



**A POSTCOLONIAL AND ECOCRITICAL READING OF
MARLENE VAN NIEKERK'S MODERN *PLAASROMAN*
*AGAAT***

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ABSTRACT

A Postcolonial and Ecocritical Reading of Marlene van Niekerk's Modern *plaasroman* *Agaat*

This study aims to determine the importance of place, specifically the farm Grootmoedersdrift, in Marlene van Niekerk's postcolonial *plaasroman*, *Agaat* (2004). Through a combined ecocritical and postcolonial close reading, the relationship between the characters and place, specifically the farm Grootmoedersdrift and the constitutive aspects of this setting, such as farm animals, agricultural land and wild fauna and flora, is explored with the aim of determining how these interlinked elements are utilised for the depiction of conceptual power relations between the different characters. In the exploration of these relationships within the subgenre of the *plaasroman*, concepts on ecocriticism by Glotfelty (1994) and specifically the notions of Larsen (2007) regarding the boundary of interaction between human and nature are used, while Spivak's notion of the subaltern (1988) and Bhabha's notions of mimicry and hybridity (1984, 1985) are used within a postcolonial framework.

Two relationships are explored with reference to the connection between the normative *plaasroman*, a dominant subgenre in the Afrikaans literature. *Agaat* is considered an example of subversive rewriting and evolution of this subgenre. Firstly, aspects of gender and power in the relationship between Milla and Jak are analysed in terms of their respective views on farming and nature. An integral aspect of this relationship is the shifting power relations: while certain features of the narrative confirms the set social roles found in the normative *plaasroman*, with Milla as *volksmoeder* and Jak as male farmer, the traditional gender hierarchy is undermined in a number of ways, especially in terms of landownership and farming. Secondly, the relationship between Milla and *Agaat* is investigated through the complex dichotomies of their interaction as coloniser/colonised, mother/child, patient/nurse prevalent in their relationship. Here specific attention is paid to *Agaat* as Milla's Other, affording the coloured worker with much more power than is usually the case in the *plaasroman*.

Keywords: *Agaat*, Marlene van Niekerk, Afrikaans literature, postcolonial theory, ecocritical theory, *plaasroman*, the subaltern, mimicry, hybridity

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&

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Ek vererg my vir die stemtoon, die retoriek, die liggaamshouding (veral van die nek in die hemskraag), die oorsprongmites, die leierverering, die volgsaamheid, die hand op die hart, die vreemdelingehaat, die gebrek aan ironie, die burokratiese stompsin wat gepaardgaan met alle etnies eksklusiewe en rassistiese nasionalisme, wit of swart, of met enige totalitêre tipe bestel.

– **Marlene van Niekerk**

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1. RESEARCH DESIGN

1.1 Introduction

In an interview at the 2010 London Book Fair, André P. Brink said that Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2004) 'would have been a stunning achievement in any language in the world today' (Russel & Brink 2010). At the 2010 PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature, both Toni Morrison and Anthony Appiah expressed their praise for *Agaat*. Morrison said, for instance, that she 'found it so beautifully written, so interesting in its architecture where meaning really lies ... It was powerful and fully imagined' (Morrison, Van Niekerk & Appiah 2010). In a review published shortly after the first edition of the novel was published in Afrikaans, Joan Hambidge (2004:6) notes that it is not only an 'enormous achievement', but it also contributes significantly to Afrikaans literature (and to the shifting of boundaries within this literature), while Ampie Coetzee (2004:58) in his review calls the novel 'masterly'. Renowned Afrikaans critic Louise Viljoen sums up her praise for *Agaat* as follows:

Ek was absoluut begoël deur die detail (maak nie saak of dit oor siekte, beessiektes of die blomtuin gehandel het nie); verstrik in die verloop van die verhaal, wat soms gruwelike dieptepunte bereik; ontroer deur die droewige geskiedenis van hierdie land waarin ons almal so verstrik sit. Ek het my so ingeleef in die omvang van dit wat tussen Milla en Agaat gebeur dat ek ná Milla se dood eindeloos geïrriteer was deur haar seun Jakkie se opinies in die proloog. Ek wou vir hom sê: "Hou jou mond en gaan weg. Wat wéét jy van wat ek alles saam met hierdie twee vroue deurgemaak het?" Kortom: die roman is 'n kragtoer (in Loots 2004:28).

It therefore comes as no surprise that since its first publication in Afrikaans, *Agaat* has been translated into numerous languages, including into English as *The Way of the Women* (2007, by Michiel Heyns, published in English in South Africa as *Agaat* in 2006), into Dutch as *Agaat* (2006, by Riet de Jong-Goossens), and into Italian as *La via delle donne* (2010, by Laura Prandini). This novel is large in scope, dealing with an expansive history, farming, embroidery, music and natural beauty, while at the same time exploring power, exploitation, nationalism, ideology, race and gender inequality during apartheid. *Agaat*, revolving around the relationship between two women – one a privileged Afrikaner who owns her own farm, the other a coloured child of one of the farm workers, abused from a young age – spans the course of 40 years during the apartheid regime and thereby forms part of the post-apartheid Afrikaans canon, with its focus on revisiting history. In this regard, André Brink mentions that '[t]he need to revisit history has both accompanied and characterized the literature of most of the great "thresholds of change," as Kenneth Harrow has called them – those periods in which, Santayana had it, "mankind starts dreaming in a different

key” (Brink 1996:17). Cochrane (2004) points out that the focus of post-apartheid Afrikaans literature on history and smaller narratives is congruent with the project of trauma narratives established by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – a body which sought ‘to deal with the meaning of individual stories within the larger narrative of apartheid crime.’ *Agaat* follows the thematic pattern of post-apartheid fiction, and this novel, like Van Niekerk’s previous novel *Triomf* (1994), is harsh in its critique of Afrikaner culture. *Agaat* comprehensively explores some of the problematic aspects of Afrikaner culture and historical ideology – and yet at the same time it considers many of the problems of present-day South Africa.

If one considers the vast amount of historical and cultural artefacts explored in the narrative of *Agaat*, it is not surprising that the novel sparked a heated debate among Afrikaans critics and philosophers. The debate was initiated in a political reading by the philosopher Johann Rossouw (2005), who argues that there are three types of Afrikaners in post-apartheid South Africa: the neo-nationalists, a group which does not wish to integrate into the multicultural context of South Africa and so strives for isolation (in the most extreme form sometimes through the ideal of a separate Afrikaner homeland like the town Orania); the self-sacrificers, a group that rejects its Afrikaner culture and which attempts to assimilate into broader South Africa, welcoming globalisation; and the ‘Nuwe Afrikaners’ or neo-Afrikaners, a group which attempts to redefine Afrikaner identity. *Agaat*, Rossouw argues, is a plea for Afrikaners to sacrifice themselves. He justifies this through his understanding of the character Jakkie:

Met sy keuse om die plaas te bemaak aan Agaat en hom in Kanada te vestig, is Jakkie ten beste netjies in lyn met die oproepe op Afrikaners om eerder nou te aanvaar dat hulle “hul kans gehad het”, dat dit nou ander se beurt is; ten slegste in lyn met diegene wat onomwonde verklaar dat Afrikaners bloot koloniste is wat nie ’n plek in Afrika het nie. Ook word spesifiek verwys na hoe Agaat haar Afrikanermeesters “se taal” bemeester het, asof die toekoms van die taal nou uitsluitlik in bruin hande is.

The literary critic Andries Visagie (2005) was the first to respond to Rossouw’s reading of *Agaat*. Visagie points out that Rossouw’s interpretation relies mainly on the central place he affords to Jakkie as a type of spokesperson for the Afrikaner in a post-apartheid milieu, while this cannot be justified from a textual analysis. According to Visagie, Van Niekerk carefully manipulates the reader to respond unsympathetically to Jakkie and his perspectives of the Afrikaner – as can also be seen in Louise Viljoen’s response to Jakkie in her review of the novel (quoted above). Based on this aspect of the narrative, Visagie argues, one cannot accept that the cynical Jakkie functions in the novel as credible commentator on the complex lives of Milla and Agaat – and thus, more allegorically, on the future of the Afrikaner. Furthermore, Visagie points out the fact that Jakkie only narrates in the prologue and the epilogue, about 26 pages out of a total of 692 pages, is a

further indication that his discourse time cannot be sufficient to voice the theme of so-called Afrikanerness. For Visagie, *Agaat* is a monument for Afrikaans and Afrikaans culture:

Agaat van Marlene van Niekerk is, soos die klassieke werke van skrywers soos C Louis Leipoldt, NP van Wyk Louw en Breyten Breytenbach, 'n teks wat die lewenskragtigheid van Afrikaans en die Afrikaanse kultuur bevestig en bevorder. Met *Agaat* dra Marlene van Niekerk nie by tot die opheffing van die Afrikaanse kulturele en politieke toekomsvooruitsigte nie. Haar roman is reeds 'n lewende monument vir Afrikaans en dit sal na alle waarskynlikheid uitstyg bo enige beperkende politieke agenda waarteen dit geweeg mag word.

Rossouw's reading of the novel often tends to assume absolutes, which is a very difficult position to take based on one's personal interpretation of a novel. One example is the simplistic groupings Rossouw creates for current-day Afrikaners, which leads to distinct clear categories that are arguably unrealistically unambiguous. Furthermore, such a closed political reading, at the cost of other possible interpretations, indicates an oversimplification of certain core issues in the narrative, like the one Rossouw explicitly notes regarding the future of Afrikaans being in coloured hands. In this respect one could for instance say firstly that *Agaat* (as coloured person who has mastered 'Milla's Afrikaans') is not necessarily representative of all coloured people in South Africa, while secondly, *Agaat*'s mastery of Milla's form of Afrikaans does not necessarily entail that Milla entirely loses all power pertaining to her language.

Anton van Niekerk, like Rossouw a philosopher, assumed the same position as Visagie (2005) in terms of his interpretation of *Agaat*. Van Niekerk (2005) also analyses Rossouw's views of all three types of Afrikaners and comes to the conclusion that Rossouw's neo-Afrikaner ideology is just a politically correct way of describing current Afrikaner nationalism. For Van Niekerk (2005), the fact that he does not identify as Afrikaner does not mean that he is sacrificing Afrikaans culture:

[E]k behoort tot 'n groep mense in Suid-Afrika wat Afrikaans is, maar wat die begrip *Afrikaner* ... prysgegee het. Wat gerus "opgehef" kan word, is die begrip *Afrikaner*; wie gaan by die begrafnis van so 'n historiese las lang tranen hui! Daarmee is *mense* – van alle kleure en geure en gemeenskappe – wat Afrikaans praat en daarvoor lief is, allermins "opgehef". Ons ... het 'n broertjie daaraan dood dat mense soos Johann Rossouw ons gedurig probeer kaap vir die strak omlynde identiteit wat ons moet aanvaar as hy eendag daarin slaag om inhoud te gee aan sy jollie bobbejaan.¹

¹ The reference "jollie bobbejaan" (literally "jolly baboon") in this debate is from Rossouw's original article on *Agaat* with the title "O moenie hui nie, o moenie treur nie, die jollie bobbejaan kom weer", a line from an Afrikaans folk song. For Rossouw, this "jolly baboon" is the Afrikaner.

It is thus clear that *Agaat* drew a variety of responses. And in Afrikaans literature, novels that solicit such debate – like *Poppie Nongena* by Elsa Joubert almost 30 years prior to *Agaat* – usually question existing notions of identity. In terms of the issues put forward in *Agaat* about Afrikaner identity, with its interesting myths concerning the importance of land, power and social order, this opens up a number of possibilities for an ecocritical and postcolonial reading of the novel. *Agaat* is also an attempt to write back to the centre. As a modern example of the Afrikaans subgenre of the *plaasroman*, *Agaat* reverses the social orders of race and gender, for first a white woman and then a coloured woman acquires the farm – a mythical space depicted as having a symbolic connection to Afrikaner values and the social order in the Afrikaans literature.

