the conscious decision to erase a crucial part of her life story happened much later than it was the case with Nomsa/Nancy. Their narrative paths however resemble each other a lot, in that the name change among others has been an important step in becoming someone else, in acquiring a new identity. There is also in the story of Mina/Amelie a part, namely the letters from her sister begging her to come back to her family and later telling her that their mother has died, that has been suppressed completely by her unconscious. The denial and suppression goes in the case of Mina/Amelie so far that even if she opened the family photo album every year she became totally unaware of the letters from her sister which she never opened. The reason for taking the photo album with family pictures out is thus not to remember the past but to reassure herself of her version of the

story. Mina/Amelie looks at the pictures with bitter resentment, strengthening her anger and conviction that she has been a victim of a terrible injustice. It is only after her sister accuses her of betrayal and blames her for letting the family down when their mother got sick, and later when she died, that Mina/Amelie starts doubting the story she has elaborated around her runaway from the family. Only then she looks cautiously in the shoebox where she keeps the family album and finds the unopened letters from her sister that she has been unseen right in front of her eyes. She finally gathers the strength to open and read the letters, and consequently to face the truth. Mina/Amelie comes to know that her mother has died not a long time after she has left the family and, as her sister claims, exposed the family to shame, which their mother was not able to carry.

#### **3.3.2.4. Afaat**

Mina/Amelie had to gather the strength to face her sister's letter, but Milla in *Afaat*, on the contrary, has no other choice than to face the documents connected with her past. She is namely made to see, hear and touch them by Afaat who wants to remind her mother/master of their past. In *Afaat*, the objects that are connected with the trauma and that will at the end enable the I-narrator to find words for her story are, due to the works's complexity, also rather complex. We can actually speak of a two sorts of objects that help Milla remember her past, make her face it and help her to find the words to finally tell this story. Firstly, there are Milla's diaries in the Croxley notebooks that have played a very important role in reminding Milla of deeds, forcing her to face the past. Apart from this documents, written by Milla's own hand, there is also a set of objects that has a great importance for the relationship between Milla and Afaat on a more symbolic level, and consequently for the relationship between Afaat and Jakkie. The combination of paper documents and material objects represents the mixed cultural situation in which Milla has lived her whole life, and in which Afaat has been brought up. I will discuss the two sets of objects apart, so that their different significance for the process of remembering and finding words for her story by the character of Milla is clear. Let us start with Milla's diaries in Croxley notebooks.

We know already that after her disease has been spoken about and Milla became aware of the fact that she will inevitably die before long she asked/ordered Afaat to burn the notebooks in the context of the great clean-up. Afaat has however on her own decided to keep them in the attic and brought them back at the moment when Milla was already

bed-ridden and therefore not able to oppose her physically (we already know that Agaat would not care much about verbal resistance from Milla). Agaat adds Milla's notebooks to the staple of books from which she reads to Milla during the "reading hours", placing the diaries next to classics in English and Afrikaans. Agaat does however not limit herself to reading only. She also corrects and adapts the "original" version Milla has written down. Agaat remarks that Milla's diaries are just as good as (fiction) novels, comparing them to classical (colonial) novels in Afrikaans and English, implying also that what Milla has created in the Croxley books is far from what actually happened (Van Niekerk 2004: 16). It seems that she has worked out a scenario, a plan of order in which she reads to the paralyzed patient her own diary entries. Agaat marks the passage she is going to read during the "reading hours", building up the expectations of Milla. At the same time she is also playing with her nerves since Milla is at the moment when the narration takes place fully or at least partially aware of the fact that the image of herself she has created in her diaries is not always in accordance with what really happened. The diaries speak also clearly of her colonial arrogance and reveal some aspects of Milla's life and character she does not want to be reminded of.

*"Die blou boekies op die stapel lyk almal dikker as wat hulle is van die omgevoude ore. Partykeer sê sy ek moet raai watter dit gaan wees. Dan sê sy sý sou nooit geraai het wat sy alles daar sou lees nie. Maar partykeer maak sy die boekie toe op haar skoot en dra voor wat daar geskryf staan, lang stukke. Asof die versies is, of 'n les. Dan vra sy my of dit goed was so, of ek kan onthou wanneer dit was."* (Van Niekerk 2004: 11)

*"The blue booklets on the pile all seem thicker than they are because of all the dog-ears. Sometimes she says I have to guess which bit it's going to be. Then she says she could never have guessed everything she was going to read there. But sometimes she **closes** the book on her lap and recites what's written there, long stretches. As if they were rhymes, or a lesson. Then she asks me if it was good like that, whether I can remember when it happened."* (Van Niekerk 2006: 9; my correction, in original translation: "opens")

Agaat reading aloud of Milla's diaries thus becomes the third narrative voice of Milla, as I have pointed out in the previous part when summarizing the novels and introducing the I-narrators. As readers we cannot be sure whether what Agaat is reading to Milla is the real/original version, exactly as Milla cannot be sure any more after thirty years have passed between the actual event and Agaat reading the entry. She is however



clearly aware of the fact, which Agaat with her conducted reading aloud wants to point out, namely that the most important part of the story of Milla and Agaat, the story of taking Agaat from her biological family, is missing.

*“In opdrag van die Almagtige God, Bestuurder van ons aller lot en Bewaarder van die Boek van die Lewe...*

*Ek was jonk. Dit was ook nie die eerste inskrywing nie. Die eintlike begin van alles het ek nooit opgeskryf nie.”* (Van Niekerk 2004: 12)

*“As directed by the Almighty God, Ruler of our joint Destinies and Keeper of the Book of Life...*

*I was young. And it was not the first entry. The real beginning of it I never wrote down”.* (Van Niekerk 2006: 10)

Milla has never been able to write down the story of Agaat’s arrival at Grootmoedersdrift, and most importantly the events that preceded this arrival, the story of taking the girl from her biological family, chasing her like a wild animal and then fighting her down with physical power. Milla took Agaat as if she was not someone’s daughter, as if she was there simply for her to be taken. When the scared child, who knew only abuse and violence, tried to escape from her inapprehensible situation, Milla reacted instantly with violence and threats.

*“Jy sal nie wegkom nie! het jy uitgekry. Ek moet nou na jou kyk. Jy is myne nou. En nou maak jy jou ore oop en jy luister mooi vir my, ek klop jou stert vir jou warm as jy nie nou vir jou gedra nie. As jy soet is, sal ek jou niks maak nie. As jy nou aanhou stout wees en weghardloop sal ek vir die kleinbaas sê en hy sal sy belt afhaal en vir jou pakgee dat die rooi hale op jou boude lê en dan sal ons ’n tou om jou nek knoop en jou aan ’n paal vasmaak soos ’n bobbejaan, die hele dag lank tot jy mak is.”* (Van Niekerk 2004: 694)

*“You’re not getting away! You managed to say. I have to look after you. You’re mine now. And now you open your ears and you listen to me well, I’ll trash your backside blood-red for you if you don’t behave yourself now. If you’re good, I won’t do anything to you. If you carry on being naughty and running away I’ll tell the kleinbaas and he’ll take off his belt and flog you till your backside comes out red welts and then we’ll tie a rope around your neck and tie you to a pole like a baboon, the whole day long until you’re tame.”* (Van Niekerk 2006: 572, ‘kleinbaas’, that is “small boss” refers to Jak, Milla’s husband, my remark)

At the very first moment Milla simply declared Agaat (who however did not have this name yet) to be hers. She considers it to be her duty to take care of the little girl, but

does not take her into account at all. For Milla any care from a white person has to be automatically better, more civilized, more cultural, more humane. The brutality and cruelty of Milla actually simply expresses her anger and how she feels offended by the ungratefulness of the little girl who, according to Milla, should be instantly happy that she will be taken care of by white people. The rich farmer daughter Milla finds it absolutely normal to take a child from another family. Let us now just for a moment forget the concrete situation in which the girl who later became Agaat was growing up. She claimed the child to be hers. “*Jy is myne*”, you are mine, Milla said and by this she appropriated Agaat. Ironically, exactly these words will be later pronounced by Agaat when she raised the newborn Jakkie, taking him from Milla. “*Jy-is-myne, het sy hom genoem*”, you are mine, she named him (Van Niekerk 2004: 717). This act of appropriation will only one of the many deeds by which Agaat will remind Milla of her own deeds in the past and will make her admit her faults. I will return to this topic of repeating Milla later on in the text.

Milla is thus every day of her bed stay confronted with her diaries, and her idealized (and romanticized) version of the events. She has to face the documents of her own past she herself has put on paper, “*as directed by the Almighty God*” (Van Niekerk 2006: 10). What Milla however wants to see most in her last days are the maps of her land, of the farm of Grootmoedersdrift. This is also how the narration of Milla actually begins, with her trying to get contact through her eyes with Agaat to show her, let her know that she would like to see the maps for the last time. Even though Agaat probably understands what Milla is trying to tell her, she ignores her wish, postponing this moment which Milla longs for, until Agaat self decides it is time. Milla has strived a long time to get hold of that concrete piece of land and has been farming and living there for the greatest part of her life. She got married because of this piece of land, and it had a great influence on her life, as well as on the life of Agaat who has been learned to feel the very same attachment to the land as Milla has always felt.

Apart from the aforementioned diaries of Milla there is another set of objects that is directly connected with the colonial guilt of Milla and at the end helps her to admit her faults and find words to describe the story of her and Agaat. I am talking about the objects with the help of which Milla acquired Agaat, objects narrowly connected with Agaat’s (and Milla’s) past, representing the bond and communication between the two of them. As readers, we get a summary of a number of objects Agaat made Jakkie take

with him when he is on a plane back to Canada. Before he left South Africa after the funeral of his mother Agaat gave him a number of objects that have been crucial for both of his mothers, but are also in a way connected to his person. The objects are memento's of their unique relationship and also documents of their shared history, and of the history of Jakkie, the child they have brought up together.

*“’n Effense trilling, af en toe ’n paar ligte skokke, maar nie so erg as met die opstyg nie. Die sak by my voete raak lastig.*

*Ongerieflike goed om saam te peikel. These fragments. Bo en behalwe die blou Delfse geboorteboordjie en die pak vinkelsaad, die horing en die blaasbalk. Ekstra bagasie wat nie in die ruim kon gaan nie. Wilde reuke van Afrika, roet, droë proteïene. (...)*

*Agaat het aangedring.*

*Blaas af en toe vir my ’n noot daarop, het sy gesê, weggekyk. Ek sal dit hoor, het sy gesê, net haar lippe het geroer. Toe was haar stem weer helder.” (Van Niekerk 2004: 701-2)*

*“A light vibration, now and again a few faint shocks, but not as bad as on take-off. The bag at my feet is starting to get in my way.*

*Inconvenient stuff to cart along. These fragments. Apart from the blue Delft birth-plate and the parcel of fennel seed, the horn and the bellows. Extra hand luggage that couldn't go in the hold. Wild aromas of Africa, dried protein. (...)*

*Agaat insisted.*

*Blow me a note on it every now and again, she said, looked away. I'll hear it, she said. Thought that's what she said, only her lips moved. Then her voice was clear again.” (Van Niekerk 2008: 577-78)*

Jakkie becomes aware again of the bag at his feet through the uncomfortable feeling during the turbulence. There is a clear link between the nauseating shocks of the aircraft and the uneasy emotions connected with the bag, or to be more specific with its contents and with what it represents. This bizarre collection of objects symbolizes for Jakkie both his mother, and at the same time also Africa. Or to be more precise, this set of objects symbolizes for Jakkie both his mothers, Milla and Agaat, and implicitly also the mixed cultural background they have given to him, that of European culture and native practices. This mixed cultural background, that originated exactly on the 'liminal', border of two (or more cultures) is the aspect of Jakkie's identity that enables (or forces) him to become a cosmopolite, a person beyond one cultural background, not wanting and not being able to root in only one culture.