1.2 Problem Statement

This study aims to determine how the depiction of place,² the farm Grootmoedersdrift, is significant for the narrative in the ways that it impacts on the interaction between the characters Agaat, Milla and Jak in the construction of their relationships over the course of forty years. Through a combined ecocritical and postcolonial close reading of *Agaat*, the relationship between the characters and place (specifically the farm Grootmoedersdrift and the constitutive aspects of this setting, such as farm animals, agricultural land and wild fauna and flora) is explored with the aim of determining how these interlinked elements are utilised for the depiction of conceptual power relations between the different characters.

With reference to the connection between the normative *plaasroman*,³ a dominant subgenre in the Afrikaans literature, and *Agaat*, as a subversive rewriting and evolution of this subgenre, in terms of gender aspects, power relationships and postcolonialism, two relationships will be explored. Firstly, the relationship between Milla and Jak will be explored in terms of their respective views on farming and nature. An integral aspect of this relationship is the shifting power relations between the two characters, which comes about through societal gender norms and landownership as Milla and not Jak is the owner of Grootmoedersdrift. Secondly, the relationship between Milla and Agaat will be investigated through the complex dichotomies of their interaction as coloniser/colonised, mother/child, patient/nurse as well as through the subsequent ways in which events on the farm depict the relations of power within Milla and Agaat's very complex relationship.

² The term 'place' is used rather than 'space', because it refers specifically to Grootmoedersdrift.

³ Throughout this thesis, I use the Afrikaans term *plaasroman*, rather than 'farm novel', since, as Devarenne (2009:627) notes, although it is a dominant genre in both English and Afrikaans literature in South Africa, the Afrikaans *plaasroman* developed 'into an ideologically important genre justifying colonial subjugation and white supremacist claims to Afrikaner ownership of the land' and it is quite distinct from the English farm novel. The *plaasroman* became so strong that it in fact forms a subgenre of the Afrikaans literature, and as such, the *plaasroman* should not be confused with the more encompassing 'farm novel'. The differences between these two genres are far larger than the simple linguistic difference of the terminology.

1.3 Research Questions

Based on the problem statement set out above, the following research questions can be formulated:

- What new insights can a combined postcolonial and ecocritical reading of the novel *Agaat* by Marlene van Niekerk present regarding the boundary between nature and culture (or non-human and human), particularly relations of power, within this specific South African context?
- How does place function as both a separate axis of analysis in ecocritical readings and as part of the construction of identity in postcolonial readings of literary texts, and how can these different focuses inform one another?
- How does Milla function in different roles as *volksmoeder*,⁴ matriarch and coloniser and how are these different roles affirmed and subverted in relation to the normative *plaasroman*? How are these aspects related to her views on farming and nature and what are the narrative functions thereof?
- How does Jak function in different roles as patriarch, but also as emasculated male, and how are these different roles affirmed and subverted in relation to the normative *plaasroman*? How are these aspects related to his views on farming and nature and what are the narrative functions thereof?
- How does the character Agaat subvert and affirm the role and characteristics typically attributed to the coloured farm worker in the normative *plaasroman*? How do Bhabha's concepts of mimicry and hybridity function in the characterisation of Agaat? How do these matters inform the relation of power between her and Milla?

1.4 Literary-Historical Contextualisation

1.4.1 A Short Overview of Marlene van Niekerk's Oeuvre

Marlene van Niekerk made her literary debut in 1977 with the volume of poetry *Sprokkelster*. Van Vuuren (1999:709) notes that the main themes are centred on pastoral settings, specifically the surrounds of Stellenbosch, the Overberg and Boland, where Van Niekerk spent some of her childhood. There is also a strong presence of humour, irony and music (ibid.) – all themes that will take shape in some form in Van Niekerk's later work. The volume received generally positive reviews, with André Brink commenting on the uniqueness of a new voice (Brink in Van Vuuren

⁴ The term *volksmoeder*, meaning 'mother of the people/nation', is a notion that forms part of the Afrikaner's quasi-historical mythology. This term is discussed in detail in the theoretical section on the *plaasroman*, and also in the close reading.

1999:709-710), although he is not entirely without criticism, claiming that Van Niekerk is all too conscious in her composition of ‘pretty images’.

During the completion of her doctorate in philosophy on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Paul Ricoeur, Van Niekerk published a second volume of poetry entitled *Groenstaar* (1983). According to Van Vuuren (1999:711), the poetry in this volume moves away from the ‘suiwer liriese lofsange op die eie klein landelike wêreld van Stellenbosch en die Wes-Kaap’ found in *Sprokkelster*. Kannemeyer (2005:631) states that the poet establishes a connection between the South African landscape (as it is presented in *Sprokkelster*) and the countryside of Germany and the Netherlands, where Van Niekerk was studying at the time. In this respect Van Niekerk presents a thematic kinship with the work of the Afrikaans poets Elisabeth Eybers (notably her later work), Lina Spies and Fanie Olivier (ibid.).

In 1992, with the publication of the collection of short stories *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*, Van Niekerk made her debut as prose writer, satirising the Afrikaans literary society, while also satirising her own position therein (Van Vuuren 1999:712). Once again a strong presence of nature is to be found in the narrative when the protagonist, a tormented writer, gradually decides to stop writing and starts spending all her time feeding the birds in the gardens of her friends. She ultimately wishes to become one with the birds and offers herself as birdfeed. Having almost been pecked to death, she is saved, and sets about writing down her story. Although the work is powerfully philosophical, Van Vuuren (1999:712-713) mentions that the general consensus in the reception of *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het* is that its weakness lies in the heavy baroque and intellectual nature of the language.

In answer to her critics (Van Niekerk in Van Vuuren 1999:713), Van Niekerk then published *Triomf* (1994), written in a very crude, working-class Afrikaans. Although Kannemeyer (2005:633) agrees with Van Vuuren’s note on the criticism of *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*, he does not view *Triomf* as a pure reactionary turn by the author, but rather as a continuation of her “‘intelligente” satiriese aanslag’ already present in the former. The novel depicts a poor, working-class Afrikaner family, living in the Johannesburg suburb of Triomf, built upon the ruins of the previously black suburb Sophiatown. The novel deals with various social taboos; domestic violence, incest and racism, and all of these – combined with the extremely crude language used by the Benade family – caused much controversy at the time. *Triomf* received numerous awards, including the M-Net Literary Prize, the CNA Prize, as well as the Noma Prize for Publications in Africa. Kannemeyer (2005:633-634) views the novel as a continuation of earlier Afrikaans works, including P.G. du Plessis’s *Siener in die suburbs* (1971), a drama about a dysfunctional working-class family, and Jeanne Goosen’s *Ons is nie almal so nie* (1990), a novella about a white middle-

class family in 1950s South Africa. Van Vuuren calls *Triomf* ‘bedrieglik in sy eenvoud’ and notes that the key to understanding this novel rather lies in ‘die allegorie van eksistensiële opsies wat die roman voorhou, as in die realistiese duiding’ (Van Vuuren 1999:721). Thematically, *Triomf* also deals with similar socio-economic issues explored by amongst others Jochem van Bruggen’s 1924 *plaasroman* entitled *Ampie* (Kannemeyer 2005:633). In *Agaat* the dialogue with the genre of the *plaasroman* becomes central to the narrative. In both *Triomf* and *Agaat* Van Niekerk also employs references to music to achieve various narrative goals (see Van der Mescht 2008).

The publication of *Agaat* in 2004 marks a spatial return to the settings depicted in Van Niekerk’s volumes of poetry and *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*. The central events in the novel are situated on the farm Grootmoedersdrift in the Overberg region of South Africa, near the town of Swellendam. As in her poetry there is a strong presence of humour, irony and music in *Agaat*. The relationship between man and nature is once again explored in this novel, as in Van Niekerk’s collection of short stories, and this study will attempt to shed more light on this issue with regards to ecocriticism and postcolonial literature. *Agaat* has won numerous awards since its original publication in Afrikaans, including the University of Johannesburg Prize, the WA Hofmeyr Prize and M-Net Prize, and also the prestigious Hertzog Prize for Afrikaans literature.⁵ Michiel Heyns also won the Sol Plaatje Award for his English translation of *Agaat*, while Van Niekerk and Heyns have been dually awarded the Sunday Times Fiction Prize for the English translation of the novel. In the United Kingdom, the English translation of *Agaat*, published as *The Way of the Women*, was nominated for the Independent Foreign Fiction Award.

Despite most critics having received the novel positively, some did mention that the length of the novel was probably its greatest flaw. After writing a praising review, Ampie Coetzee (2004:58) ends his impression with this paragraph:

Kritiek? Net weer Marlene van Niekerk se ou laai: beskrywings wat soms heeltemal te lank is. Soos die beskrywing van hoe Agaat lam Milla se tande poets (ses bladsye), leer skaap slag (vyf bladsye) en Milla met haar opelyf help (nege gruwelike bladsye).

In this respect, Coetzee’s criticism resonates some of the issues pertaining to *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*. However, the last sentence of Coetzee’s review is also telling of how he views this flaw in relation to the rest of the novel: ‘Maar die beskrywing van Jakkie se geboorte is ook weer ’n ander storie’ (2004:58). Clearly Coetzee believes that the author’s use of long descriptions is not always unjustified. Similarly, Hambidge (2004:6) notes that she differs from

⁵ The Hertzog Prize is a prestigious Afrikaans literary award, within the specific literary system comparable in standing to the P.C. Hooft Prize for Dutch literature.

those who have proposed that Van Niekerk should rather have cut some of the more long and lyrical passages. Willie Burger (2004:4) also criticises the novel when he says that ‘die woordrykheid en omslagtigheid [het] soms vir my te veel geraak’, but he also notes that the obstacles that this causes in a reading of *Agaat* are lessened by the clever use of humour throughout the novel. Hein Viljoen (2005:177-178) also comments on the cumbersome detail and span of the narrative:

Soms word die verhaal darem baie breed uitgespin – so breed dat die boek sy voortgang verloor. Dit gee noodwendig ’n vertekende beeld van die werklikheid op plase in Suid-Afrika, juis om die tragedie van apartheidshoudings en -denkwyse in hierdie konkrete geval so aangrypend te kan ontwikkel.

He further notes that

‘[d]aar is nie ’n sterk korrektief op Milla se feminisme nie. Die negatiewe gevolge daarvan is dalk die duidelikste sigbaar in Jakkie se koersloosheid en ontreddeering in die epiloog. Hy is nog een van die swak helde waarmee heelwat resente Afrikaanse romans eindig (Viljoen 2005:178).

Krige (2007:5) also criticises the novel for instances of weak characterisation:

It pivots on the women, the men in Van Niekerk's world being woeful. Jak de Wet is simply a megaphone for apartheid who ruts and frets prior to his own High Noon. He is so sexless, Macbeth's poor player who struts and frets.

Burger (2004:4) identifies this failing as well, and describes Jak as a stereotype. He goes on to say that this stereotypical character might be explained against the background of the *plaasroman*, wherein characters were often stereotypical in nature, and he says that the author might perhaps be commenting on this issue. However, Venter (2004:11) also points out the mechanical quality of Jak: ‘In alles wat hy doen, is hy gedoem om die ou Afrikaner-orde te verteenwoordig. Vir die diepgang van die boek is dit jammer dat dit so moet wees’. Like many of the other reviewers, Venter also notes that the repetitive language and excessive amount of description is not always functional (*ibid.*).

Agaat, for all its accomplishments, is not without flaws. The heavy, lyrical and often overindulgent use of language can at times burden the reader with unnecessary elongation of the events. While certain characters are very well-formed, especially Milla, others like Jak and Jakkie fail to reach the same level of completion, and as a result they are in some instances reduced to stereotypes (or simple archetypes).

1.4.2 *Agaat*, the *Volksmoeder* and the *Plaasroman*

Jansen (2005:103) states that since the mid 1980s the *plaasroman* subgenre has become one of the most widely researched genres in the greater South African literature.⁶ For the purposes of this study, *Agaat*'s position within the Afrikaans and greater South African literary system will shortly be discussed in relation to the *normatiewe plaasroman* and successive texts written as a reaction to the normative texts in this subgenre.⁷ More specific details of the ways in which *Agaat* subverts and affirms certain key features of the normative *plaasroman* will be discussed in the close reading of the novel.

Ampie Coetzee (1996:126) notes that the farm novel 'is a literary event that has been recurring since the nineteenth century in Afrikaans and English writing in South Africa' and that '[i]t has consistently been revisited in both language literatures.' He acknowledges Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) as the first English farm novel proper (since it is a work in which the events all take place and centre around a specific farm), and *Die meulenaar* (1926) by D.F. Malherbe as the first Afrikaans *plaasroman* proper, yet asserts that elements of this genre can be traced back a lot farther in South African literature(s), thus implying that this genre has no one specific 'beginning.' Devarenne (2009:629), on the other hand, views Jochem van Bruggen's *Ampie* (1924) as the first significant *plaasroman*. Despite the simple linguistic correspondence of the terms farm novel and *plaasroman*, there exists clear differences between these types of novels. The *plaasroman* was produced quite more prolifically than the farm novel, and the *plaasroman* can also be viewed as a form of the *vaderlandsroman* (Scholtz in Cloete 1992:442); i.e. a novel connected to certain patriotic ideologies. As is discussed later in this section, the evolution of the *plaasroman* up to the present is another indication of the importance of this subgenre in Afrikaans literature. To place the *plaasroman* into perspective, it would therefore seem sensible to view the rise of this literary form and its themes against the socio-economic and socio-political backdrop of Southern Africa during the 20th century.

The relation between the *plaasroman* subgenre and Afrikaner nationalist ideology is a matter that is often discussed in this thesis. As a result of the various connotations that have in recent decades been added to the word 'nationalism' (and its various modifiers), it is here necessary to clarify how

⁶ Existing research on the mythical *plaas* (and specifically the *plaasroman*) will also be discussed in the third chapter of the thesis.

⁷ I argue that *Agaat* (and some other Afrikaans novels that will subsequently be mentioned in this section) is a reaction to the *normatiewe plaasroman*. This argument must be clarified. The existence of novels like *Agaat* – thus also being themselves *plaasromans* – relies heavily upon the older texts in the genre for their basic characteristics. The socio-political elements that surround and pervade the normative *plaasroman* are not simple, and cannot be left out of account in any analysis involving novels from this genre. Novels like *Agaat* exist firstly because of the normative *plaasroman*, but secondly they also represent the literary evolution of this subgenre. This continuity is indicative of the importance of this genre, even to the present day.

this word should be read in this thesis. When nationalism (or any of its modifiers), whether it be general or specific (as in the case of Afrikaner nationalism), is used in this thesis, it does not necessarily constitute an unproblematic collective term for notions which may today be regarded as hegemonic, homogenising, unwanted, inhumane or even foolish. These notions were undoubtedly a result of the combination of a myriad of social, political, economical and cultural factors. Afrikaner nationalism would therefore in its simplest sense mean ‘a sentiment based on common cultural characteristics that binds a population and [...] produce[d] a policy of national independence or separatism’ (Collins Internet-Linked Dictionary 2003). In the case of Afrikaner nationalism the phrase ‘common racial attributes’ could be added to this definition. It cannot be denied that other definitions – like ‘loyalty or devotion to one's country; patriotism’ and ‘exaggerated, passionate, or fanatical devotion to a national community’ (Collins Internet-Linked Dictionary 2003) – may also at times be implied when using the term nationalism. In the following section there are ample sources that also attest to the undeniable link between the normative *plaasroman* and Afrikaner nationalism/Afrikaner nationalist ideology.⁸ Of course certain elements that form part of Afrikaner nationalism will not be limited to the specific South African situation (patriarchy, for example). Since *Agaat* is set within the specific social, political and cultural landscape of South Africa (and subsequently Afrikaans, the Afrikaners, Afrikanerdom and its numerous ideologies), these ideas will however not be treated within a greater global, social, cultural and political sphere. It must be analysed within the South African context in which it has been created.⁹ These terms and their ideological positions will be discussed in reference to their importance in *Agaat*.

Roos (1998:25) attributes the rise of the Afrikaans *plaasroman* to the socio-economic position of the Afrikaner after the South African War (1899 to 1902), and observes that

[d]ie boereplaas is as die “grondswil van die Afrikaanse Boerekultuur” gesien (Nienaber 1938:43), en nog tot in die laat veertigerjare is die plaaswêreld as geïdealiseerde milieu vanuit ’n romantiese, nostalgiese perspektief beskou.

The golden age of the normative *plaasroman* (between 1900 and 1960) coincides with the rise of Afrikaner nationalism and the development of apartheid ideology, as Devarenne (2009) explores extensively. Farm novels written in this era by authors like C.M. van den Heever and D.F. Malherbe, amongst others, create patriarchal worlds wherein races, generations and the sexes act

⁸ Afrikaner nationalism also conforms to what Anderson (1991:75) refers to as an ‘imagined community’.

⁹ Regarding Afrikaner nationalism, its history, and its impact in society (and other spheres) in South Africa, see Du Toit (1983), McClintock (1991), Vincent (2000), Van Coller (2003), Giliomee (2004), Van Alphen (2007), Welsh & Spence (2007), and Devarenne (2009). This is but a limited list of the research that has been conducted on (or is in some way related to) Afrikaner nationalism.

according to traditional hierarchies, while labour is glorified and the farmer (man) is depicted in an idyllic relationship with nature (the farm) (Roos 1998:25).¹⁰ The idyllic relationship with nature sketched within these set boundaries also becomes a metaphorical battle for authority, as the loss of land can often be read as a loss of authority (Devarenne 2009:630). Regarding the authority of landownership and importance of the land in the narrative (a binary of landownership versus landlessness), Van Coller (2003:51) summarises the ideological foundation of specifically Van den Heever's novels as follows:

In die tradisionele Afrikaanse plaasroman word die plaas nie net 'n ruimte waarbinne die karakters toevallig leef nie. Die plaas word geteken as 'n mitiese ruimte en die verband tussen boer en kosmos is nie bloot 'n romantiese identifikasie nie; in die prototipiese plaasroman is daar 'n beweging na die openbaring van die plaas as bron van betekenis. Deur die plaas word die Afrikaner geheg aan die aarde en sy geskiedenis, kan hy as 't ware sy aanspraak op die land bevestig. Daarom mag die plaas nooit verlore gaan nie, moet erfopvolging bestendig word, is die plaas in alle opsigte oppermagtig aan die stad (Van Coller discussing J.M. Coetzee's placing of Van den Heever's novels, 1988).

Cairne's view (2007:21) concurs with Van Coller's: the normative *plaasroman* is not concerned with the future, but with an idyllic past, and also, 'the farm [is presented] as the site of a clear, but "fair", social hierarchy (patriarch, wife, sons and daughters, tenants, servants, beasts, and land)'.¹¹ This established hierarchy is important because of the binaries that it creates. Postel (2006:23) identifies the interaction between these binaries within the *plaasroman*:

De boerderijroman gaat bij uitstek over landinrichting en een daaraan gekoppelde culturele identiteit. In boerderijromans zijn centrum en periferie als vanzelf ruimtelijk bepaald, en is er langs de grenzen van de boerderij een voortdurende wisselwerking tussen binnen en buiten: cultuur en natuur, beschaving en barbarij, *wij* en *zij* (original emphasis).

Within these interactions – nature and culture, civilisation and barbarism – one can also discern the presence of what Spivak (2008) refers to as the subaltern, which includes the farm workers (referred to as 'hulle') and also to some measure the white females (*wij* and *zij*, as Postel 2006:23 notes). According to Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (2007:198) the term 'subaltern' is a term adopted by Italian philosopher and theorist Antonio Gramsci 'to refer to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes', which included peasants, labourers and 'other

¹⁰ These themes are of course not limited to this subgenre. In the earlier period in Afrikaans literature, which was generically speaking dominated by poetry, these themes were already explored in post-War nationalist poetry, for instance the epics *Trekkerswee* (1915) by Totius and *Martjie* (1911) by Jan F. E. Celliers. The nationalist themes in works from this period also influenced Flemish literature (see T'Sjoen, 2007).

¹¹ The *plaasroman* thus looks back to an uncomplicated past, which in Afrikaans literature signify specific dates: the period before the South African War (1899-1902), thus before the scorched earth policy of the British ruined the lifestyle of many Afrikaners, and before the urbanisation of the Afrikaner due to this loss of land and the establishment of a strong capitalist mining industry in South Africa.

groups denied access to “hegemonic power”, which in the case of the *plaasroman* also includes white females and coloured farm labourers. The importance of the concept of the subaltern classes within postcolonial studies lies in its recentring and decentring of certain matters, for instance the history of the dominant classes, often accepted as the authoritative and most important history, disregarding the history of the non-elite. The notion of the subaltern was introduced into postcolonial studies by Gayatri Spivak in her influential essay ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ (1988), wherein she gave a critique of the assumptions of the Subaltern Studies Group, a group established in South Asia to redress what they viewed as an imbalance in academic work that only focused on the elite and elite culture in Asian history, disregarding the rest (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007:199-200).

In the normative *plaasroman*, set in a patriarchal world based on a powerful hierarchy, there are subaltern groups. The farmer (white male) signifies the hegemonic power in Gramsci’s terms, while the farm woman (white female) and to a much greater extent the farm labourer (coloured males or females), signify the subaltern. It must be noted that the subaltern in the *plaasroman* is not unnuanced: the relationship between the patriarch (father and his son[s]), the female (daughter[s], sister[s]) and servants (maids, labourers) illustrates, again in Gramsci’s terminology, the extent of ‘access’ that each character has to the hegemonic power. Spivak’s further exploration (1988) of the subaltern and specifically the subaltern’s ability to speak are discussed in more detail in the theoretical section regarding postcolonial theory.

Within the *plaasroman* certain themes and metaphors are set to create a justification for the Afrikaners’ claim to land and position in South Africa, supported by various nationalist elements, for instance the Afrikaner woman as *volksmoeder* (Devarenne 2009:632-633). According to Marlene van Niekerk (1996:144), in one of her scholarly articles, the idea/ideal of the *volksmoeder* came from what is viewed as the ‘sacred history’¹² of the Afrikaner: the period between the Great Trek¹³ and the South African War¹⁴. Through the hardships endured during this period, specifically during the Great Trek and in the British concentration camps of the South African War, the acts of Afrikaner women were idealised in early 20th century South Africa and precipitated into the idea of

¹² Van Alphen (2007) supplies a clear explanation of the sacred nature of the Afrikaner’s history. He explains how the Afrikaner’s came to see themselves as ‘’n uitverkore volk’: ‘[De Afrikaners] zijn daarmee identiek aan wat de Israëlieten volgens het Oude Testament waren in die oudheid. Volgens die redenering correspondeert de geschiedenis van de Afrikaners tot in het detail met die van de Israëlieten. Onderdrukt door de Engelsen begonnen de Afrikaners in 1835 [sic] de Grote Trek door de woestijn op zoek naar een eigen land. De analogie met het volk van Israël is duidelijk. Hun exodus vanuit Egypte werd geleid door God en na een lange tocht door de wildernis kwamen zij aan in het beloofde land. De nederlaag van de Afrikaners in de tweede Boerenoorlog die hen tot onderdanen van het Britse rijk maakte, is een herhaling van de Babylonische gevangenschap van Israël. In tegenstelling tot de Israëlieten slaagden de Afrikaners er snel in om hun politieke macht te herstellen en zich onafhankelijk te maken van het Britse imperium’ (2007:886-887).

¹³ For an in-depth history of the Great Trek, see Giliomee (2004:120-153) and Giliomee & Mbenga (2007:108-119).