The very same subjects have played an important role in the childhood of Agaat, creating a bond between her and her mother figure Milla. These objects were also later used by Agaat to acquire Jakkie and steal him emotionally from his own mother. The sack has been the only thing/object Agaat has brought from her biological family and played an important role in bonding between Milla and Agaat. The sack was the first way through which Agaat was willing/able to communicate with Milla, who would eventually leave some sweets in the sack for Agaat if she behaved well. The horn and “*blaasbalk*”, the bellows, meant a great step in the communication between the two. With the help of the “*blaasbalk*” Milla actually taught Agaat to speak on the breath-out. The horn was an important part of their play, since with it they let each other know where they were at the moment. Both these objects were above all a way to call and contact the other in a case of need. It is exactly the same metaphorical notion of connection that Agaat implies when telling (or begging) Jakkie to blow the bellows once in a while to send her a note, assuring him that she will hear that, that she will understand. She does not want to loose Jakkie, the child she took (literally and figuratively) from Milla and brought up, and hopes to sustain the connection between them through objects, exactly as Milla has done with her, and exactly as she did with Milla in the period prior to her death.

In the last days of Milla, Agaat installs around Milla’s deathbed a collection of objects that have been crucial for the relationship between Milla and Agaat. Every day new objects appear in Milla’s room, reminding her of an occasion or an event that has been important in the history of their relationship. Agaat however does not only bring up the positive aspects of their history, but she reminds Milla of all they have (had to) experience together, especially of Milla’s cruel education and/or punishment methods. Agaat enables Milla to speak (by pointing letters on the alphabet chart) with exactly the same duster handle with which Agaat has been beaten as child when Milla was trying to make her speak, the digestive system of Milla is kept working with spinach and prunes, which Milla has used to make Agaat use the pot, Agaat mentions casually that she might have Milla’s teeth extracted which is exactly what Milla has done to Agaat in her first days at Grootmoedersdrift etc.

All the above mentioned objects themselves, as it also was the case with the combination of documents on paper and material objects, represent the cultural mixed-

ness of the background of Milla, and implicitly also of Agaat, who has been brought up in these circumstances.

### 3.3.2.5. Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat

The object(s) that is connected to the trauma from the I-narrator's past is in *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat* the shell collection of Helena. As we have already mentioned before, Helena has been in a way "prepared" for this journey into her unconsciousness already by leaving the safe environment, being separated from her partner through whom her sexual, gender and socio-cultural identity has been constructed. Another aspect of Helena's identity has been painfully exposed by her new appointment on the dictionary project, putting her as a white Afrikaans speaker into clear opposition to her environment. It is however the break-in, and specifically the violation of the shell collection that makes Helena face uncomfortable facts from her past. The theft of the shell collection and even more importantly the distortion of its consistence violates Helena's inner world more than the fact that someone broke into her apartment and defecated on her carpet. Helena is shaken when she finds out that the integrity of the shell collection is damaged and consequently by the gap the disappearance of the shells has left in her life. The emotional gap in her life she has been unconsciously trying to fill with the shells is revealed and exposed for Helena to face.

*"Al my besittings sien ek as aardse goed, alles vervangbaar – maar nie die skulpe nie. Die skulpe is hemelse boodskappers! Die skulpe versamel ek al 'n leeftyd. Hulle is my kosbaarste besittings. Ek het die afgelope jare (met enkele uitsonderinge) meer plesier van my skulpe gehad as van mense."* (Winterbach 2006: 11)

*"All my things I view as earthly goods, all of them replaceable – but not the shells. The shells are heavenly messengers! The shells I have been collecting for a lifetime. They are my most prized possessions. Over the years I have taken (with a few notable exceptions) more pleasure in these shells than in people."* (Winterbach 2008: 11)

Helena admits that she cares more for the shells than for any other of her material belongings. She even says explicitly that the shells mean more for her than the material belongings, and that the shell collection therefore is much more than the material. Helena has had more pleasure with/from the shells than she has from living beings, mostly because she would not permit herself to get emotionally engaged with another person. *"These shells are like my family,"* Helena tries to explain to Constable Modisane

who cannot really understand why someone would be so agitated by some stolen shells and can spend so much time and energy in the attempt to get the shells back (Winterbach 2006: 83). After the disappointment of her marriage Helena apparently unconsciously decided not to become emotionally engaged with other people anymore. She also admits that her passion for the shells originated in the last phase of her marriage:

*“In die laaste jare van my huwelik is my skulpversameling bestendig en aansienlik uitgebrei.”* (Winterbach 2006: 87)

*“During the years of our marriage my shell collection was consolidated and significantly extended.”* (Winterbach 2008: 86)

The first shell has been given to her by her mother who stands for another painful chapter in Helena’s personal history. There is also a connection between the shells and Helena’s recently deceased sister whom she calls Joets. The relation between the three women of the family has been very complicated and Helena mentions it only partially, probably because she is still not able to speak about it. Exactly as is the case with her ex-husband and partially also with her daughter, Helena takes in an impersonal attitude with which she tries to protect herself. She mentions a dispute with her sister and a long break in communication which has been disrupted by Joets a short time before her death. The short phone call however has not been fully able to bridge the distance that was caused by the years of silence.

There is a clear connection between the stolen shells and her “lost” family. From Helena’s reactions we can understand that the shells actually came in the place of her dissolved family, in the place of the deceased family members, her non-working marriage or daughter with whom Helena has almost no contact anymore. When the shells were stolen, the gap they were supposed to fill got exposed and made Helena face this primary loss in her life.

### **3.3.2.6.   ’n Stringetjie blou krale**

Nomsa/Nancy also has to face a loss of (a part of) her family. She is however reminded of this loss not by the disappearance of an object, but on the contrary by an appearance of an object in her life. As the title of the novel suggests, a crucial role in the story will be appointed to the string of blue beads, “’n stringetjie blou krale”. It refers to a string of blue beads on the sangoma’s neck, but more importantly to the string of blue beads

Nomsa's mother used to wear on her neck to keep the age of her children, one string for each of them. The string of the blue beads thus very literally points to the life of Nomsa/Nancy, and especially to the part which has been silenced. Nomsa/Nancy is fascinated by the beads on the sangoma's neck:

*“Terwyl ek praat, speel die vrou met die wit krale om haar nek, (...). Die krale fassineer my. Nie die wittes nie. Die string bloues wat versteek lê onder die al die wittes. (...) Ek kan my oë nie van die blou krale afhaal nie... (...) Sonder 'n woord haal sy die blou krale van haar nek af en hou dit na my toe uit. Teen my wil vat ek dit by haar. (...) Iets kriel in my gedagte. Iets wat ek wil-wil onthou. Wat dit is, weet ek nie. Al wat ek weet, is dat die kriel begin het toe ek die blou krale in my hand kry.” (Dido 2000: 21)*

*The woman plays with the white beads around her neck, while I speak. (...) I'm fascinated by those beads. Not by the white ones. It's the string of blue beads that lies hidden under all the whites. (...) I can't get my eyes off those blue beads... (...) Without saying a word she takes the string of blue beads from her neck and hands it to me. I accept it against my will. (...) Something is itching in my mind. Something I really try to remember. What that is, I don't know. All I know is that the itch begun when I got the beads in my hand. (my translation)*

There is however yet another object that reminds Nomsa/Nancy of her Xhosa past and roots, namely the pipe the sangoma who has been called by the parents to help, is constantly smoking. It is the smell of the smoke coming from the pipe, together with the sight of the blue beads on sangoma's neck, that make Nomsa/Nancy faint, and consequently to tell the story of her childhood, and the suppressed roots.

*Ek versteen in my spore toe ek na haar kyk. Sy het nou 'n langsteelpyp in haar hand en is besig om die twak daarin brand te steek. Dis nie wat my pla nie. Pa rook ook pyp. (...) Maar die wilde ruik van die rook wat sy ná die eerste trek in die lug blaas ... dié ruik... (Dido 2000: 23)*

*I freeze when I look at her. Now she holds a pipe in her hand and tries light the tobacco. That's not what is bothering me. Dad smokes pipe as well. (...) But the wild smell of smoke that she breathes out after the first puff ... that smell... (my translation)*

We have already mentioned earlier that the actual object that was awakened in the unconsciousness of Nomsa/Nancy and caused her nightmares was yet another pipe. It was a pipe of an old Xhosa man whom Nomsa/Nancy has met on a workshop dedicated to preserving native culture and traditions. Therefore I conclude that the unconscious of

Nomsa/Nancy could have been awakened by any native Xhosa object, even though I admit that the smell of the pipe smoke and the string of blue beads that is so narrowly connected with the life of Nomsa before she became Nancy surely had great significance. Even before Nomsa/Nancy actually finds out, or better said becomes aware again, of her Xhosa origin, the string of blue beads, partially hidden under other strings of white beads, on the sangoma's neck make her feel very uncomfortable. It is also among others the pipe the old man in Bisho is smoking that causes her nightmares at first place.

When Nomsa/Nancy tells sangoma about her childhood and verbalises what has been hidden in the deep layers of her unconsciousness, the sangoma gives her the string of blue beads as a reminder. At the end, when Nomsa/Nancy finally is able to "out herself" as a Xhosa and speak in the public about her origin, she decides to wear the string of blue beads she has been given by the sangoma openly around her neck. The string of blue beads on her neck becomes not only a public proclamation of her origin, her claim of the Xhosa identity, but is also a reminder to be always honest about her past.

### 3.3.2.7. Conclusion

After a short analysis of the objects connected with the identity crisis of the I-narrators, a resemblance is clear. In all the six analyzed novels a crucial role is ascribed to an object from the past of the I-narrator. This object not only helps the I-narrator to remember and consequently verbalise the (trauma from the) past, but also in the end enables reconciliation. An interesting difference appears when we look at the material aspect of these objects: while in the Dutch part the objects that lead the I-narrator to remembering and finding words for the past are all sorts of documents on paper (letters, school notebook), in the South-African part of the corpus these objects are more of a material/natural art (shells, beads). The case of both *Sleuteloog* and *Agaat* is noteworthy, since the objects actually are a combination of both paper document and natural material, i.e. of European/Western culture (that is somehow fixated on paper and documents) and indigenous/Eastern<sup>49</sup> culture. Herma keeps the paper documents in an antique Indonesian ebony chest that is a symbol of communication and cooperation between East/Orient and West as such (as already mentioned in the analysis). Milla, on

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<sup>49</sup> I am using here deliberately the 'West' – 'East' binary opposition and am fully aware of its connotations, as well as of the constructedness of both terms.



the other hand, is reminded of (we could even say forced to remember) the past and finds the words for her personal, and Agaat's, story with the help of a combination of her old diaries (paper documents) and a set of objects that is more connected to Agaat (nature). In both cases this points to the hybrid position of both Herma and Milla between cultures, and not rooted only in one. This difference described in the art of the subject connected with the past between the Dutch and South-African parts of the corpus might, of course, be a pure coincidence. Since it actually confirms my theory of cultural mixedness it however seemed worth mentioning.