¹⁴ Also known as the Anglo-Boer War. War fought between Imperial Britain and Boere (Afrikaners) in South Africa. See Giliomee & Mbenga (2007:206-229).

the *volksmoeder*.¹⁵ Van Niekerk (1996:147) briefly summarises the common qualities of the *volksmoeder* myth as ‘religion, bravery, a love of freedom, the spirit of sacrifice, self-reliance, housewifeliness, integrity, virtue and the setting of an example to others.’ Devarenne (2009:633) expresses the appearance of the *volksmoeder* in the Afrikaans literature (specifically the normative *plaasroman*) as follows:

The volksmoeder ideal was well served by novels such as *Die Meulenaar* [D.F. Malherbe] and *Somer* [C.M. Van den Heever], in which a daughterly femininity (represented by characters ...) learns the art of self-sacrifice, sets an example by its virtue and integrity, and censures the rash behaviour by which young Afrikaner men sometimes ‘lower’ themselves to the level of their coloured labourers. In the long-suffering, reliable rectitude of these girls’ mothers, moreover, the *plaasroman* depicted the plane to which the daughter was expected to evolve.¹⁶

The position of *volksmoeder* was given to (and created for) Afrikaner women, according to Elsabe Brink (1990:273), as a way for the patriarchal Afrikaner society to dominate women:

One of the means by which men in male-dominated societies control women is by giving them a well-defined but circumscribed position within society, to which some status, honour and respectability are attached. The parameters of this position, within which may be found the notion of ‘ideal womanhood’, may evade exact definition but yet be widely acknowledged and accepted.

She furthermore discusses the relation of such positions to the hegemonic power centre of males:

Women who, even partially, begin to question society and their role within it, lose the privileges of this position, because, having questioned social norms and structures, they are no longer as controllable; society loses its power over them (ibid).

Brink (1993:273-292) provides an interesting overview of the various factors that contributed over a very long period of time to the construction of the *volksmoeder*. She discusses the political, economical and social events that contributed to the rise of the *volksmoeder*, and concludes that

it incorporated a clear role model for Afrikaner women. It was a deliberately constructed ideal, the work of male cultural entrepreneurs who deliberately promoted a set of images surrounding women; these centred mainly on their nurturing and home-making roles. Even though some of the images

¹⁵ See also McClintock (1991).

¹⁶ It is necessary to note here that the idea of the *volksmoeder* is not limited to older Afrikaans texts like the normative *plaasroman*. In the recent successful Afrikaans novel *Fees van die Ongenooïdes* (P.G. du Plessis 2008, Tafelberg, based on the television series *Feast of the Uninvited*), set in the South African War, many of the Afrikaner women are also portrayed as prototypical *volksmoeders*.

were produced by women themselves, they were utilised in an utterly different context, and ultimately the *volksmoeder* became part and parcel of an Afrikaner nationalist mythology.

Viewed in terms of the subaltern discussed above, one could argue that the *volksmoeder* was created by Afrikaner men (the hegemonic power centre) to control women by allowing them a certain well-defined amount of access to their power. If, however, women dared to question these norms and structures, their access to power would be revoked, making them effectively powerless. As a result 'Afrikaner women ... identified with and internalised this idealised vision of Afrikaner womanhood' (Brink 1990:275), consequently contributing to the upholding of Afrikaner nationalism. In Butler's terms (1990) one could thus say that Afrikaner women were not only required to perform gender in terms of femininity, but also in a very specific derivative of femininity. The *volksmoeder* identity is thus performative, re-enacted time and time again, to the extent that it started to appear as a natural, inherent identity of the women belonging to the Afrikaner nation.

The set identity of the *volksmoeder* within nationalist, patriarchal Afrikaner society, and the ways in which it is reflected, propagated and subverted within Afrikaans literature (and the *plaasroman*), is therefore an important theme that is dealt with in *Agaat*, as will be discussed in the close reading of the novel.

Within the greater corpus of South African literature, Marlene van Niekerk is not alone in her recreation of the *plaasroman*. Etienne Leroux was the first groundbreaking Afrikaans author to subvert many of the themes and codes of the *plaasroman* in *Die Silberstein-trilogie* (*Sewe dae by die Silbersteins*, 1962; *Een vir Azazel*, 1964; and *Die derde oog*, 1966), which can be viewed as the first major leap towards the modern *plaasroman*. Leroux is part of the literary movement of Sestig,¹⁷ thus forming part of the modernist movement in the Afrikaans literature. Although the basis for the trilogy is the *plaasroman*, it differs markedly from its normative counterpart in that nature serves only as a kind of 'décor' in these novels, not a place where there is a constant battle against natural disasters – such as drought, plagues, or hail – or debt with a financier, often embodied in a Jewish man in the normative *plaasroman* (Botha 1998:593). This trilogy, which is rich with allusions to psychology, mythology, religion and philosophy (ibid.), represents an interesting turn in the Afrikaans literature, because the publication of *Sewe dae by die Silbersteins* signifies the first innovatively overt subversion of (or even direct challenge to) one of the sanctuaries of Afrikaner identity: the farm. The idyllic and holy ground that is the farm becomes a

¹⁷ The period of Sestig brought about significant change in the Afrikaans literature. During this period, writers and poets experimented with form and technique, transforming the literary scene (Roos 1998:57). For more on this, see (Roos 1998:57).

warped axis of evil, through which Leroux challenges the hidden sinister side of South Africa under Afrikaner nationalist rule.

Novelist Etienne van Heerden experiments with the *plaasroman* genre in *Toorberg* (which was also the first magic realist text in Afrikaans), which he viewed not as a *plaasroman*, but as an answer to the *plaasroman* (Van Heerden in Erasmus 1999:686). Containing some magic realist elements (which feature much more prominently in his 2000 novel *Die swye van Mario Salviati*), *Toorberg* is a story of two families, one white and one coloured, having to come to terms with the results of sexual intercourse across the racial border, ‘threatening’ the ‘racial purity’ of the Afrikaner family’s genealogy (Erasmus 1999:686). Forming part of Afrikaans struggle literature,¹⁸ the farm featured in *Toorberg* can be viewed as ‘a microcosm of the apartheid state’ (Devarenne 2009:637). His novel *Die stoetmeester* also falls within the tradition of the *plaasroman*, as Wasserman (1997) explores in his expansive study ‘*Die stoetmeester* (1993) deur Etienne van Heerden binne die plaasromantradisie in Afrikaans’. Van Heerden’s novel *Kikoejoe* (1996) continues the tone set by *Toorberg* and *Die stoetmeester*, and subverts specifically the gender roles established in normative *plaasromans* by making one of the main characters a lesbian woman who rebels against set gender roles – quite different from the ideal *volksmoeder*. Interestingly, Etienne van Heerden’s aunt was Petronella van Heerden (1987-1975), the first South African woman to qualify as a medical doctor. She was a staunch communist and lesbian. Viljoen (2008) explores the omission of references to her lesbianism in her autobiographical writings, coming to the conclusion that this omission is a result of Afrikaner nationalism of the time, which regulated ‘the way in which sexuality is allowed to inscribe itself’ (Viljoen 2008:199). In an interview with Shaun de Waal, Etienne van Heerden mentions that the character Tant Geert in *Kikoejoe* is based on Petronella van Heerden:

Tant Geert is very loosely based on Petronella van Heerden, the first Afrikaans female doctor. She used to visit our farm when I was a child. She wore these blazers and flannels, and sat like a man. Of course, she was a dyke but no one said it. A bright woman, she was the intellectual in the family. So it’s loosely based on her (Van Heerden in Viljoen 2008:31).

Afrikaans author Karel Schoeman’s semi-apocalyptic *Na die geliefde land*¹⁹ is set on a farm in a post-oppressive regime country never explicitly named in the novel. The protagonist returns from Europe to settle an inheritance, contrasting the country as he remembers it (having left it as a small

¹⁸ That is Afrikaans literature opposed to the apartheid system. For more on this issue, see the study by Botes (2009).

¹⁹ Schoeman is not alone in sketching this type of post-oppression apocalyptic scenario. In a certain apocalyptic sense the play *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* (1979) by Zakes Mda is similar to Schoeman’s *Na die geliefde land* in that it is set in a post-oppression country. It is a short play about two veterans of the ‘wars of freedom’ discussing how they have become useless and homeless in a renewed country, and how they have been rejected by the new bourgeoisie (Steadman 1988:30).

child) and how it is upon his return. Jooste (1999:547) describes *Na die geliefde land* (and Schoeman's other novels of the 1970s) as an examination of the political system of apartheid. The farm and issues surrounding the ownership of land are central to the narrative. Jooste (1999:553) further mentions that *Na die geliefde land* can be read as a warning from European perspective that 'ná 'n rewolusie kan wit Afrikaners bannelinge wees in hul eie land'. Gerwel's interpretation of this novel (1988:2) corresponds to Jooste's. According to Gerwel *Na die geliefde land* (as well as Schoeman's *By fakkelig*, 1966, and *Om te sterwe*, 1976) presents Afrikanerdom with an unsettling image of its own political injustice and the results it might have in future. *Hierdie lewe* (1995), a later novel by Schoeman, is often compared to *Agaat* because of the similarities regarding the protagonist. Like in *Agaat*, the protagonist in *Hierdie lewe* is a woman on her deathbed who recalls her life in her last moments. In his review of *Agaat*, Ampie Coetzee also identifies this resemblance:

Soos die sterwende vrou in Karel Schoeman se *Hierdie lewe* dink [Milla] aan die verlede en ervaar sy nog wat in die hede om haar gebeur. Maar die verskil is dat Schoeman se sterwende alleen is met haar gedagtes, terwyl Milla gedurende die maande van haar afsterwe nog kommunikeer deur middel van oogseine, en later met 'n soort alfabetkaart – en uiteindelik gereduseer tot net een oog (2004:58).

Agaat differs from *Hierdie lewe* in that the narrative is told through various ways/media (Milla in the present, Milla's journals, etc.). These perspectives and the importance of Milla's strange methods of communication are discussed further on in the thesis.

Eben Venter's 1993 novel, *Foxtrot van die vleisetters*, has been referred to as a kind of inversion of the *plaasroman* (Heyns 2006:1). Kannemeyer notes that notions of the *plaasroman* are present in the novel,

maar dan 'n plaasroman waarin die tradisionele stutte van dié soort verhaal nog nouliks agterhaalbaar is. 'n Mens bespeur iets van 'n familiesage, iets van die ou patriargfiguur binne 'n feodale opset en iets van die tipiese tonele (soos die piekniek en die besoek van die dominee) wat hierdie soort verhaal binne die Afrikaanse tradisie kenmerk. Maar teenoor die skynbaar idilliese milieu gee die roman vir ons die werklikheid van 'n land op die rand van verandering (2005:666).

These novels by Leroux, Van Heerden, Schoeman and Venter (amongst other authors and novels that are not mentioned here due to the limited scope of this research project), though reliant on the *normatiewe plaasroman* for their existence (and in many respects their interpretations by readers), react to the older *plaasroman*, but are also a continuation of the subgenre. In light of the issues still felt in South Africa regarding land, most obviously concerning the post-democratisation claims to

land unlawfully acquired from previous inhabitants, and the prominent position of land in Afrikaans literature (and other South African literatures), modern versions of the *plaasroman* are quite relevant to the discourse surrounding identity and reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa.

Agaat is set mainly on the farm Grootmoedersdrift and tells the story of the De Wet family, which cannot be unfixed from the farm. The importance of the farm and the processes of farming point quite obviously to the fact that *Agaat* is situated in the *plaasroman* genre. However, it is a postcolonial rewriting/evolved form of the normative *plaasroman*, as Prinsloo & Visagie (2007) also claim. This is discussed in greater detail in the respective sections of the close reading of the novel.

1.4.3 Existing Research on *Agaat*

Some research has been conducted on *Agaat* as a postcolonial novel, with a focus on the novel as belonging to the Afrikaans subgenre of the *plaasroman* and the relationship between the different characters, most often that of Milla as coloniser and *Agaat* as colonised. Devarenne (2009) for instance evaluates Afrikaner nationalism within the framework of the *plaasroman*, while Prinsloo & Visagie (2007) analyse the representation of the coloured worker in *Agaat*. In a subsequent paper they investigate issues regarding landownership within the novel (Prinsloo & Visagie, 2009). The novel is used rather unconventionally by Slabbert (2006) as ‘legal-literary exploration’ of justice, justification and justifiability. Based on South Africa’s historical parallels with Ireland, Wessels (2006) explores *Agaat* as a Big House novel. Jansen (2005) includes *Agaat* in an overview of the representation of the ‘vrouebediende’ in South African literature, and Burger (2006) discusses the importance of language in the knowledge of the Self and the Other in *Agaat*, while Carvalho & Van Vuuren (2009) analyse the servant’s verbal and non-verbal expressions in the novel. In the close reading, there will be references to and discussions of some of these studies.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The main theoretical grounding for this study lies in ecocritical and postcolonial theory with a focus on the latter. Some of the issues pertaining to ecocriticism, as is explained in this section, will be placed on the background for the sake of the postcolonial, which is an undeniably stronger element in *Agaat*. In the following sections, ecocritical theory and postcolonial theory are shortly discussed.

2.1 Postcolonial Theory

2.1.1 Postcolonial Theory and Afrikaans Literature

One's understanding of postcolonialism (often also written 'post-colonialism') will largely depend on how one views the 'post' prefix in the term. It can be read as simplistically temporal, thus indicating the time after the age of colonialism (i.e. the ending of one era and the beginning of a new one). On the other hand, if one argues that colonialism is 'the way in which unequal international relations of economic, political, military and cultural power are maintained' (Viljoen 1996:2), then one cannot really argue that 'postcolonialism' signifies the end of colonialism, for, as Botes (2009:32-39) also argues, democratisation does not necessarily undo the damage(s) of colonisation. Within the South African context this is also the case. Although many unequal relationships that are a result of various processes of colonisation are being addressed and the political power (previously held by a white minority) has shifted with the advent of democracy, the economical power has remained for the most part unchanged, since most of the country's economical power still lies with the white minority (Thys 2010).²⁰

Leading postcolonial theorists Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (2007:169) summarise the term 'postcolonialism' as 'the processes and effects of, and reactions to, European colonialism from the 16th century up to and including the neocolonialism of the present day'. They acknowledge the debate regarding the term 'postcolonial', yet make it quite clear (also in the abovementioned quote) that they do not view it in the first mentioned temporal sense (ibid.). Although their work in the field of postcolonial studies can be viewed as pioneering, there has been much criticism against their views, specifically by McClintock (1993), also by Viljoen (1996), amongst others, who point out that Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin hold many 'totalising views' of postcolonial literature (Viljoen, 1996:2), and that they do not take into account the specificities of former colonies and especially of non-English-speaking (or not *predominantly* English-speaking) countries. Ultimately,

²⁰ Regarding this debate, see Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (1989, 2007), McClintock (1993), Viljoen (1996), and also Botes (2009).

most criticism against the notions of postcolonialism of Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin suggests that more nuanced approaches when engaging with postcolonial literature can yield more functional results.

Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the historical, lingual, social and demographic specificities of not only South Africa as former colony of European powers will have to be taken into account, but also the specificities of Afrikaans literature. Since Viljoen (1996, 2002) and to some extent Botes (2009) have formulated bases for more nuanced approaches to postcolonial Afrikaans literature, there will be no attempt in this study to refine the term 'postcolonial' in relation to the Afrikaans literature. Rather, this study will focus on Spivak's (1988) notion of the subaltern and Bhabha's theory of mimicry and hybridity.

2.1.2 The Subaltern

The historical origin of the term 'subaltern' is briefly expounded upon in section 1.3.2. Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci used the term to refer to 'groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes' (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007:198). The term and Gramsci's basic points of departure were later used by the Subaltern Studies Group 'to promote a systematic discussion of subaltern themes in South Asian Studies' (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007:199). The notion of the subaltern became prominent in 1988 when Indian literary critic and theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak wrote a critical essay on the postulations of the Subaltern Studies Group. Most important of what Spivak argues, is that 'the "people" or the "subaltern" is a group defined by its difference from the élite', and that '[o]ne cannot construct a category of the subaltern that has an effective voice clearly and unproblematically unidentifiable as such, a voice that does not at the same time occupy many other possible speaking positions' (Spivak in Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007:200-201). Viljoen (2002:92) mentions that in this essay, Spivak thus also reflects on 'die voorwaardes waaronder die postkoloniale intellektueel kan stem gee aan die stemloses wat uitgeskryf is uit die konvensionele historiografie'. Viljoen (2002:93) effectively places Spivak's comments into perspective by relating it to postcolonial South African literature:

Die postkoloniale bemoeienis met die stemloses van die Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis stel egter die wit Suid-Afrikaanse skrywer voor 'n besondere probleem. Die gevaar bestaan dat die skrywer in sy poging om stem te gee aan die onderdrukte sal voorgee dat hy homself in die proses volkome deursigtig kan maak en dat hy met sy poging die 'ware' stem van die stemlose kan weergee. Nog 'n gevaar is dat die praat oor of namens die stemlose gesien sou kon word as 'n verdere poging om koloniale outoriteit oor die onderdrukte uit te oefen deurdat hulle stemme geapproprieer word vir die persoonlike doeleindes en gewin van die outeur.

Spivak (2008:35) ultimately comes to the conclusion that it is an impossible task to let the subaltern speak. Like all white South African writers exploring postcolonial issues, Van Niekerk is clearly aware of the issues described by Viljoen. A close reading might reveal the ways in which *Agaat* as a literary text accommodates some of these concerns. The provision of a voice for the subaltern and the challenges that this presents are but one aspect of the subaltern as explored in *Agaat*. Another aspect is the position of subaltern groups in the normative *plaasroman* to which both white females and coloured farm labourers belong. These subaltern groups are not an all-encompassing, unified and unnuanced group, but their different positions are determined in terms of the specific group's access to the hegemonic power, which in this case differs for the white female and the coloured farm labourer. Because of the subversive nature of *Agaat* as a reaction to the normative *plaasroman* – in that the coloured labourer Agaat and the white female Milla are positioned in the centre of the narrative, and the white male Jak is not the main character – the subaltern is important in how the mentioned access to the hegemonic power centre is challenged and explored. Thus the positions of Agaat and Milla in the narrative will be explored. Furthermore, research conducted by Prinsloo & Visagie (2007) suggests that the subaltern in *Agaat* does in fact acquire a voice, which, based on the undertaken close reading, is contested in this study.

2.1.3 Nature and Culture, Mimicry and Hybridity

The dichotomy of 'civilised' vs. 'uncivilised/barbaric', is traceable as far back as Homer's *Odyssey* (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007:191). Considering the influence of authors like Homer on the development of Western literature, it is no surprise then that this idea was transported along and developed in various parts of Europe over the centuries. Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (2007:192) assert that the 'best-known expression of the "noble savage" is in [Jean-Jacques] Rousseau's *A Discourse of Inequality* (1755)'. This is a grievous error. Ellingson (2001:99) argues that the attribution of concept (and phrase) of the 'noble savage' to Rousseau is a long-held but incorrect scholarly belief, and that Rousseau does not in fact argue – as Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (2007:192) claim he does – for an idealistic return to the simplicity, purity and idyllic existence as embodied by the 'savages' (i.e. non-Westerners). Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (2007:192-193) are correct, however, in claiming that the idea of the noble savage they mention (above) oversimplifies the savage figure (the other), 'rendering it in this particular form as an idealized rather than a debased stereotype', continuing an ungraded approach which must be revisited. Torgovnick (1991:3) takes a more nuanced approach and identifies a more realistic definition of how the noble savage was likely viewed by the coloniser:

They exist for us in a cherished series of dichotomies: by turns gentle, in tune with nature, paradisaical, ideal – or violent, in need of control; what we should emulate or, alternately, what we should fear; noble savages or cannibals.

In this quote Torgovnick illustrates how stereotypical views associated with the noble savage (also called ‘primitive’ people) enforce idealised *and* abject²¹ characteristics attributed by the ‘us’ (the European coloniser self) to the ‘them’ (the colonised other). There is something about this noble savage – or if not the noble savage, the coloured and ‘barbaric’ non-European (read non-white) – that rouses both awe *and* contempt in the onlooker. On the one hand, the coloniser reveres the colonised for a perceived romanticised way of living, deemed to be lost from a Western way of life. On the other hand, the onlooker views many cultural practices and physical attributes of the other with disgust and contempt, frequently because of the ‘hierarchized relationship between Europe and its others’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007:192) wherein that which is European is almost always considered to be superior.

It must be kept in mind though that in a former colony like South Africa, the ideas of what constitutes ‘nature’ and what constitutes ‘culture’ as seen by the coloniser is also a construct of Western thought. ‘[T]he idea of the savage could occur only if there was a concept of the civilized to oppose it’, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (2007:32). For the European coloniser, the ‘otherness’ of the non-European, therefore, could only be defined by its exclusion from and by its irrelevance to the metaphysical (and physical) centre: Europe. Certain perceived aspects of the colonised, like instinctiveness and spontaneity, are romantically associated with them by the coloniser, but in the end all the attributes of the colonised are deemed lacking by the coloniser on the grounds of the absence of ‘culture’. How ‘culture’ is defined, is again relative to the situation in which the term is used. In *Agaat*, Milla views herself as the embodiment of culture, which she also attempts to instil in Agaat. This must be read in conjunction with Bhabha’s notions of mimicry and hybridity.²²

Within postcolonial theory, mimicry describes ‘the ambivalent relationship between colonizer and colonized’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007:124). It is an adoption of the coloniser’s cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, and because it is an adoption, it is ‘never a simple reproduction of those traits’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007:125). Bhabha uses the term in his exploration of the ambivalence of colonial discourse (most notably in *The Location of Culture*,

²¹ I use this term based on Kristeva (1982).

²² These theories of Bhabha are complex, but are exactly set out to indicate the fluidity of identity. The terms hybridity and mimicry are never meant patronisingly; the very subversion of the patronising meaning that these words once carried in colonial contexts attests to this. Although these terms give an indication of incompleteness, this incompleteness indicates that there is more to colonised identity than visible instances taken/borrowed from the coloniser’s identity.

1994). He defines mimicry as ‘the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*’ (Bhabha 1984:126, original emphasis). On the one hand, the coloniser wants the colonised to adopt his (the coloniser’s) cultural habits, assumptions, values, etc., but on the other hand, the coloniser only wants this to a certain extent. Bhabha (1984:127) explains this on the basis of the ambivalence of mimicry (‘almost the same, but not quite’), which ‘does not merely “rupture” the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a “partial” presence’. Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (2007:125) note that mimicry thus reveals the limitations of the colonial discourse’s authority, and because of this, the mimicry is also possibly mockery. This menacing feature – always only suggesting the presence of some other identity, hiding something that cannot be discerned, challenging the authority of colonial discourse – is explained by Bhabha:

As Lacan reminds us, mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization or repression of difference, but a form of resemblance that differs/defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically. Its threat ... comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory “identity effects” in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no “itself” (1984:131).

The uneasiness of the colonial interpreter (Milla in *Agaat*) comes as a result of two problematic issues in the question of self/other. Firstly it is the ability to recognise familiar elements of its own ‘culture’ (‘the same’) in the colonised (and the knowledge that there is something more). Secondly it is the inability to recognise anything but that (‘the difference’). Furthermore, mimicry shows just how constructed the coloniser’s identity is. As such, mimicry exposes just how performative colonial power is, since identity is always a construct influenced by various things.

The notion of hybridity is closely related to mimicry (not in any specific order). At its simplest level within postcolonial theory, ‘hybridity commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization’, and can take many forms: ‘linguistic, cultural, political, racial, etc.’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007:108). A key feature of hybridity is the liminal space which it negotiates; a grey area that is the result of interaction, in which conflict and contestation, but also accommodation and co-operation is possible (Van Wyk 2000). Hybridity contributes to the subversion of the dominant colonial discourse through various postmodern tactics, including (in a literary context)

die fantastiese, groteske, chaotiese, die parodiërende herhaling of omkeer van dominante kodes, die vervreemding van die bekende, die verwringing van meesterstylfigure (“master tropes”), die breuk

met taalreëls. Daar is ook 'n afwysing van die lineêre narratief, chronologiese tyd en realisme wat aan 'n bepaalde literatuuropvatting gekoppel word (Van Wyk 2000).