### **3.3.3. The act of reconciliation**

Now I propose to take a closer look at the third narrative moment that all the six novels in the corpus have in common – the moment of reconciliation with their past, and the eventually acceptance of their identity/position. That happens mainly by finding words to describe this feeling of belonging, a feeling the I-narrators of the analyzed novels did not feel at the beginning of their narration. Now, after they have admitted and accepted their trauma's from the past, they can move forward and do something significant with their lives, and the way how they experience themselves and their position in the society nowadays.

#### **3.3.3.1. Sleuteloog**

The moment of reconciliation with the past and with the actual trauma from the past is in Hella S. Haasse's *Sleuteloog* narrowly connected with the character of Herma's best childhood friend Dee. In the first place it has been Dee who actually caused the discomfort and uncertainty of Herma, who threatened Herma's identity - as woman (by having a passionate relationship with her husband) and as an Indonesia-born of culturally mixed origin (by denying Herma's right to call Indonesia her home country). After a long struggle with words, her incomplete memories and her own unconsciousness Herma has finally been able to admit and become fully aware of the relationship between Dee and Taco. The awareness of this relationship however does not make Herma angry with Dee. On the contrary: she understands the distance Dee has been trying to create between the two of them. She is able to put herself in the place of Dee and imagines how hard it must have been for Dee to be passionately loved but never accepted as official partner. Ironically enough, Herma has had comparable

feelings next to Dee due to Dee's exceptional (exotic) beauty that made Herma in her own eyes look "less womanly".

After a long period of uncertainty Herma is even able to put up with the bond between her best friend and her husband. She understands that Dee and Taco shared something she, as member of a colonizer's family, would never have been able to share with him.. The idea that Dee and Taco have been complementary to each other in a way she never has been to any of them is still after all the years very painful for Herma.

*Tussen Dee en mij, in vriendschap, was zo'n eenheid blijkbaar niet mogelijk, tussen Taco en haar, in hartstocht, wel. Ook nu kan ik de gedachte daaraan, die ik al jaren uit mijn bewustzijn heb gebannen, alleen verdragen door te berusten, pasrah, in wat was voorbestemd: nasib, het lot. Ik merk dat ik ben gaan denken als Non. (Haasse 2002: 186)*

*Such a unity between Dee and me in friendship wasn't possible. It was possible between Taco and her in passion. Even now I can only stand the thought I have banned for years out of my consciousness by acquiescence, pasrah, in which has been determined: nasib, the fate. I see I've started thinking like Non. (my translation)*

Herma mentions fate, and finds conciliation and acquiescence. We can see that on the last pages of the novel, at the end of Herma's narration when she has already been able to find words for her personal story, the I-narrator of *Sleuteloog* uses such expressions a lot. From the tone of Herma's narration it is very clear that she has found inner peace and calmness. Herma compares herself to Non, Dee's aunt who became very religious in her olden days and even undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca. What is even more important for the relationship between Non and Herma, is that Non has been able to communicate with 'the other world' and was always very spiritual. Since Herma was a young girl, as already mentioned earlier, she has been able to see ghosts and hadji's when accompanied by Non which was a strong binding element between the two of them. Through this comparison to Non Herma again claims her culturally mixed background and her roots in Indonesian culture. Even though born to a white family of a member of the colonial administration, Herma has acquired a sense for Indonesian culture, art and even spirituality, an attribute that will make it later difficult for Herma to be rooted in the Netherlands, but that will at the end enable the reconciliation with Dee.

A very important moment in the process of Herma's reconciliation with her past and culturally split (and therefore unresolved) identity is the discovery that Dee had a son whom she taught to appreciate native Indonesian/South-East Asian art. Looking into the catalogue of Inada's exposition which actually is an homage to his recently deceased mother, Herma realizes that if she has had the financial means she would have chosen the exactly same objects. Herma, as an expert in her field, knew that Inada was interested in flower and leaf motifs in sculptures and paintings from South-East Asia but is struck by the similarity in their taste. At this moment she knows that this must have been the influence of his mother, Herma's best childhood friend Dee. Herma finds out that Dee never rejected her (their) roots, their rootedness in Indonesia. At the same time Herma however understands that Dee has been fighting all her life with feelings of misplacement and rootlessness, exactly as Herma did.

*Ik weet dat ergens in mijn geheugen alle stukken te vinden zijn die samen een sluitend beeld van de waarheid vormen. Ik heb ze niet herkend, of ze niet willen zien, toen ze opdoken in de werkelijkheid van mijn leven. De Inada-collectie is, via een verre omweg door tijd een ruimte, een signaal van Dee naar mij. Het ontkent de vervreemding, het bewijst een 'gelijkheid' in lagen van ons wezen waar wedijver, afgunst, onbegrip, grieven, alle verschillen en tegenstellingen, geen reden van bestaan hebben. Onder de oppervlakte was er tussen ons altijd een verbindend element (...). Het laat zich alleen bij benadering uitdrukken in symbolen als de kunstwerken die Yokuro Inada verzamelde, 'inspired by his mother'. (Haasse 2002: 189 – 90)*

*I know that somewhere in my memory all the pieces can be found that will together form the picture of the truth. I didn't recognize them, or didn't want to see them, when they appeared in the reality of my life. Via a long detour through time and space the Inada collection is a signal from Dee to me. It denies the estrangement, it proves an 'equality' in layers of our beings where rivalry, envy, misunderstanding and objections, all the differences and oppositions have no reason to exist. Under the surface there has always been a binding element (...). It can only be expressed by approximations in symbols such as the works of art Yokuro Inada has collected, 'inspired by his mother'. (my translation)*

In this particular aspect Herma realizes that words are not necessary. She does not feel the need to find words that would describe the feeling of connectedness with Dee. Exactly as she has felt a spiritual bond between Non and herself, Herma becomes aware now that there has been a comparable bond between Dee and her. Even though there has been a relationship between Dee and her husband, even though they have not always

agreed on political topics and have been parted by the course of events (and very importantly by Dee's own actions) they have shared something that cannot be undone or simply wiped away. As Herma puts it, they have breathed this "something" in the land where they have been born and where they have grown up, it originated in the shared circumstances of their childhood (Haasse 2002: 190). Herma and Dee have both been "product(s)" of the last and uneasy to define period of a colonial imperium, of two decennia between the two wars, after which the good old Indië, Dutch East Indies, has disappeared leaving many Europeans without home and roots (Haasse 2002: 50). The fact that Dee passed this particular taste for art forms to her son proves the respect she has had for Herma and her insight.

### 3.3.3.2. Pelican Bay

Ada in *Pelican Bay* also has to undergo a painful process before she finally reaches peace of mind. The moment of final reconciliation with her childhood trauma happens in prison where she ends up as a result of (probably) her adoptive brother's revenge. He seems to blame Ada for his unhappy childhood in that she, as the older sister, did not stand up for him and protect him against the rage of their father and the abuse of their family friends. During her stay in prison Ada starts hallucinating, seeing Jacob drinking tea in her cell, Fanny showing her the unborn baby, and most importantly – her father.

*(...) begreep ik dat ik in hazenslaapjes telkens een stukje droom deed om chaos te verwerken tot een regulier verhaal, waarin alle elementen betekenis droegen en verband hielden met elkaar. Zo was het leven. Het kreeg betekenis door lijnen te trekken van gebeurtenis naar gebeurtenis, door mensen te groeperen en te confronteren, door er theater van te maken, de werkelijkheid te regisseren tot een kil spel van imitaties, door ongrijpbaar te zijn op de grens van leugen en waarheid. Kijk naar jezelf, Ada, zei ik, je bent niet echt. Je bent een schrijver, dat wil zeggen een actrice. Je beheerst volmaakt je tekst en berekent precies hoe je je emoties plaatst zonder ze te hebben. Als het lukt. Het was van levensbelang die fictie in de werkelijkheid vol te houden om de tijd in gevangenschap door te komen. Ik moest de toneelspeler zijn van mijn eigen leven. (Noordervliet 2002: 400 – 401)*

*(...) I understood that every time I've added a piece of dream in my dog-sleep in order to process the chaos into a normal / regular story in which all the elements carry a meaning and are connected with each other. This is how life worked. It gained meaning thanks to drawing lines from one event to another, through putting people into groups and confronting them,*

*through making a theatre out of it, to direct the reality into a dry play of imitations, through being ungraspable at the border of lie and truth. Look at yourself, Ada, I said, you're not real. You're a writer, that is an actor. You've mastered your text completely and you calculate precisely where to put the emotions without actually having / feeling them. If it works. To go through the imprisonment it has been of life importance to keep the fiction in the reality. I had to be an actor in my own life. (my translation)*

In this passage, which I have quoted in its full length for the sake of understanding of the thoughts of Ada, the I-narrator of Pelican Bay analyzes her life and reflects upon her self-protective behavior in the past. When looking at the text, and the explanation Ada gives for her dreams, one cannot not think of Freud's analysis of dreams. At this particular moment of her narration Ada finds herself at the point of understanding her traumatizing experience. At this moment Ada is not able yet to face the truth, and because of that she finds refuge in dreams. Her dreams help her to organize all the experiences, perceptions and observations she has gathered during her stay on the island. Ada has become (again) aware of the history of sexual abuse in their family, she had to admit that the relationship with her husband is not working and that she actually tried to replace the figure of the father in her life by someone else. She also starts a sexual/amorous relationship with another man which is significantly different from what she has been used to in her marriage, mostly because Marcus lets her take full responsibility for her deeds. She cannot however put this experience into words, this is also why she finds a retreat in dreams. It is in and through her dreams that the reality starts to make sense to her, it is in the dreams where she finds the words to describe her situation, and finally also finds reconciliation with her past, in order to move further.

Another interesting aspect of this self-analysis of Ada is that she admits that she has been only playing a role till now. She becomes aware that it has not been her living her life but a person, a character she has created in order to protect herself from the trauma she has suffered in her childhood. Ada furthermore has a very little self-confidence. She bases her value and consequently her identity on the verdict of the people surrounding her. Already as a child she has often felt (or been made to feel) guilty for things she actually had nothing to do with. Till the moment Ada has decided to go to the island she has basically done what her surroundings have expected from her, in that she has been a good daughter, accepting the version of the story which her parents have served her, never inquiring them. Also in her marriage she has been playing a role of which she

thought that is expected from her (by her husband). She took in the position of a wife without it having any meaning, nor could she influence the development of the relationship. Ada accepted being thought of as a child, *kindje*, as her husband often called her. Her decision to leave to go to the island to look for the truth about the old as well as recent colonial past of her family is actually one of the first own decisions Ada makes, in her life AND in her marriage. We have already mentioned the panic attack and the doubts Ada felt in the airplane before it landed on the island. Especially at the beginning of her stay at the island, she feels an urgent need to call her husband Huib and ask him for advice a number of times. “*Zou ik Huib wakker bellen en zeggen dat ik een anafylatische schok of zoiets had en wat ik moest doen?*”, should I wake up Huib with a phone call and say that I’m having an anaphylactic shock or something like that and ask what I should do? (Noordervliet 2002: 70). Thanks to her stay on the island, her conversations with, among other, Ma Edith, and the liberating relationship with Marcus, Ada has been able to find her own voice and point of view.. Even though she has spent most of her stay on the island searching for answers, at the end of her narration Ada has to learn to accept that the absence of a clear answer can also be an answer in a way. She has to leave the island without any clear answer about the identity of the murderer of Jacob’s wife Fanny Fenwick but realizes at this moment already that in some cases an answer is impossible to find, and not even necessary.

Another great change that her stay on the island brings is Ada’s pregnancy. After her arrival back in the Netherlands Ada finds out that she is pregnant with Marcus’baby. The baby will however be brought up together with her (white) husband. I will come back to the maternal aspect of the novel later in the text.

### 3.3.3.3. De verstorlene

An unexpected pregnancy also plays an important role in *De verstorlene*. The information however comes before the moment of reconciliation and causes an even greater depression in the I-narrator. Mina/Amelie has in the course of her narration reached the very bottom, she has suffered of a serious depression, been addicted to painkillers and antidepressants for a long time. Prior to that she has lost everything on which her (made-up) identity has been based. After a number of sessions with a psychoanalyst she is however able to face the truth. She finally tells her psychotherapist about her Moroccan origin, the story of being chased out of the family after her essay

about women and Islam was found. She also admits that she tried to erase this part of her personal history from of her life. After this last session Mina/Amelie however corrects the therapist when she calls her Amelie, and reminds her that her real name is Mina (El Bezaz 2006: 226). This points to the fact that the process of recovery from the denial has begun. Mina/Amelie however has at this moment of the narration still a long journey to go, since she has not yet become aware of her denial of the death of her mother. Interestingly enough Mina/Amelie does not tell the psychotherapist, nor her general practitioner, about her pregnancy. She does mention it with all details of the conception to Elsa to whom she, on the other hand is not able to reveal her Moroccan background. Even though she tries a number of times (El Bezaz 2006: 229, 238, 251) Mina/Amelie cannot get the whole truth over her lips.

Another interesting turn is that the I-narrator of *De verstotene* tries to seek help from her sister. After she partially got out of the denial, Mina/Amelie tries to renew the contact with her sister about whom she has been speaking with love in the whole course of her narration. She looks her sister up and tells her that she is pregnant with an illegitimate child of a Jewish man. In reaction to this Sanaa accuses Mina/Amelie of being responsible for their mother's death.

*'Jij hebt ons schande gebracht. Alles wat moeder had opgebouwd, heb jij in een klap tenietgedaan. Ik werd de zus van de afvalige, de zus van de straathoer genoemd. (...)*

*Haar woorden sloegen als zweepslagen in mijn gezicht en ik kon en wilde haar niet meer aankijken, maar ditmaal liep Sanaa niet meer weg. Ze confronteerde me, schold me uit, vertelde me over haar frustratie en dat ik haar leven kapot had gemaakt. (El Bezaz 2006: 244)*

*'You've put us in shame. Everything Mother has build up, you destroyed in one hit. I became the sister of the apostate, they called me the sister of the street whore. (...)*

*Her words felt like lashes in my face and I didn't want to look in her eyes anymore. But this time Sannaa didn't walk away. She confronted me, scolded me, told me about her frustration and that I've ruined her life. (my translation)*

Her sister reminds her of the number of letters she has written to her, begging her to come back, asking her for help, telling her about the disease of their mother and consequently about her death. Mina/Amelie is suddenly confronted with the real version

of her running away and the relationships in the family, especially between the two sisters. Mina/Amelie turns out not as a victim, but an actual cause of the family's suffering. Only at this moment she realizes how much of her past she has actually been suppressing. After speaking to her sister, and being reminded of things that Mina/Amelie has absolutely banned from her consciousness, she runs home and, indeed, finds at the bottom of the shoebox she has opened so many times at the occasion of her birthday a stack of unopened letters from her sister. Her first reaction is running to her therapist in the middle of night, crying and asking for an explanation. The psychotherapist tries to explain to her that she has created an own version of the story out of self-protection. This does not seem to help much and on the day of her birthday, which also this year Mina/Amelie decides to spend alone (even though she promised to Elsa they would do something together), her depression gets too bad that she takes the decision to commit suicide.

At the very last moment, Mina/Amelie takes pity on the unborn child and decides to bring the child up alone, or with the help of Elsa, in New York. Her child would become a mild, liberal Muslim, aware of his roots, but with respect for other beliefs (El Bezaz 2006: 253). The presence of her (unborn) child gives Mina/Amelie the strenght and courage to face the real version of her past she has just discovered. She accepts the challenge of combining her cultural Moroccan/Muslim background with her position in society in order to become (the mother of) a cosmopolitan citizen aware of her/his roots.

#### 3.3.3.4. Afaat

Milla in *Afaat* also at the end has to admit her own faulty behaviour and is able to tell the real version of the (beginning of) history of her and Afaat. The story of how Milla chased, caught and overpowered the scared girl with pure physical strength and threats is something Milla has not been able to tell her whole life long. This story is also the last story Milla 'tells' in her life and after her narration of the events that preceded Afaat's arrival at Grootmoedersdrift Milla dies. It seems that after Milla has finally found the words to tell the story of her conquest of Afaat, she does not have a reason to live anymore and can die peacefully.

The passage where Milla describes the events before and during Afaat's arrival at Grootmoedersdrift is in the novel followed only by a passage narrated by Milla's inner



voice, in the book printed in italics, where Milla dies, accompanied by Agaat who is trying to comfort her master/mother in this difficult moment.

After this inner voice passage only the prologue told by Jakkie follows, which has already been partially discussed earlier. Considering the inner voice passage describing Milla's mind fading away and the prologue which is narrated by another character (interestingly the author has consciously chosen Jakkie to tell this part, and not Agaat, so that she actually stays without a clear voice during the whole course of the narration, as already mentioned earlier) the story of taking Agaat from her biological parents and appropriating her as personal property is the actual end of the novel. It forms therefore the finale of the novel, the point to which the narration has been proceeding and developing during its whole course. We can see here, again, a clear resemblance to the character of Herma who also had to struggle a long time with her own unconscious before she was able to pronounce the painful truth.

Milla is at her end, and we can argue whether the nearing death has finally made her talk or whether she only has been able to leave this world after the true story has been told, able to find words and describe her colonial guilt. She dies in the arms of Agaat, who is here described as a companion, helper, the closest person Milla has and probably ever had:

*wie trek my skouers saggies oop soos vlerke? wie sit 'n knie tussen my knieë sodat ek my eie vlees nie aankleef nie? wie is onder my 'n boei dat ek nie sink van my eie gewig nie beswyk nie? in watter lyf word ek gehou soos in 'n krip? gekantel soos in 'n wieg? wie asem onder my asof ek op 'n lewende bestee lê my pols gekapsel in stewige steiers my sinne staangemaak op ander sinne soos mure gebou op 'n rots? wie? (Van Niekerk 2004: 698)*

*who gently parts my shoulders like wings? who places a knee between my knees so that I should not cleave to my own flesh? who is a buoy beneath me so that I should not sink from my own weight not perish? in what body am I sustained as in a crib? tilted as in cradle? who breathes beneath me as if I'm lying on a living bedstead my pulse ignited with another pulse my breath to the rhythm of another my insight capsulated in sturdy scaffolds my sentences erected on another sentences like walls built on a rock? Who? (Van Niekerk 2006: 575)*

Milla leaves this world with “in my hand die hand van klein agaat” (Van Niekerk 2004: 699), in her hand the hand of small Agaat. She dies as a mother, with Agaat as her daughter accompanying her to “the other side”. Agaat with whom Milla has been

struggling almost all her adult life and whom Milla all this time (without great success) tries to subjugate and control is at this moment actually a comforting element for Milla.

From the quotation above we can clearly sense the intense presence of the bodily element in the novel. Milla is experiencing her death in, on and through her body, there is only a minimum said about her mind (or soul). I will return to this bodily aspect that in one or another way is present in all the novels analyzed later in the conclusion.

### 3.3.3.5. Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat

The I-narrator of *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat*, Helena, finds reconciliation in the remembrance of the last conversation with her sister. She becomes aware that her sister wanted to restore the communication and that there has always been an emotional connection between the two of them. Therefore Helena does not have to feel guilty herself for the break in the family. After realizing this, and also accepting the fact that the past cannot be changed, only admitted, Helena is finally able to let the shells go. The presence of the shells is not necessary anymore since Helena is able to face the gap they were supposed to fill.

After her second attempt to gain some information from the Steinmeier family in Ladybrand she gives up her search. She tells Jaykie, her informant, that she accepts the situation and has to endorse with the fact that we actually do not possess anything. Here she implies that she is aware of human mortality, saying that people are born with empty hands and leave the world with empty hands again (Winterbach 2006: 206). Clearly, Helena does not speak about her shell collection only, but about her family and other things she has lost (had to leave).

After the process of admitting and accepting Helena was able to integrate love as well as death as a natural, and inseparable, part of life. During the whole narration she has been occupied with the question about where does life begin, and where does it end. Thanks to her discussions with Hugo Hattingh she accepts the world, and life on it, as passing, temporary, ephemeral. This helps her also to resign herself to the futility of her search for the stolen shells and once she grasps that nothing lasts forever she manages to let go. Even though there is an attempt to buy other shells in order to restore the collection (and order in Helena's life) Helena understands that these would only be a

replacement of the shells as material objects and not of the emotional gap that has been opened by the robbery and violation of the integrity of the shell collection.

At the very last page of the novel, at the end of the narration, Helena states that the dead, her mother and her sister, are still with her, visiting her in her dreams, but that they feel distant and leaving. The sudden disappearance of the shells evoked the lost family members, but after Helena has processed this earlier loss she has been suppressing for years, among other by directing all her emotions to the shell collection, she is able also to let go her dead mother and sister. She is looking forward to meeting her brother again without bitterness or anxiety. “*My skulpe het ek ter ruste gelê.*”, I have laid my shells till rest, she claims (Winterbach 2006: 333). Helena has come to peace with their disappearance. Even though she admits that this peace of mind is probably only temporary and that the painful experience of loss will eventually come back, she is able (and willing) to accept that. Helena understands completely that she has been replacing a missing aspect of her life by the shell collection, the shells being a safe option in place of personally engaged human interactions and emotions. Even though she expects that the pain caused by major losses she has suffered in her life to come back, she does not deny it anymore, and accepts it as it will come and go again. Helena returns back to her “normal” life which she has lead before her assignment on the dictionary project. Apart from the fact that she has started to write again, nothing seems to have changed at first sight (everything is back to normal); under the surface, however, the attitude of Helena has changed a lot. She does not deny or suppress emotions anymore, is wanting and willing to make them a part of her life again. At the end of the narration, the brother of Helena makes contact with her again and she is looking forward to meeting him, restoring “the family”, or at least what has remained out of it.