The interactive exchange, change, appropriation, altering and twisting of cultural elements that takes place within the liminal space of hybridity, is what led Bhabha (1983:200) to note that it is an incorrect suggestion that 'colonial power and discourse is possessed entirely by the coloniser'. Ultimately, it is these processes that challenge the supposed unchangeable superiority of coloniser, and invert many of colonial oppression's original tactics and results:

Hibriditeit behels dus dat dit wat vreemd en onbekend is, vertaal word in die bekende en aanvaarbare en gevolglik legitieme status verkry. Sodoende word die proses van demonisering omgekeer en verplaas. Dat die proses deur mag gereguleer word, is voor-die-hand-liggend, want die mag van die sentrum legitimeer die nuwe word [sic], al sou dit dan onder druk geskied. Anders skilfer dit in so 'n mate af dat 'n nuwe sentrum, die hibried, die mag oorneem en besit en so gaan die proses aan (Van Wyk, 2000).

Hybridity is important for the close reading of *Agaat* in conjunction with the notion of mimicry and the important subsequent idea of difference. In the close reading focusing on the relationship between Milla and Agaat, the subversion of the coloniser-colonised hierarchy (based also upon culture and knowledge) through hybridity will be explored.

In postcolonial theory the term 'place' is often used in relation to the concepts of displacement and realisation of place, and how this has been influenced and changed by colonialism (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007:161 ff). This study is not explicitly concerned with displacement or conceptions of place, and the term 'place' is used here to simply refer to the farm Grootmoedersdrift.

2.2 Issues in Ecocriticism

Although ecocriticism is a relatively young and multidisciplinary field of study, still lacking a 'widely-known set of assumptions, doctrines, or procedures' (Barry 2002:248), its core aim within the humanities and specifically literary studies can be summarised as follows:

Simply defined, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies (Glotfelty 1994).

Larsen (2007:342) offers a similar initial definition to Glotfelty's: 'Ecocriticism deals with the way literature contributes to the articulation, interpretation and transformation of the boundary between nature and culture or, even broader, between the non-human and the human'. These descriptions are, however, deceptively simple. Barry (2002:248) places the advent of ecocriticism (or 'green studies' as it is also often called) in the 1980s in the United States of America, and shortly after in the early 1990s in the United Kingdom. Head (1998:27-28) emphasises the position of ecocriticism within poststructuralist and postmodern studies. As is the case with postcolonialism, there is a movement of ecocriticism towards 'decentering and recentering' wherein 'traditional hierarchies are overturned – the assumptions on which they are based [are] decentred – and a new, provisional platform of judgement is installed in a qualified recentring' (Head 1998:28). In her short overview of ecocriticism, Glotfelty (1994) identifies a few questions that ecocritics and ecocritics might ask when approaching a work of literature:

- What role does the physical setting play in the plot of a work of literature?
- How do metaphors of the land in a work of literature influence the way it is treated?
- 'In addition to race, class, and gender, should place become a new critical category?'
- 'In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture?'

Despite the fact that some of these questions use rather abstract ideas and terms, these questions clearly illustrate that there is a very strong focus on nature in ecocritical readings of literary texts, and less focus on the human elements in literature. Although Glotfelty's questions may point researchers in specific directions, her outline still does not constitute some 'universally accepted model' (Barry 2002:257) for ecocritical studies. Estok (2005:198) argues that while some scholars view the inadequate theorising of ecocriticism as an advantage (like Buell 1999), it should be viewed as 'counterproductive' – despite the inclusivity of this lack of clear definition contributing positively to the rise of ecocriticism in its advent years – and he attempts to combat this by defining some distinctions, starting with the dissimilarity of ecocriticism and another related field of study, ecofeminism. Keeping in mind that both of these fields of study might in some way be useful for this reading of *Agaat*, it is necessary to briefly outline these differences.

Ecofeminism became prominent in the early 1980s, and has its foundations in feminist philosophy, environmental activism and the European and American peace movements of the late 70s (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007:67). The ecofeminist movement seeks to undo binarisms postulated by 'dominant strands of Western culture' (Plumwood 1993:6), for instance nature and

culture, black and white, civilisation and savagery, human and animal (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007:68). King (1989:115-116) attempts to clarify the aims and motivations behind ecofeminism by relating it to other fields of study and causes of the postmodern age:

The ecological crisis is related to the systems of hatred of all that is natural and female by the white, male western formulators of philosophy, technology, and death inventions. I contend that the systematic denigration of working-class people and people of color, women, and animals are all connected to the basic dualism that lies at the root of western civilization. But this mindset of hierarchy originates within human society, its material roots in the domination of human by human, particularly women by men. Although I cannot speak for the liberation struggles of people of color, I believe that the goals of feminism, ecology, and movements against racism and for the survival of indigenous peoples are internally related; they must be understood and pursued together in a worldwide, genuinely prolife, movement.

Estok (2005:200) argues that positioning nature as the central category of analysis in ecofeminism, as he interprets King (1989), would be a mistake, since other scholars (like Mellor 1997) have convincingly argued that gender differences are at the centre of ecofeminist analyses. Estok (*ibid.*) summarises his point as follows:

So even though “eco” comes first in both of the terms, in “ecofeminism” it is the second part of the term that has ontological priority. This means that ecofeminism is first a social theory, a human-centred approach; to some degree, ecocriticism tries to be something else, to move away from anthropocentric models.

Plumwood (as quoted in Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007:68) identifies ecofeminism’s proverbial ‘root of all evil’ in Western patriarchal society, holding ecofeminism true to its feminist roots. Ecofeminism still places the focus on the position of the female in a white, phallogocentric world, while only including ecological elements to support feminist arguments, therefore simply grouping nature as yet another oppressed group. In the case of colonisation, the ‘land’ becomes a female, “‘new” to Europeans, ... “ripe” for conquering and taming’ – all in all the subjugation of women, non-Western people and the natural world (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007:68). In attempting to undo the binary oppositions purported by Western patriarchy, ecofeminism paradoxically makes use of the same simple dichotomies, thereby reducing women to inactive and helpless beings. Ecofeminism thus undermines its own emancipatory focus for, although the oppression of women in a patriarchal system is undisputed, such an approach (just like patriarchy) refuses to acknowledge women’s agency and complicity. This is problematic not only in terms of feminism, but also in terms of an ecocentric approach, for both sexes are surely responsible for the environment. Although there is a clear link between ecofeminism and ecocriticism, an approach

such as the former would not do well in combination with a postcolonial reading, which exactly emphasises the nuances of various postcolonial situations and societies, and which must strive to take into account the specificities of each exact situation. In *Agaat*, despite the oppression of females by males, the females are not a blameless oppressed group, and nor do they constitute a coherent group, as the power imbalances between Agaat and Milla clearly indicate. Furthermore, ecofeminism once again prescribes ‘woman’ as a singular category, like Western-based feminism had done originally. The problem of such an approach is formulated by Mohanty (2008:243):

The assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location or contradictions, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy (as male dominance – men as a correspondingly coherent group) which can be applied universally and cross-culturally ... [A] homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group is assumed, which, in turn, produces the image of an ‘average third world woman’.

Estok (2005:203) notes that despite various theorists touching on the connective possibilities that exist between ecocriticism, feminism, and postcolonialism, no one has thus far made a notable attempt at establishing this link. He notes ecocriticism faces a real danger of facilitated misuse, and that ‘[i]f thematicism is held up as ecocriticism, then the term “ecocriticism” itself becomes little more than a new buzzword for the old practice of looking at Nature in literature’ (Estok 2005:203-204). Furthermore Estok suggests that if ‘nature’ in literature is analysed without the use of properly defined theory, ‘ecocritical’ readings of nature in literature might become nothing more than ‘a thing in literature through which we might comment on an author’s artistic dexterity’, and nothing more (ibid.).

It would seem that the term ‘ecocriticism’ is in danger of being appropriated for any ‘study’ vaguely referring to ‘nature’, not too different from the cases of the terms ‘postmodern’ and ‘postcolonial’. Although Estok (2005) in his article makes a valid point in stating that a more sound theoretical foundation must be found for ecocriticism, and that the interrelatedness of other fields of study (and causes) must also be explored and benefitted from, he merely supplies an overview of how some scholars have attempted and mostly failed in doing so, without supplying any suggestions or solutions to these problems himself. Vital (2008) also identifies the need to combine postcolonial and ecocritical studies, and he argues for an African ecocriticism (unique from American or European ecocriticism). He further mentions that in order to ‘reconcile’ ecocritical and postcolonial critique, ‘the complex interplay of social history with the natural world, and how language both shapes and reveals such interactions’ must be taken into account (Vital 2008:90).

Larsen (2007:342) criticises ecocriticism for its Anglo-American theoretical and literary focus. American ecocritics have focused mostly on Transcendentalist texts, while their British counterparts have focused mainly on texts from the English Romantic period. He notes that '[n]ature is not a Western phenomenon, neither in its materiality nor in its multiple and culturally diverse definitions and practices that interact with the Westernised ideas and practices in a global perspective' (ibid.).²³ Larsen also highlights the possibilities for a postcolonial re-approach to ecocritical readings. Larsen (2007:342-344) further suggests that the focus in ecocriticism should rather be directed towards the 'changeable boundary' between human and non-human and the interaction between and interrelatedness of the two concepts. This view of Larsen is thus comparable to that of Estok (2005). This approach seems to be more useful, as it suggests that nature is not a singular and all-encompassing entity, but rather opens up a number of possibilities for studying natures and their boundaries. Since nature as 'material reality, delineating the boundary of culture does not appear as a monolithic Other ... [and is] [t]oo vast to be grasped in its entirety by any cultural technological or conceptual tool', it can only be interpreted through 'two sets of partly contradictory elements, embodying the culturally and historically specific variations of the encounter: *concrete experiences* of nature and *interpretive conceptualisations* of nature' (Larsen 2007:343, original emphasis). Since humans cannot experience nature in its entirety, our experience of it is composed of various 'experiential boundary markers', as Larsen calls it (ibid.). There is a myriad of these markers, and the broader ones can include 'wilderness', 'sexuality' and 'natural resources', to quote but a few (Larsen 2007:344) and these can of course have a range of sub-markers, for example 'farming' would fall under 'natural resources'.²⁴ He explains how these complexities can be dealt with:

Instead of regarding environmental entities as objective slices cut out of external space to be rendered faithfully in the representational mode of realism, we may see them as boundary markers. From that perspective they are just some boundary markers among others which all deal with the nature-culture boundary, but without necessarily referring directly to the natural environment. Hence, their interrelation and importance will differ, culturally, historically and regionally, and no specific boundary marker will a priori be given priority. How and why certain boundaries are foregrounded in certain contexts is the core problem to be investigated. Thus, the suggested definition allows for a more comprehensive and cross-cultural analysis, leading to a more profound

²³ As is often the case with postcolonial theory and study, it would seem that ecocriticism frequently places a very strong focus on English texts, or texts in mainly European languages (for more on this matter, see Botes, 2009:14), something which Larsen (2007:342) also seems to criticise implicitly.

²⁴ I do take note that farming can be viewed ambivalently as a marker of culture and nature. The limited scope of this thesis unfortunately does not allow for a better exploration of this issue, but it is a possibility for subsequent ecocritical literary study wherein this problematic ambivalence can be discussed. Perhaps because of the duality of farming as both cultural and natural activity it can act as a productive level on which relations of power can be explored in *Agaat*.

understanding of the actual complexity of the experiences of nature and their cultural implications than the focus on the experience of external nature as Other (Larsen 2007:344-345).