### 3.3.3.6. *’n Stringetjie blou krale*

The reunion with the family plays an important role in the act of reconciliation also in *’n Stringetjie blou krale*. The reconciliation with the family in the case of Nomsa/Nancy has actually two parts: firstly she has to ask forgiveness from her Xhosa family and renew contact with them and secondly, after officially declaring herself as Xhosa, she has to find a way to combine her black and brown background, and the two families she has/gets.

A part of the reconciliation moment in *'n Stringetjie blou krale* is the fact that Nomsa/Nancy does not disavow her ex-husband. Even though they are officially divorced, she keeps the advice of her family back in the kraal and keeps thinking of herself as his first wife. When Bennie makes her leave the hospital when she comes to visit him, because it has been “one of her people” who has shot him, she accepts his anger, leaves but does not abandon him. She also explains to her children who disapprove of his behaviour towards her that she wants them to stay in touch with their biological father, not wanting them to have to undergo a comparable identity crisis she has suffered due to a suppressed origin.

*Ek wil nie hê dat julle van hom af moet wegbly nie, want hy het julle nou meer as ooit tevore nodig. Julle kan hom enige tyd gaan besoek as julle gereed is. Moenie van hom vervreemd raak nie. Ek het van my ma's vervreemd geraak en sal vir die res van my lewe spyt wees dat ek hulle uit my gedagtes gestoot het. (Dido 2000: 237)*

*I don't want you to stay away from him, because now he needs you more than ever before. You can come to visit him any time when you're ready. You shouldn't lose contact with him. I've been alienated from my mothers and I will be sorry for the rest of my life that I've banned them from my mind. (my translation)*

Nomsa/Nancy finds a balance between the Xhosa and the coloured part of her identity, as well as between both her families.

### 3.3.3.7. Conclusion

All the analyzed characters have in the course of their narration undergone a painful process of remembering, admitting and finding words to describe this experience. Finally they all succeeded in their striving and found reconciliation with their past (and themselves) at the end of their narration. Admitting the problem/trauma to themselves is however only a first part of the process; the second step is (in the majority of the works) communicating this new understanding of their own ‘self’ to their surroundings. As visible in the analysis above, memory plays an important role in this process leading to reconciliation, since identity is connected with memory. Memory is an inseparable part of identity, the feeling/awareness of ‘the self’ is narrowly bound with the working of our memory, with what we (want to) remember. The analysis shows that every new (different) memory creates a new (altered) identity.

### 3.3.4. Postcolonial motherhood

As might already be clear or sensed from the analysis of the reconciliation moments above, the coming/next generation represents a very important aspect in this process. The key to the identity of the I-narrators is in various ways connected with the notion of motherhood. Very often the child stands for the upcoming generation, for the cosmopolitan elements, free from the burden of history and “one-culture-identity”. That is very clearly the case of the baby girl of Ada in *Pelican Bay*, or Dee’s son in *Sleuteloog*. Milla and Agaat’s son Jakkie in *Agaat* is another example of the new cosmopolitan species of human kind, as I have shown earlier in the text.

Even though Herma did not become a mother herself, albeit it was not her choice, the son her best friend gave birth to, at the end mediates the reconciliation between the two women, even after Dee’s death. Through the specific taste for decorative art objects Yokuro Inada has acquired thanks to his mother, and in which Herma recognizes her own aesthetical preferences, the bond between the two childhood friends becomes visible again. Dee extended her cultural background further, and brought her son up in the “*Indisch*” tradition of the colonial heritage, accepting both roots (European AND Eastern) of her origin and socio-cultural identity. Even though Dee officially changed her name into Mila Wychinska and proclaimed herself simply an European, accidentally born in South-East Asia, but as Herma comes to know later, she did (or could) not leave her and her family’s past completely. Realizing that her friend actually never abandoned the cultural background in which they were both born and grew up, helps Herma find her own position in postcolonial society. Thanks to Dee and her inability or unwillingness to choose one culture (and herewith socio-cultural identity rooted in this one cultural background) Herma understand herself and her own identity better. Dee’s act of changing her name did not free her of the culture and society in which she grew up and was brought up. Therefore Herma also, even though not of mixed origin biologically, can feel (has the right to feel) “*Indo*”. Herma has been suffering from feelings of colonial guilt, being aware of the role her family, especially her father, played in the colonial system. She apprehends which consequences her European, hundred percent white, origin brings. She always felt inappropriately because of her inner feelings of being an Indo, of a mixed origin. As a consequence of that, Herma felt (socially and culturally) misplaced both in Indonesia, as well as in the Netherlands. The

fact that Dee actually never abandoned the culture in which she grew up justifies Herma's feelings of belonging.

*De Inada-collectie is, via een verre omweg door tijd en ruimte, een signaal van Dee naar mij. Het ontkent de vervreemding, het bewijst een 'gelijkheid' in lagen van ons wezen waar wedijver, afgunst, onbegrip, grieven, alle verschillen en tegenstellingen, geen reden van bestaan hebben. Onder de oppervlakte was er tussen ons altijd een verbindend element, niet benoembaar, dat zich aan elke poging tot verklaring of analyse onttrekt. We hebben het ingeademd met de lucht van het land waar we geboren zijn. (Haasse 2002: 189-90)*

*Via a long detour through time and space the Inada collection is a sign from Dee to me. It denies the alienation, it proves a 'parity' in the layers of ourselves where rivalry, envy, misunderstanding, objections, all the differences and contradictions between us, have no reason for existence. There always was a binding element between us under the surface, which I cannot name, that restrains all attempts to explanation or analysis. We have breathed it in with the air of the land where we were born. (my translation)*

Under the surface, under the colour of their complexion, they have been alike. There may have been misunderstandings and conflicts, but beyond that they have shared the same cultural identity.

The child Ada is going to bring up together with her husband Huib in *Pelican Bay* plays an important role in the emancipation process of the I-narrator. By being aware of the skin colour of the child growing in her womb she repeats what her own parents have done. At the same time, she however decides not to do it the way they did. By deciding to have the child of her black lover, even though she had agreed earlier not to have children with her husband, she takes the chance to undo the guilt of her parents. With her decision to keep the child, the result of her passionate relationship, Ada also finally becomes independent as a woman. She frees herself from the Freudian father figure – daughter figure relationship she has had with her husband Huib and becomes an independent and equal partner in the relationship. As Huib also observes, thanks to the birth of her daughter Ada got a sort of vigour, “*Lebensbejahung*”, she did not have beforehand (Noordervliet 2002: 407).

In the case of the I-narrator of *De verstotene* the process of searching one's identity is probably the most complicated and the most painful of all the six analyzed novels. Here also the result of the search process is the least clear since Mina/Amelie accidentally

dies at the end of the narration. When Mina/Amelie finds out that she is pregnant with her Jewish lover, she is surprised firstly by her own racism. Even worse is the reaction of her lover Samuel who has in the meantime come to know about her Moroccan origin: he does not want to have anything to do with her and doubts even that the child she is expecting is his. After this confrontation Mina/Amelie has trouble deciding whether to keep the baby or not. She tells her best friend Elsa about the dilemma and Elsa proposes to bring up the child together. Moving to New York, preferably as far as possible from the Netherlands, and raising the child together seems to be an acceptable solution for the I-narrator. Then, however, the depression takes over and Mina/Amelie decides to commit suicide. Already standing at the balcony of her apartment, she has the following monologue to her unborn child:

*‘Heb ik het recht om jou het leven te ontnemen?’ zeg ik tegen het wezen in mijn buik. ‘(...) Al zou je blijven leven, dan zou je nooit je vader kennen omdat hij ons niet in zijn leven wil. Hij is joods, weet je. Maar ik ben dat niet, dus ben jij dat automatisch ook niet. Ik zou je opvoeden tot moslim, maar dan een verlichte. Met respect voor alle geloven en met het besef dat er verschillende waarheden zijn en dat die naast elkaar kunnen bestaan.’*

(...)

*‘Ik zou je veel liefde geven (...). Ik zou je elke dag zeggen dat ik trots op je ben, dat ik je perfect en mooi en slim vind. En als je ouder bent, wil ik je het land van mijn moeder en vader laten zien, want dat is ook een beetje jouw land. Je zult gelukkiger zijn als je weet wie je echt bent, want misschien begrijp je jezelf dan wat beter. Hoewel ik mezelf absoluut niet begrijp.’ (El Bezaz 2007: 253-54)*

*‘Do I have the right to take your life away from you?’ I ask the creature in my belly. ‘(...) Even if you stayed alive, you would never get to know your father, because he doesn’t want us in his life. He is Jewish, you know. But that’s not what I am, so you’re automatically also not Jewish. I’ll bring you up as a Muslim, but a liberal one. With respect for other beliefs and aware of the fact that there are other truths that can exist next to each other.’*

(...)

*‘I’d give you lots of love (...). I’d tell you every day that I’m proud of you, that I find you perfect and smart. And when you grew older, I’d like to show you the country of my mother and father, because it’s also your country a bit. You’d be happier knowing who you really are, since you might understand yourself better. Even though I don’t understand myself at all. (my translation)*

Mina/Amelie firstly wanted to commit suicide, to escape from the difficult situation in which she suddenly found herself. At the end she decides to keep the baby and raise her alone, giving it the mother love she personally never felt she had. Even though she dies and does not get the chance not to make the mistakes her mother has made, there is a clear development in the character of Mina/Amelie. As it is the case with the character of Ada in *Pelican Bay*, whether she would really succeed in her resolution stays unknown for the reader. The important point in both cases however is the moment when the I-narrators decide to face their own fears in place of running away from them. Mina/Amelie and Ada decide to work with their childhood trauma in order to create a new generation unburdened with the past. Motherhood means for them a chance to take their life in own hands.

As briefly mentioned above, Jakkie, the son that Milla and Agaat actually share in *Agaat* is a clear example of a (post)modern cosmopolitan world citizen. Jakkie, burdened with the Apartheid history of his country of origin, and his own family, especially the father, is unwilling to actively take part in any nation, clearly feeling no sense of belonging to Canada where he is at the moment living. Jakkie is carrying the cultural heritage of both his mothers. As a real cosmopolitan, he is working creatively with his cultural background and the different roots of his socio-cultural identity. He became an ethnomusicologist, combining in his research the classical music tradition he has been able to acquire through his biological mother Milla as well as the indigenous influences Agaat has taught him to appreciate, among others through her being anchored in the indigenous African oral tradition through the stories she has been telling him before bedtime.