Larsen's definition set out above allows for a multi-theoretical approach to a work of literature, which in the case of this study will be an ecocritical approach to Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* – and the clear relation of nature, or at least the depiction of nature (or different boundary markers) to postcolonial elements in the novel. Both cultural and scientific conceptualisations must therefore be established and adapted; in this case the concept of ecocriticism (Larsen 2007:349). When approaching a text, Larsen (ibid.) proposes the following:

1. '[Interpreting] all the methodological principles and tools to be used as variants of dialogical processes.
2. [Approaching] texts on all levels from the point of view of dialogue, not only the levels of themes, plots, characters and maybe imaginary language; but also the so-called aesthetic devices, genres, narrators, enunciative principles, et cetera.
3. [Investigating] how such structures integrate conceptualisations of nature, including, of course, landscapes and environments, but also non-contemporary, other-cultural and non-spatial conceptualisations that are active in our cultures.
4. [Seeing] how these dialogues allow us to understand and take a stance on the boundary markers of our culture in relation to nature'.

In light of the dual theoretical approach of this study, it would seem that a combination of some of the key concepts of ecocriticism, as described by Glotfelty (1994), would supply the most sensible methodology for a reading of Van Niekerk's *Agaat*, notably when combined with the interrelated approach proposed by Larsen (2007) and Vital (2008), which focuses on the conceptualisation of nature and relationships with nature, and how these conceptualisations and relationships may function in the text.

In the field of Afrikaans literature, some research has been conducted within the framework of ecocriticism. Meintjies (1994) briefly explores the relationship between ecology and literature with reference to Elsa Joubert's *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena* (1978) and André P. Brink's *'n Oomblik in die wind* (1975). Keuris (2007) analyses Pieter Fourie's play *Die Koggelaar* (1988) in relation to the Karoo landscape in which it is set, while Bothma (2004) uses elements from ecocritical studies in her analysis of the postcolonial nature of some novels by André P. Brink. In studies on South African English literature, Vital (2005 and 2008) uses ecocritical theory to identify how it may highlight certain postcolonial aspects of Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* and *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) by J.M. Coetzee.

2.3 A Combined Approach

Nature, embodied by the setting of the farm Grootmoedersdrift in *Agaat*, is underlined firstly for its focal point in the narrative, and secondly for what it may reveal about broader matters dealt with in the novel, especially how it can aid in the exploration of the position(s) of the subaltern, the nature/culture binary, and mimicry and hybridity in the novel. It is also argued that the boundary of interaction between nature and human constitutes a fixed connection between these two parties and that within the context of the narrative of *Agaat* they cannot be understood (or even exist) without an acknowledgement of the importance of this relation.

2.4 A Note on the Use of the Term ‘Power’

This study deals with the relationships of various characters to one another and the subsequent relation of power that exists and shifts between them. Although a Foucauldian reading of *Agaat* may deliver many new insights into the power relations identified within the novel, the limited scope of this thesis does not allow for such a reading. It must therefore be noted that although the conceptualisations of power in *Agaat* are identified, and the way in which this power moves between the characters and the interlinked nature of power on different levels (political, cultural, racial, etc.) are examined, the focus falls rather on the ecocritical and postcolonial elements used as important aspects of the narrative that illustrate this process, rather than on how the concept(s) of power is explicitly defined in a more general post-structuralist approach.

3. CLOSE READING : THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MILLA AND JAK

The analysis of the novel will be divided into two main sections. In both sections the importance of *Agaat* as postcolonial *plaasroman* is highlighted. To identify this generic position of *Agaat*, the functions of the reiterations and subversions of the normative *plaasroman*'s characteristics and themes will be analysed against the boundaries of interaction between human and nature, as Larsen (2007) suggests. The writing of nature in *Agaat* and what it may highlight of postcolonial issues in the novel will come to the fore, with a focus on the dynamics in power between the different characters.

The close reading is therefore divided into sections. The first section discusses the relationship between Milla and Jak. This will include their differing views on and experiences of farming (and thus the interaction within the boundary between human and nature) and what this reveals regarding the importance of gender relations in *Agaat*, especially against the backdrop of the novel within the subgenre of the *plaasroman* (especially regarding the portrayal of patriarchal Afrikaner society of that time and the notion of the *volksmoeder*).

3.1 The Structure of the Narrative

The events in *Agaat* are not presented chronologically and therefore a close reading must be well structured for the purposes of lucidity. The ordering of events in the novel serves as a way of creating a greater impact on the reader. The deeper the reader is allowed into the story of Milla and Agaat, the higher the tension rises and the more he/she wants to know how Milla and Agaat came to be together on Grootmoedersdrift. In the first part of the novel, the reader is confronted with Agaat's life story on the Milla's farm Grootmoedersdrift, starting with Agaat's early teenage years. Only here and there one finds a reference to Agaat's childhood years and how she and Milla crossed paths. Near the end of the novel the reader is finally allowed access to the circumstances surrounding Milla and Agaat's initial interaction as 'mother' and child'.

Milla is the main narrator and it is through her eyes that the story is mostly focalised in three different ways. Firstly, there is the narrative told from the present day (1996): Milla is no longer able to move and is confined to her bed and at the mercy of the middle-aged Agaat. Here Milla looks back upon many of the events she remembers from her younger days. Secondly, there is the narrative told through the journals kept by Milla over many years while living on Grootmoedersdrift. Here, much of the day-to-day of the farm is recounted, and often the journals tell of an event Milla also remembers in the present (albeit that the journal's version often differs), or, as is the case with the memories regarding how she had abused Agaat, events she would prefer

not to remember at all. These diaries are read by Agaat to Milla. Thirdly, *passim* throughout the novel there are short pieces of narratives in a kind of stream-of-consciousness form. Van Niekerk in an interview refers to Milla as ‘an invalid delirious from lack of oxygen’ (Pienaar & Van Niekerk 2005), and one might venture to believe that the stream-of-consciousness technique might illustrate something of that. The prologue and epilogue are told not by Milla, but by her son Jakkie. In the prologue, Jakkie, when hearing from Agaat that the end is close for Milla, boards a plane from Canada, where he works as an ethnomusicologist, to South Africa. In the epilogue he leaves South Africa to return to Canada after Milla’s funeral.

In the early chapters of the novel, the reader learns about how Milla made Agaat into a servant. More towards the centre of the novel the reader learns how Milla raised Agaat (not revealing the events where Milla found Agaat), and significantly only in the very last chapter of the book, just before the epilogue, it is revealed how Milla found Agaat and what led to Agaat being taken to Grootmoedersdrift.

Due to the limited span of this thesis, the topics examined in each section will focus only on selected events in the narrative.

3.2 The Importance of Dates in the Narrative

The narrative time spans 45 years (1947 to 1996), while also referring to some years before that, since the character Milla was born in 1926. Rossouw (2005) emphasises the allegorical significance of dates in *Agaat*, and views them as key to any critical and political reading of the novel. Some of this will also be included in the discussion regarding the relationship between Milla and Agaat.

3.3 The Relationship between Milla and Jak

In *Agaat*, as in *Triomf* (1994), Van Niekerk explores gender relationships within the Afrikaner culture in South Africa during the apartheid years. With reference to *Triomf*, Devarenne (2006:106) notes that it offers a ‘radical interrogation of the racist and sexist underpinnings of Afrikaner nationalist thought’, while *Agaat* ‘is explicitly concerned with the relationship between colonialism, racism, and misogyny’. These issues are presented within the familiar setting of the Afrikaans *plaasroman*. In this section I discuss how the relationship between Jak and Milla and their respective views on farming (nature vs. human) serve as narrative instrument in the author’s exploration of ‘the relationship between colonialism, racism, and misogyny’, and how all these elements are used in the representation of the power relationship between the two characters.

In an interview with Marlene van Niekerk about *Agaat*, Pienaar states that

[t]he chief male character [Jak] in *Agaat* represents an exploitative capitalist approach to farming, while the two main women characters embody a more harmonious relationship with nature, insisting on farming methods that are more attuned to natural cycles (in Pienaar & Van Niekerk 2005).

He proceeds to ask Van Niekerk whether *Agaat* can 'be read as providing an alternative to the current exploitative dispensation on most South African farms'. Van Niekerk replies that the novel should not be read as such, for it is a novel, not a political pamphlet, and that the farming praxis found in *Agaat* is used as a 'textual device' (ibid.). The reader could view this as both a warning and a hint that the literal farming activities depicted in the novel are not necessarily important on a literal level, but become significant as part of the narrative aims that are achieved by means of such representations. The differing farming approaches of Milla and Jak de Wet will therefore be read in relation to the gender and power dynamics between the characters against the framework of the normative *plaasroman*.

3.3.1 Redirecting Male and Female

From very early on *Agaat*, some of the key attributes of the normative *plaasroman* are subverted, but also affirmed. These subversions and affirmations are key to an understanding of the relationship between different genders on Grootmoedersdrift and the perceptions of power this may reveal. Prominent amongst these responsive subversions of the normative *plaasroman* is the situation of the male farmer, Jak de Wet. Firstly, the significance of his name must be noted. Rossouw (2005) argues that the male Jak de Wet is conventionally associated with the law:

Jakob/Jak de Wet, regsgeleerde, is die ou konvensionele verbinding van manlikheid met die wet, maar dwarsdeur die roman word die leser getuie van sy onvermoë om enige wette te laat geld, omdat hy nie die groter wette van die liefde, die etiek en die politiek begryp nie. Sy voornaam beteken onder meer "die verdringer", en hy is by uitstek 'n karakter wat mense hulle ruimtes ontnem.

This is reflected in the characterisation of Jak. Jak is technically not the owner of the farm Grootmoedersdrift. It is especially significant that he is not the owner through patrilineal inheritance. He has no familial ties to the farm whatsoever, and therefore no dues. The term 'dues' is used in accordance with the remarks by Roos (1998:25) regarding the glorification of labour in

the *plaasroman*, of which Van Coller (2003:55) asserts that labour often acquires an ethical dimension wherein the farmer must pay his dues for having been granted the land by his forebears, but must also govern it responsibly for the sake of his heir(s). Dissimilarly in *Agaat*, Jak is not indebted to his forefathers (thus obliged to pay with labour for what he received). Milla's mother is well-aware of this fact, and also explains the notion of paying one's dues:

Mens gooi nie jou lewensreg weg nie, het jou ma vir Jak gesê, dit wat jou voorsate tot stand gebring het met bloedsweet, dit pas jy op en dit leef jy na. ... As jy dít nie kan doen nie, jong man, moet jy maar gerus eenkant toe staan, want dan deug jy nie, dan is jy net 'n oorlas vir ander (p. 31).

This forms part of Van Niekerk's subversion of the traditional *plaasroman*. The male farmer in the normative *plaasroman* usually exists in a patriarchal world, wherein races, different generations and the two sexes act according to traditional hierarchies and in specific (seemingly constant) social roles, while labour is glorified and the farmer (man) is depicted in an idyllic relationship with nature (the farm) (Roos 1998:25). In *Agaat*, however, Jak is not at the top of the hierarchy (as is usually the case with the white male in the normative *plaasroman*). The matriarchal order of Grootmoedersdrift is established early on in the narrative when Milla recounts the evening of her and Jak's engagement:

Dit het begin toe Jak by die aandete die duur verloofring aan jou vinger gesit het. Diamonds are forever, het hy gesê. Dit was 'n knoets van 'n diamant gevat in goud. Jy kon haar gedagtes lees. Daar sou liever iets prakties met sulke geld gedoen kon word, iets vir die plaas wat nou joune geword het omdat jy sou gaan trou. Maar sy het niks gesê nie. Omdat jy wat nog nooit kon guns vind in haar oë nie, uiteindelik volledig sou wees. Iemand se vrou. In die normale loop van dinge, iemand se ma (p. 26).