In comparison with the other works from the corpus the character development of the I-narrator in *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat*, as already mentioned earlier, is the most subtle and happens mostly within the character and not as much on the outside. Her relationship with Frans de Waard does not change a lot, it actually seems that it comes back to where it has been for seven years before Helena has left for Durban. Also, there seems to be only a subtle change in her understanding of motherhood as such and her motherly role. Since Helena's daughter is already a grown-up and lives, as the narration implies, abroad, Helena also does not have much chance to live out her changed attitude. Therefore Helena Verbloem seems to be the less motherly figure of the six analyzed characters. In the course of the narration she keeps denying this part of her



female experience, by not being willing to speak about her daughter. At the end, she takes a maternal role, and especially the maternal experience, back in her. She stops suppressing this part of her experience and forming process. Helena understands that denial of her marriage does not necessarily mean also the denial of her motherhood. After the process of admitting Helena is again able and willing to trust and become a member of a family again. In the last sentences of the novel she mentions that her brother has contacted her after years and that she will be meeting him soon. She is looking forward to this reunion and the stories he will have to tell her. I have already pointed at the importance of the act of telling stories to each other in this concrete novel. The fact that Helena mentions the act of telling stories as a form of contact with her brother implies the comfort she feels about (and expects from) this situation, even though her emotions and, importantly, the memory of her and her family's past will be evoked. The fact that she has started to write again also plays an important role, implying that she allows herself the emotionality and creativity that is connected with it. Writing, as described in *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat*, is consistent with the notion of *écriture féminine*, and Kristeva's theory of feminine creative writing as connected with the female body.

On the other hand, children clearly play an important role in the reconciliation process in *'n Stringetjie blou krale*. Nomsa/Nancy reaches the reconciliation with her past through her children. After the children firstly refused to accept her in her new (or re-found) identity and were shocked by the fact that their mother actually is black they come back to her by themselves, leaving the father, and criticize his behaviour towards her. They are also not willing to come to see him in the hospital after he is shot and wounded. Nomsa/Nancy however does not deny her ex-husband and even tries to make their children change their mind about their father. She does not want them to lose contact with both their parents (and implicitly their roots) as it happened to her. Nomsa/Nancy is aware of the consequences of denial of where one comes from.

While the second wave feminism felt the need to silence and negate the maternal aspect of womanhood (Hirsch 1989: 4). Contemporary literature does not omit the topic and presents motherhood as a liberating act. All the above analyzed I-narrators have thanks to the children gained something, albeit identity, self-assurance or independence. Motherhood as represented in the above analyzed novels, however, is not in any sense connected with romantic and/or passionate love relationship, nor is it anyhow anchored

in the patriarchal hierarchy. Their decision to become mothers, or the way they accept their motherhood (not necessarily in the biological sense of the word), is not dependant on their partners, and in some cases even excludes the partner completely. Herma in *Sleuteloog* emotionally leaves her husband because of his inability to make a choice between her and her friend, but accepts the child Dee gave birth to as partially a child of her own since they share the same cultural background and taste for art. Ada in *Pelican Bay* gets pregnant with her lover, but decides to bring up the child together with her husband in a democratic friendly relationship. Mina/Amelie in *De verstotene* chooses for bringing up her child alone, with the help of her best friend Elsa.

The authors of the above analyzed works have been able to leave the romantic plot and in place of the expected scenario offer an alternative. Their literary characters engage in amorous and/or sexual relations, but these are not of great significance to their identity as women, nor members of society. The analyzed characters do not deduce what they are from their (male) partners, do not build their identity upon the fact that they are ‘non-men’, nor that they are in a relationship with ‘the man’ (I use the term in the Freudian sense of the word). All six characters we have just took a closer look at have abandoned the hegemonic binary ‘man’ – ‘woman’ and are clearly not willing to exist further in this hierarchic structure. They however do not reject men completely (as it would be often the case in the second wave feminism). The characters of this project’s corpus hereby complete the second step of Derridian deconstruction, since they do not only turn the binary, but take away the ascribed meaning and connotations of the terms in the binary, the re-valuate the devaluated term ‘woman’ and provide it with new positive meanings.

#### **4. Conclusion**

I analyzed women’s characters in contemporary postcolonial women’s writings in Dutch (from the Netherlands) and Afrikaans within the framework of the research project *Back to the Roots?*. The analysis focused on the way these characters position themselves in contemporary society and how they deal with the altering system of binary oppositions. As I have argued earlier, with developments in Western society and the growing effect of, among others, third wave feminism and postcolonialism, the category of white heterosexual middle class male as the unmarked standard has started to dissolve, and with that also the homogenous group of ‘the other’, i.e. all those who

would not fit the first category. The pressure to create/define one's identity, however, did not decrease. In the introduction I have called this situation the dilemma of the Western society. Also, I quoted Rosi Braidotti who stated the problem "*how to redefine female subjectivity after the decline of gender dualism, privileging notions of the self as process complexity, interrelatedness, postcolonial simultaneities of oppression, and the multilayered technology of the self*" (Braidotti 1994: 157) as the central question of contemporary feminism.

In order to attempt to offer an answer to this urgent question, I have compiled a corpus of a number of contemporary postcolonial women's writings and took a look at the ways women characters search (and eventually find) their identity in the altered postcolonial situation. Due to limited space and time the corpus was limited to the Netherlands and South Africa, but there are surely possibilities for further and more extensive research, for example adding works from Flanders, and/or the Dutch Caribbean to the corpus in order to get a more complex view<sup>50</sup>.

All the characters in the analyzed works we have taken a closer look at seem to experience similar confusion and discomfort about their identity and position in the society, which as we have pointed out earlier is typical for the postcolonial situation. They also undergo a similar process of remembering, admitting, accepting, and finally verbalising. They manage to find a vocabulary to describe their personal experience and their identity that is complementary and reflects various socio-cultural background and influences. Here I would like to come back to the question that opened the whole project, i.e. whether women characters search and find their identity in a retrieval of or a return back to their own roots. After the analysis it is very clear that the answer to this question will be negative, as the questionmark in the title implied. Based on the analysis we can say that withdrawal back to only one's roots (one culture) is not an option, neither is a negation of one's roots in order to fit into (one) another culture. Even though all the analyzed characters have (had to) accept their roots, the socio-cultural background from which they came from, we cannot say that they would in any sense return. On the contrary, by accepting their background and the traumas from past, they

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<sup>50</sup> Authors like Rachida Lamrabet, Kristien Hemmerechts, Annelies Verbeke or Lieve Joris from Flanders and Ellen Ombre, Astrid H. Roemer or Aliefka Bijlsma from the Dutch Caribbean come to mind as good representative examples that would fit the aim of the project.

were all able to move further, to develop. The acknowledgment of their socio-cultural background did not mean in any of the analyzed novels a return back to where they came from. On the contrary, it enriched their identity, made it hybrid, fluid and multilayered.

Herma in *Sleuteloog* states that she has the cultural background of an Indonesian and that she does not completely belong to the Netherlands, but has no ambition to go back to Indonesia, since she is aware that she does not belong there either. Acknowledging her roots allows her to close this part of her life and begin a new period. Nomsa/Nancy in *'n Stringetjie blou krale*, which is probably the most complex and painful case of cultural displacement and eradication, also does not simply return to her family and their way of living in the kraal - she accepts this part of her cultural heritage and combines it with the socio-cultural background she has acquired in the course of her life. A comparable case is also Mina/Amelie in *De verstotene*, who does not deny her Muslim background anymore and decides to bring her child up as a moderate Muslim, with respect for other people, opinions and beliefs. All six analyzed characters clearly represent the Bhabhian notion of a hybrid identity. They consciously decide to take a socio-cultural position in-between the cultures, and work with aspects from both (or all) cultural backgrounds.

This shift in thinking and the way the character is constructed within the work of a particular author points to a development in their own work. I have already briefly mentioned the comparison of *Oeroeg* and *Sleuteloog* by Hella S. Haase. The greatest difference between the two works is in the way Haase depicts the friend character, Oeroeg in *Oeroeg* and Dee in *Sleuteloog*. While Oeroeg is clearly still a typical colonial other to which the I-narrator cannot (and probably does not even want to) understand, both the characters of Dee and Herma in *Sleuteloog*, more than 50 years later, are depicted as culturally hybrid, without a hierarchic structure that would disable the mutual understanding. Another example could be the work of Nelleke Noordervliet. As also already mentioned before, Noordervliet attempted to rework the classical work of Dutch (colonial) literature, *Max Havelaar*, and retell it from the perspective of Havelaar's wife Tine. In this work, even though informed by feminism and postcolonialism, Noordervliet automatically took in the position of a man, narrating the story from the perspective of and for the male gaze. As a result of that, she did not offer an alternative for this patronizing male gaze, since she actually re-produces and re-

affirms the patriarchal hegemony. When comparing this to Fenoulhet's book *Making the Personal Political* we can clearly see the development Dutch women's literature has made from the 1970s where her analysis ends<sup>51</sup>. Therefore I conclude that this is not a personal development of a number of authors, but a common development in the Dutch literary field.

In the case of the South-African part of the corpus this development is less visible. Marlene van Niekerk has only published one novel before *Agaat* and actually started publishing literary works in the 1990s. We can however observe a shift in dependence on men by the women's characters by Ingrid Winterbach, e.g. in comparison with *Karolina Ferreira* (1993)<sup>52</sup>, that was published under the pseudonym Lettie Viljoen. Also the fact that Nomsa/Nancy in *'n Stringetjie blou krale* starts a new phase of her life without a (male) partner seems to be a significant difference from her previous works, e.g. her debut *Die Storie van Monica Pieterse*<sup>53</sup>.

The concept of the identity of the characters is however not the only aspect that has changed. If we look closely at the six characters analyzed above, we can observe a development on the three major areas: the bodily element, motherhood and the way of perception of 'the other'. These are, of course, connected with the altered concept of women's characters which, as I want to argue, are not stuck in the classical Oedipal plot anymore and therefore offer an alternative to the father – son narrative, "the conventional plot structure, in which men are central and women function as objects or obstacles" (Hirsch 1989: 2). We can see that this development is quite recent when comparing this to the work of aforementioned Hirsch, Blau DuPlessis and Fenoulhet who have analyzed older women's literature.

While the (literature influenced by the) second wave feminism was trying to omit the biological, bodily and maternal aspect, the authors of this project's corpus on the

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<sup>51</sup> For a greater time scale also Erica Van Boven's *Een hoofdstuk apart: 'vrouwenromans' in de literaire kritiek 1898 – 1930* (A Separate Chapter: 'women's novels' in literary criticism 1898 - 1930), published in 1992 in Amsterdam by Sara/Van Genneep.

<sup>52</sup> English translation by the author herself was published under the title *The Elusive Moth* in 2005.

<sup>53</sup> For a detailed analysis of the character of Monica Pieterse see chapter 7.4 in Lianne Barnard's dissertation *Van niemand tot iemand* (2002).

contrary pay a lot of attention to these aspects. As Hirsch puts it in her *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, “Most areas of feminist analysis have been terribly careful to role out an identification with biology.” (Hirsch 1989: 166). To admit the existence of the (female) body would consequently mean to fall in the trap of the heteronormative division into two homogenous groups of ‘men’ and ‘women’ which, indeed, was not desirable. At this point, women’s emancipation (in society and in literature) could only be reached by silencing the bodily and maternal:

“(the) shift away from the maternal and bodily identity of women (...) is symptomatic of the moves of North American and European feminist writing and theorizing in the 1970s and 1980s. This feminist tradition can succeed in inscribing the female into the male plot only by further silencing one aspect of women’s experience and identity – the maternal.” (Hirsch 1989: 4)

When we take a look at the analyzed I-narrators from the previously discussed works we can clearly see a development in the attitude towards the body, and the maternal aspect which I talked about earlier. The characters analyzed experience the surrounding reality with and through their bodies, they are clearly not afraid of the body in general, nor of their own bodies. To name a few examples, Helena in *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat* experiences the grief about losing her shells as sharp physical pain; Ada in *Pelican Bay* describes in detail the effects the domestic alcohol has on her body; Mina/Amelie in *De verstopene* sketches her various sexual adventures in great detail and Herma in *Sleuteloog* gives an account of the experience of/through an elderly body. We can see that this openness and awareness of the own body covers various aspects of the female body. The authors of the six novels do not idealize the female body, nor objectify it. They represent the female body not from the perspective of the male gaze, nor for it. This (women’s) perspective is an account of women’s experience of their own body from their own point of view.

As we have already mentioned a number of times, feminism as well as postcolonialism are striving to reconceptualise the notion of ‘the other’ as “non-self” and consequently of the binary ‘self’ – ‘the other’. In the novels analyzed above we can observe a change in the way ‘the other’ is perceived by ‘the self’. As discussed earlier in the text, the I-narrators with whom the reader is most likely willing to identify are depicted as the others and experience themselves in that way as well. That, in consequence, turns and

destroys the hierarchy of the binary opposition ‘self’ – ‘the other’ with the one pole of more value than the other, meeting the goal of Derridian deconstruction.

In his *An essay concerning Human Understanding*, as quoted in King, John Locke wonders whether he would be the same person if he had forgotten some of his memories and experiences (King 2000: 2). I want to argue that, as should be also clear from the literary characters previously analyzed from the project corpus, that conscious as well as unconscious negation, suppression or deletion of memories alters the personality. This has also been the ultimate reason for the identity crisis we have been able to observe in the analyzed I-narrators in contemporary postcolonial texts. Mostly because of self-protection (protecting their own psyche and emotions) they have (un)consciously decided to forget a part of their past. That has, however, in the end lead to distantiation from themselves, in that they became someone else. That is also the reason why, when reminded of their forgotten/suppressed past by an object, they suddenly became aware of their feeling of discomfort with themselves, what they are and what they have become. The (other) person they became because of the negation/suppression of a part of their personal history cannot be rhymed with what they actually are.

A traumatizing experience a person has to go through creates a distance between ‘the self’ “before” and ‘the self’ “after”, thus between the person experiencing the story and the person telling it. Since the person telling the story already has the (conscious or unconscious) knowledge of the traumatizing experience, she/he alters the story with this knowledge. We were able to observe this mechanism clearly in all the analyzed characters, and the results and consequences this alteration of the personal narrative has had. Destruction or fragmentation of someone’s identity also means destruction of her/his personal narrative. This mechanism however works in both directions. Finding the words for an own narrative and telling the story (acquiring an own voice and finding a vocabulary to tell one’s personal history) means the re-construction of one’s identity, of the sense of oneself. The task of a psychoanalyst is exactly the same, to help the patient to find words for the traumatizing experience, and herewith to complete/re-create one’s personal narrative. Assisted by psychoanalysts or simply driven by their own need to find what they have lost and feel comfortable again with(in) themselves they undergo a search for words, for vocabulary that would fit their history, with the means of which they would be able to tell their story and reconstruct their own identity.

By finding this new vocabulary that would be able to describe this new plot, the authors of the corpus offer an alternative to the traditional literature where the white heterosexual middle-class male character, presented to the reader as ‘the self’, has been the standard. In shifting attention to the relations between women, contemporary women’s literature apparently does not only concentrate on the relation between a man and a woman any more. Even though men did not disappear from the plot, their role is significantly different and the identity of the women’s characters is not dependant on them. The position of the female character Also changed a lot, as well as the possibilities of the plot and/or character development.

The characters we have taken a closer look at are different from we are used to in literature. They present themselves as ‘the other’ and at the same as ‘self’. These I-narrators, with whom the reader logically empathizes, acquire in the course of their narration an own voice and subjectivity, even though they keep the position of ‘the other’ at the same time. They refuse to take in a position in the centre (I refer here to the colonial binary ‘centre’ – ‘periphery’) and on the contrary find self-assurance in this marginal position. Hereby the literary characters in contemporary postcolonial women’s literature spread the positive representation of ‘the other’ and consequently deconstruct the hierarchy within the binary of ‘self’ – ‘the other’.

The characters analyzed are clearly situated in the intersection of a number of axes of oppression (if we want to use the intersectional vocabulary), or in other words identity aspects. Their identity, the way they experience and place themselves in society, is not only influenced by their gender, but also sexuality, age, race, social class. Therefore in this concrete case we cannot separate postcolonial and gender theory from each other. If we take a look at the way the analyzed characters from the project corpus searched for their identity and where they finally found their new position, it is obvious that their identity is hybrid.

What has also changed dramatically is the way ‘the other’ is made present, visible and audible (to be heard), i.e. how ‘the other’ is represented. In the works analyzed the self-representation project has clearly been successful. The I-narrator characters have at the end managed to represent their political identity (vertreten) as well as their cultural identity (darstellen). Hereby they meet the aim of representation in Spivak’s point of view - they are not spoken for, they speak for themselves and are made visible. Spivak



argues that ‘the subaltern’ indeed has to raise its voice, but in another (non-standard) way<sup>54</sup>. The authors included into this project’s corpus offer an alternative to how a story can be told about ‘the other’, but also about ‘the self’, since in their narratives these two are inseparable, intertwined, and more importantly: not in hierarchical order. The I-narrators abandon the hierarchical structure of ‘the self’ – ‘the other’ binary and come with a new, non-hierarchical, concept that recognizes ‘the other’ in ‘the self’. Hereby they put the interrogation process between ‘the self’ and ‘the other’ in a radically new perspective. Or to put it in Irigaray’s words, they have found a vocabulary for what does not exist yet. They do not have to assimilate to white male subjectivity in order to become subjects themselves. As this research has shown, and I would like to claim that this is the case of the postcolonial situation globally, the act of becoming a subject is closely connected with language emancipation.

The authors of the novels included in this project’s corpus have, with the help of their characters, developed a language/vocabulary in which the experience of a woman in the postcolonial society can be described. They write in a language that imbeds this (till now unnamed since excluded from the Oedipal plot) notion. We can see a development between the generations of women and dialogue between the generations in the project’s corpus. This is something that did not happen that often in literature before.

I can conclude at the end of my analysis the same as Jane Fenoulhet in her book *Making the Personal Political*: “women writers gave expression to the personal: to women’s disappointments and frustrations, which (...) came to be replaced by recognition of the need for self-realization.” (Fenoulhet 2007: 201) With the help of their literary characters the contemporary postcolonial women writers explore the area of women’s experience which has been till now unrepresented and silenced in literature.

Homi K. Bhabha has described the colonial system as follows:

*“The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to*

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<sup>54</sup> That is also Spivak’s critique of Jean Rhys’s attempt to (postcolonially) rewrite Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Rhys namely is not able to give voice to Bertha Mason in another way than making her “white”. We can raise the same objection to already mentioned Nelleke Noordervliet’s *Tine* that could only give an account of her story through the male gaze.

*justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.”*  
(Bhabha 2007: 101).

We can surely find the same principles in the ways how patriarchy works/ed and has been maintained, by “*articulation of forms of difference – racial and sexual.*” (Bhabha 2007: 96). For a long time women have been silenced and put in a disadvantageous position in society on the basis of a constructed difference. In the introduction I referred to Rosemarie Buikema according to whom the objective of feminist theory should be to deconstruct the phantasmic representations of women and womanhood that (still) exist in the patriarchal system and offer alternative/contrastive representations that would go further than the (till now) still valid limitation to mother/motherhood (Buikema 1995: 90). In the works just analyzed we can clearly see that this role has already been overtaken by writers (artists). In their writing contemporary postcolonial writers in Dutch and Afrikaans manage to offer radically different forms of womanhood that are firstly not limited to motherhood, but above all do not connect this respective motherhood to the male element. The I-narrators have at the end all managed to find their own voice, their own position in the contemporary postcolonial society, a voice/position that is independent on the male counterpart. The analyzed characters however do not reject men as such, they do not turn the gendered binary the other way, but find a difference within, a difference that does not have quality/value connotations and hereby deconstruct the oppositional hierarchy.

Here we come once again to Spivak’s claim of ‘the subaltern’ who cannot speak for her/himself. It is indeed true that there is no vocabulary to describe the experience of ‘the others’ in the discourse of ‘the self’, since the voice/dentity of ‘the self’ is narrowly connected with the imposed silence of ‘the other’. ‘The subaltern’ can however come with an own vocabulary for her/his voice and in this way gain voice and subjectivity. The just analyzed I-narrators are representatives of this new theory of the subject,

We can conclude from the analysis that contemporary literature written by women (in Dutch and Afrikaans) has clearly met the targets that have been stated/demarked by the feminist as well as postcolonial theory. It manages to describe the differences within and to write from the position of ‘the other’ without the negative/disadvantaging label that has been connected with this (at that time still) silenced position. Rosi Braidotti states in her *Metamorphoses* that

*“the subject of feminism is not a Woman as the complementary and specular other of man but rather a complex and multi-layered embodied subject who has taken her distance from the institution of femininity. ‘She’ no longer coincides with the disempowered reflection of a dominant subject who casts his masculinity in a universalistic posture.”* (Braidotti 2002: 11).

The I-narrators of the analyzed novels have in the course of their narration done exactly the same thing – they do not take their ‘womanhood’ and/or femininity for granted, they take distance from the imposed images and ideas. They explore their position themselves (on their own) and try to define again and differently what and who they are. This exploration includes at least temporary distance, voluntary or forced, from their male partners. Herma in *Sleuteloog* and Mila in *Agaat* are widows, the partners of Mina/Amelie in *De verstotene* and Nomsa/Nancy in *’n Stringetjie blou krale* break up with them and Ada in *Pelican Bay* and Helena in *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat* are temporarily parted from their partners due to external causes. The fact that they are not next to a man through whom they would state their identity/their position in the society enables them in the end to define themselves in a new and different way, not biased by the above mentioned imposed ideas and images. A very similar principle works also on the axis of race and culture; while being put in a racially and/or culturally ambiguous situation where they simply cannot choose one side they are made to define themselves afresh, in a different way. However, coming back to the axis of gender and the Braidotti’s claim, we can conclude that the characters analyzed can be described as feminist. The authors of the corpus create feminist characters in their work that clearly have a role as a positive representation for their readers. Hereby the authors of the corpus offer in their work a new concept of the subject, in compliance with third feminist wave and postcolonial theory. After the analysis I can conclude that the difference between feminist writing and literature written by women is, at least in the case of postcolonial women’s literature, dissolving and still less visible.

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## 6. Resumé v češtině

Cílem disertační práce *Back to the roots?* je nalézt jednu z možných odpovědí na dilema západní společnosti, jak stanovit společensko-kulturní identitu jednotlivce jinak, než na základě hierarchické binární opozice jako je „já“ - „ten druhý“ a zjistit, jak se literární postavy v současné postkoloniální tvorbě s pozměněným systémem binárních opozic vyrovnávají. Tento cíl je realizován analýzou vybraných děl ze současné postkoloniální tvorby autorek v nizozemštině a afrikánštině a analýzou korpusu sestaveného z děl ze stejné oblasti. Analýza se zaměřuje na ženské literární postavy v současných postkoloniálních dílech psaných ženami v nizozemštině (z Nizozemska) a afrikánštině, konkrétně na to, jakým způsobem literární postavy v postkoloniální situaci hledají, resp. nacházejí identitu, jak vymezí sebe sama, když není možné se odvolat na jedinou kulturu. Práce identifikuje způsoby, jakými se současné postkoloniální autorky vyrovnávají se změněnou postkoloniální situací, jak jinak a nově koncipují identitu svých ženských postav (než na základě hierarchické binární opozice „muž“ – „žena“, resp. „muž“ – „ne-muž“). Pozornost je věnována především tomu, jak se mění koncept „ženy“ a „ženskosti“ v souvislosti s ženským tělem a mateřstvím. Tedy aspekty ženské zkušenosti, které byly v majoritním diskursu koloniálního systému, tj. oidipálním narativu, zamlčeny nebo potlačeny.

Práce má teoretické zázemí ve feministické literární teorii a postkoloniálních teoriích. Využívá interdisciplinární přístup, který jako jediný poskytuje teoretický a metodologický aparát k provedení záměru tohoto výzkumu. Dalším teoretickým aspektem výzkumu je psychoanalýza, jak freudovská, tak lacaniánská. Z Freuda vychází přístup k lidskému podvědomí a také psychoanalýze jako léčebnému procesu, z Lacana je využit důraz na verbální aspekt a vznik identity prostřednictvím slov a jazyka. Výzkum přistupuje k literárním postavám jako k reálným lidem a podrobuje je psychoanalýze, na jejímž základě hledá možné shodné vzorce chování a uvažování.

Jedním z teoretických předpokladů této práce je všeobecná nejistota vlastní identity (pozice ve společnosti). Korpus tedy cíleně obsahuje autorky (a postavy) nejrůznějšího politického a společensko-kulturního zázemí, vzdělání, barvy pleti, věku, náboženství atd. Tak je možné i na relativně malém počtu analyzovaných děl dosáhnout částečné objektivity a nabídnout reprezentativní vzorek dění na současné literární scéně v dané oblasti. Šest případových studií, které dohromady představují praktickou analytickou

část práce, formou kvalitativní analýzy ilustrují teoretická východiska a odpovídají na otázky, které si projekt klade. Nizozemsko je v korpusu reprezentováno Hellou S. Haasse (*Sleuteloog*), Nelleke Noordervliet (*Pelican Bay*) a Naimou El Bezaz (*De verstopene*). Jižní Afriku pak zastupují Marlene van Niekerk (*Agaat*), Ingrid Winterbach (*Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat*) a E.K.M. Dido (*'n Stringetjie blou krale*). Pro obě oblasti se podařilo najít zástupkyně různých generací, náboženství a sociálních a etnických skupin přítomných v dané oblasti.

Díla zařazená do korpusu vykazují řadu shodných znaků na tematické i narativní úrovni. Tematicky je spojuje postava vypravěčky v první osobě, ženy, která se potýká s krizí osobní identity a snaží se najít své místo v postkoloniální společnosti. Také na narativní úrovni jsou si díla zařazená do korpusu podobná. Ve všech analyzovaných dílech je možno nalézt tři stěžejní narativní momenty.

Vyprávění začíná zlomovým bodem, kdy si vypravěčka uvědomí nejistotu vlastní pozice ve společnosti. Vypravěčka, resp. její podvědomí, si na počátku vzpomene na traumatický zážitek z minulosti. Ve všech uvedených případech si vypravěčka uvědomí, že se ocitla v situaci, která jí nedává jinou možnost než čelit traumatu z minulosti a popsat ho, pokud chce (znovu) nalézt sebe sama a jistotu vlastní pozice. Klíčovou roli v postupném procesu vzpomínání a hledání slov, která by popsala traumatickou zkušenost z minulosti, hraje předmět spojený s minulostí vypravěčky a její rodinnou historií. Vypravěčce svou existencí pomáhá a zároveň ji nutí si vzpomenout a osobní příběh pojmenovat. Pouze tehdy, když je vypravěčka ochotná a připravená pojmenovat trauma z minulosti, je možné smířit se se svou osobní historií a současnou pozicí ve společnosti. Tento akt smíření je třetím narativním momentem, který se vyskytuje ve všech dílech korpusu a který také všechna analyzovaná vyprávění uzavírá. Obnovení vzpomínek tak nakonec umožní se s traumatem vyrovnat a stanovit svou identitu jiným způsobem, se znalostí své osobní historie a specifické pozice.

Klíčovou roli v procesu smíření se s minulostí a současnou pozicí ve společnosti hraje nová generace. Ve všech případech vypravěčka zaujme roli matky a převezme tak zodpovědnost za rodinnou minulost, ale také přítomnost a budoucnost. Akceptací svého „mateřství“ (ne nutně v biologickém smyslu slova) se vypravěčky zařazují do kontextu generací a vytvářejí dialog mezi nimi. Pro jejich chápání sebe sama a jejich pozici ve společnosti nejsou klíčové vztahy nebo vazby na muže, jako tomu bylo dříve. Význam

se přesouvá na jejich roli matky, prostředníka mezi generacemi, postavu, která vychovává následující generaci bez zátěže minulosti. Vypravěčky se tak zcela vyprošťují z Oidipálního narativu a nabízejí čtenáři nový, doposud neznámý diskurs postkoloniálního mateřství. Vypravěčky analyzovaných děl musely hledat a obhajovat si svou pozici mezi kulturami (ve více kulturách nebo splečensko-kulturních zázemích). Jejich děti mají již hybridní identitu a tuto pozici považují za samozřejmou a přirozenou.

Klíčová slova: feministická literární teorie, postkolonialismus, ženské autorky, identita, nizozemská literatura, afrikánská literatura

## 7. Summary in English

The project *Back to the roots?* analyzes women's characters in contemporary women's postcolonial writing in Dutch (from the Netherlands) and Afrikaans, focusing on how and where these characters search (and eventually find) their identity in the new/alterd situation of the postcolonial society. The aim of the project is to sketch the developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century women's literature through a number of case studies, mapping the respective narrative and thematic changes. With the help of the analysis of their literary characters I want to take a closer look at the way contemporary women writers re-conceptualise the notion of womanhood, especially in relation to the body and motherhood. Thus the aspects of women's experience that have been excluded from and silenced in the discourse on women in the patriarchal/colonial system.

In order to attempt to offer an answer to this urgent question, I have compiled a corpus of a number of contemporary postcolonial women's writings and took a look at the ways women characters search (and eventually find) their identity in the altered postcolonial situation. Assuming that the situation would be different but still comparable for white as well as black women and women of colour, the corpus of the project includes authors as well as literary characters disregarding their skin colour. Due to limited space and time the corpus is limited to the Netherlands and South Africa, but there are surely possibilities for further and more extensive research, for example adding works from Flanders, and/or the Dutch Caribbean to the corpus in order to get a more complex view.

The title *Back to the Roots?* questions whether the solution of the postcolonial identity crisis is indeed to turn back to one's (socio-cultural) roots. The political and social movements in the last decennia have disrupted the hegemony of the binary structure and revealed its basis as artificially constructed. As a result of that the clear borders between different cultures and groups in the society became blurry and impossible to preserve. This situation, indeed, asks for a reconception of the notion of identity and the subject.

All the analyzed characters seem to experience similar confusion and discomfort about their identity and position in the society. This is typical for the postcolonial situation. They also undergo a similar process of remembering, admitting, accepting, and finally verbalising their personal story. They manage to find a vocabulary to describe their personal experience and their identity that is complementary and reflects various socio-

cultural background and influences. Based on the analysis we can say that withdrawal back to only one's roots (one culture) is not an option, neither is a negation of one's roots in order to fit into (one) another culture. Even though all the analyzed characters have to accept their roots, the socio-cultural background from which they came from, we cannot say that they would in any sense return. On the contrary, by accepting their background and the traumas from past, they were all able to move further, to develop. The acknowledgment of their socio-cultural background did not mean in any of the analyzed novels a return back to where they came from. On the contrary, it enriched their identity, made it hybrid, fluid and multilayered.

The concept of the identity of the characters is however not the only aspect that has changed. If we look closely at the analyzed characters, we can observe a development on the three major areas: the bodily element, motherhood and the way of perception of 'the other'. These are, of course, connected with the altered concept of women's characters which, as I want to argue, are not stuck in the classical Oedipal plot anymore and therefore offer an alternative to the father – son narrative. By finding a vocabulary that would be able to describe this new plot, the authors of the corpus offer an alternative to the traditional literature where the white heterosexual middle-class male character, presented to the reader as 'the self', has been the standard. In shifting attention to the relations between women, contemporary women's literature apparently does not only concentrate on the relation between a man and a woman any more. Even though men did not disappear from the plot, their role is significantly different and the identity of the women's characters is not dependent on them. The position of the female character also changed a lot, as well as the possibilities of the plot and/or character development.

The characters I have taken a closer look at are different from we are used to in literature. They present themselves as 'the other' and at the same as 'self'. These I-narrators acquire in the course of their narration an own voice and subjectivity, even though they keep the position of 'the other' at the same time. They refuse to take in a position in the centre and on the contrary find self-assurance in this marginal position. Hereby the literary characters in contemporary postcolonial women's literature spread the positive representation of 'the other' and consequently deconstruct the hierarchy within the binary of 'self' – 'the other'.

The authors included into this project's corpus offer an alternative to how a story can be told about 'the other', but also about 'the self', since in their narratives these two are inseparable, intertwined, and more importantly: not in hierarchical order. The I-narrators abandon the hierarchical structure of 'the self' – 'the other' binary and come with a new, non-hierarchical, concept that recognizes 'the other' in 'the self'. Hereby they put the interrogation process between 'the self' and 'the other' in a radically new perspective. They do not have to assimilate to white male subjectivity in order to become subjects themselves. As this research has shown, and I would like to claim that this is the case of the postcolonial situation globally, the act of becoming a subject is closely connected with language emancipation.

The authors of the novels included in this project's corpus have, with the help of their characters, developed a language/vocabulary in which the experience of a woman in the postcolonial society can be described. They write in a language that imbeds this (till now unnamed since excluded from the Oedipal plot) notion. We can see a development between the generations of women and dialogue between the generations in the project's corpus.

We can conclude from the analysis that contemporary literature written by women (in Dutch and Afrikaans) has clearly met the targets that have been stated/demarked by the feminist as well as postcolonial theory. It manages to describe the differences within and to write from the position of 'the other' without the negative/disadvantaging label that has been connected with this (at that time still) silenced position.

The I-narrators of the analyzed novels do not take their 'womanhood' and/or femininity for granted, they take distance from the imposed images and ideas. They explore their position themselves (on their own) and try to define again and differently what and who they are. The authors of the corpus create feminist characters in their work that clearly have a role as a positive representation for their readers. Hereby the authors of the corpus offer in their work a new concept of the subject, in compliance with third feminist wave and postcolonial theory. After the analysis I can conclude that the difference between feminist writing and literature written by women is, at least in the case of postcolonial women's literature, dissolving and still less visible.

Keywords: feminist literary theory, postcolonialism, women authors, 'the other', identity, Dutch literature, Afrikaans literature