Milla, reading her mother's thoughts, here reveals how her mother views everything (also money) in relation to its importance to the farm. Furthermore, what is important to Milla's mother is established through Milla explaining that her own worth depends not only on her being a wife, but also having a child, and continuing the lineage. Here it becomes clear that Milla can only access her matriarchal position by getting married. This conflict between a matriarchal and patriarchal situation is constantly felt in Milla and Jak's relationship. Milla's mother speaks earnestly to Jak after dinner on the night of the couple's engagement:

Jou ma was onverbiddelik. Na Jak sy graad in die regte op Stellenbosch gekry het, het sy gesê, moes jy sorg dat hy 'n diploma op Elsenburg gaan loop om hom voor te berei vir die boerdery. Of dit, of hy sit nie sy voete op my grond nie, het sy gesê. ... Ek wil jou papiere sien, jong man, het Ma gesê

die aand van die verlowing, en ek sal jou self 'n paar vrae vra dat ek kan hoor of hulle jou iets geleer het daar by die kollege. ... Ek hoop jy is so verstandig as wat jy aantreklik is (pp. 26-27).

Milla's mother stresses her symbolic authority as matriarch of Grootmoedersdrift ('my grond'). Milla acknowledges this: '...al het jy hom voor die tyd gewaarsku, net een mens het gepraat in die huis waar jy grootgeword het, en dit was jou ma. Jou pa het opgestaan en by die venster gaan uitkyk' (p. 26). Milla's mother's position as matriarch is further reinforced by Milla's father removing himself from this conversation. Later in the narrative, when Milla's mother visits Grootmoedersdrift while Milla is pregnant, her mother yet again reinforces her power position as matriarch, and also as a woman:

Ons vrouens mag die swakkere vat wees, maar ons is eintlik die baas, dit weet jy net so goed soos ek. Ons werk net op ander maniere. Ons hoef nie bang te wees nie. Ons het hulle waar dit die seerste maak (p. 151).

As opposed to Milla, a victim of domestic violence, Milla's mother dominates her father. This might also be a way to indicate how women in the novel are not a homogeneous group. This wariness of creating homogeneity for the genders is another way in which *Agaat* differs from the normative *plaasroman*.

The different relationships Milla has with her parents are also important in understanding her characterisation. Her father, who is sketched as a soft-spoken character, a 'victim' of Milla's mother, is the parent Milla clearly has the most affection for, as illustrated most times she mentions him:

Baie keer was dit net jy en Pa, dit was julle beste tye, hy het jou opera-arias geleer en op veldekspidisies geneem. Jou pa met sy lang treë en sy perfekte gehoor, jy kon nie glo dat hy die windskeef oubaas geword het met die skuifelstappie nie (p. 29).

Metodes waarvan min mense nog weet. Pa't my die belang van hierdie ou kennis geleer hy't gesê die wiel draai altyd my kind daar kom weer 'n tyd van armoe & nood & die boer wat dan nie weet van die ou weë nie sal in sy glorie wees toe huil ek daar oor Pa se onderstrepings by die stukke oor die veldverval in ons land & die uitputting & verniel van die grond. Dis wat A. ook moet leer die ou weë & die sorg vir die weerlose aarde, die pannetjies & die vleie & die "skupaaie" & hoe ons dit moe beskerm teen die aanslae v.d. sg. beskawing want hoeveel eeue vat dit nie vir die moederrots om te verbrokkel & te ontbind tot grond nie & dan kom die mens & verwoes dit deur gierigheid & onverskilligheid (pp. 78-79).

The first quote reveals Milla's love of music, specifically German *lieder*, something she also learns from her father. She instils this love in both Agaat and Jakkie, and for both these characters music is also important. Jakkie becomes an ethnomusicologist, while Afrikaans folksongs play an important role in the shaping of Agaat's identity.

The second quote illustrates Milla's father's concern with conservation, a personal conviction that Milla finds touching and shares with him. Milla's references to the earth as 'die weerlose aarde' and 'moederrots' is revealing about the position she takes towards nature. She views it as something that is helpless and must be protected against 'die aanslae v.d. sg. beskawing'. By writing 'sg. beskawing', she also makes known her negative feelings towards the progression of human beings at the cost of nature. Milla's interest in and reverence for nature, which is cardinal to her approaches to farming (the significance of which is discussed further on), are traits that she learns from her father, not her mother. When she starts crying while reading the text on conservation and destruction of natural resources, she is thus mourning both the *loss of her father* and the *loss of nature*. This link between her father and nature thus confirms the traditional notion of the *plaasroman*: the farmer (man) is inextricably connected to his farm, even to the extent that his whole identity revolves around him as farmer. When Milla is reading this book on farming, she is reading (and remembering) her father's legacy.

Another aspect that is important in this section is the concept of conservation. As was pointed out, the genealogical link between successive generations requires the preservation of land: the farmer inherits it from his forebears, but he must not exploit the land, he must treat it with respect so that it can be maintained for the next generation. In this sense, then, the conservation of nature is also inextricably bound to the conservation of identity, for the farmer whose identity is formed by the farm will suffer the loss of identity if the land is lost. The farm as a natural resource thus also becomes a site of identity construction and therefore of culture. If the farm is lost, identity cannot be preserved, so the farmer's successors will be left without an identity and without a culture. This notion of conservation presented in this passage of *Agaat* adheres to the traditional views of the normative *plaasroman* regarding the farmer's mythical relationship to the land (Van Coller 2003:51).

At the same time, though, this characteristic of the normative *plaasroman* is undermined. The young Milla does not have an heir. Milla's desire to have a child is then focused on Agaat, and she raises the girl very much as a child of her own.²⁵ Yet Agaat is a coloured child with no heirdom to

²⁵ The relationship between Milla and Agaat is discussed here insofar as it relates to the novel's subversion of certain notions of gender (which is relevant for the discussion of the positions of Milla and Jak on Grootmoedersdrift). How Milla imbues Agaat with elements of Afrikaner culture is explored in more detail in the following chapter.

the land. Although Agaat is raised as an Afrikaner, she can never become an Afrikaner, even if she learns to love and treasure the land, even if she were to internalise the ideology of the Afrikaner farmer – for, according to the exclusionary methods required for the establishment of Afrikaner national identity in the sense of Anderson’s notion of the ‘imagined community’ (1991), this identity is subject to the colour of one’s skin and one’s birth into privileged landownership.²⁶ Thus, while the farm constructs identity, the subaltern is neither allowed full access to that identity, nor to the power that accompanies landownership in capitalist societies. Thus, Milla wants Agaat to learn about the old ways of farming, to learn about preserving the land, to learn about everything that makes the farmer, the Boer, the Afrikaner what he (she) is – but without ever fully obtaining this identity. Here it is possible to observe the hybridity that is central to the postcolonial situation: Milla wants Agaat to acquire all the knowledge passed on by Afrikaners from generation to generation, but she excludes the possibility for Agaat to ever become the farmer (the Afrikaner) herself. Milla views Afrikaner culture as inherently superior to the culture of the coloured farm workers (‘die volk’), and teaching Agaat elements of Afrikaner culture is viewed as a ‘noble’ deed of upliftment of Agaat by Milla. Herein lies the irony of Bhabha’s notion of hybridity (1994): Agaat becomes a better farmer than Milla, and also a better mother for Jakkie than Milla ever was, and in the end she does become the owner of the farm. Milla resents Agaat for her competence in all of these Afrikaner realms and attempts to undo Agaat’s power. This can be read as an illustration of the fear of the coloniser that the colonised might, to use a cliché, beat them at their own game, by undoing the illusion of racial superiority through mastering another culture.

Though it is no great revelation, knowledge of farming (key to Afrikaner identity) is obviously not a kind of natural instinct, but merely knowledge that can be acquired by anyone. The subaltern also has the potential to gain access to this power. It is therefore significant that when Agaat enters her teenage years and Milla becomes pregnant with Jakkie, Agaat is banned to the servants’ quarters in the backyard, forced to wear a uniform; demoted from child to servant. The importance of the relationship between parent and child is therefore also reflected in the relationship between Milla and Agaat, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

²⁶ The connection between Afrikaner nationalist ideology and the normative *plaasroman* has up to this point been mentioned numerous times in this thesis. The following quote from Anderson (1983:141-142) indicates the ambivalence of cultural products created within nationalist milieus:

In an age when it is so common for progressive, cosmopolitan intellectuals (particularly in Europe?) to insist on the near-pathological character of nationalism, its roots in fear and hatred of the Other, and its affinities with racism, it is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love. The cultural products of nationalism – poetry, prose fiction, music, plastic arts – show this love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles. On the other hand, how truly rare it is to find *analogous* nationalist products expressing fear and loathing (original emphasis).

Despite the important influence of her father on the forming of Milla's identity as a farmer, Milla still admits her mother to be the undisputed stronger one of her parents. For instance, she calls her mother 'onverbiddelik' (p. 26) and the first person she thinks to call in a crisis (like when she begins feeling contractions before Jakkie's birth) is also her mother: 'Jy het gebel, wie anders, die alleswetende' (p. 181). The strict respect that Milla has for her mother is revealed by her calling her mother 'die alleswetende'. The matriarchal situation in *Agaat* results in the progenitor, traditionally a position filled by a male in the normative *plaasroman*, being first Milla's mother, and then Milla (a progenitrix) herself. This serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it serves to subvert the traditional formula of the normative *plaasroman*, challenging the long-established role allocation by gender. Secondly, it problematises the position of the centre of power and the relation of the subaltern to this power. Lastly, it supplies the background for each character's approach to farming and what this reveals about their identities.

Milla's identity is powerfully influenced by her matriarchal mother. Being aware of her own farming heritage, Milla contrasts her own heritage with Jak's:

Hy was nie 'n boerseun nie. Sy hande was sag, hy was die enigste seun van die dokter op Caledon, geskool tot gentleman op Bishops. Hy sou alles van voor af moes leer. Van jou en jou familie sou hy dit moes kry, want sy ouers is al twee vroeg dood (p. 26).

Therefore, despite his physical attractiveness and law education, Jak de Wet does not fit the preferred Afrikaner image, as is also pointed out by Milla's mother:

Ma was skepties toe jy haar die eerste keer van hom vertel het. ... Jou ma was onverbiddelik. Na Jak sy graad in die regte op Stellenbosch gekry het, het sy gesê, moes jy sorg dat hy 'n diploma op Elsenburg gaan loop om hom voor te berei vir die boerdery. Of dit, of hy sit nie sy voete op my grond nie, het sy gesê (pp. 26-27).

Milla's mother, despite also defying the traditional roles of the sexes propagated in the normative *plaasroman* by being the progenitrix of the farm, values typical Afrikaner ideals found in the normative *plaasroman*: that her child should inherit the family farm, and that she should marry an Afrikaner male who will be a capable farmer. This is also because it would not be acceptable for Milla to farm herself; even the inheritance of Grootmoedersdrift was dependent upon Milla getting married so that her husband could farm. In this respect the Afrikaner archetype that appears in the normative *plaasroman* is affirmed to a certain extent. Continuing the affirmation, Milla's mother also stresses her and her daughter's indebtedness to their forebears, to whom they owe Grootmoedersdrift (p. 31, quoted earlier). Milla confirms this when she says to Jak '[o]ns moet die

naam [Grootmoedersdrift] gestand doen' (p. 30). By saying this, Milla may also be revealing her true intent – to be the matriarch of Grootmoedersdrift, like her mother before her, and like her grandmother before her mother. This ambition is constantly overshadowed with the traditional position of females in Afrikaner society, as Milla's mother's words, echoed to Milla by Jak, indicates: 'n Afrikanervrou gaan haar weë in stilte en swye' (p. 51).

Through the prominence of women in *Agaat* there also comes a certain subversion of the *volksmoeder* ideal. When the character Milla is viewed against the framework of the *volksmoeder* as summarised by Van Niekerk (1996:147) and Brink (1990:290), it is clear that she is anything but the unreal idyllic prototype sketched in Afrikaner mythology. The following passages from Milla's diary, dated 21 April 1960, illustrate her religiousness and 'spirit of sacrifice' as Van Niekerk (1996:147) refers to it:

Goeie begin gemaak vandag met die regmaak van die kamers die buitekamer & die babakmr. Verstaan vir die eerste keer waarom alles moes gebeur soos dit gebeur het Gods grote Voorsienigheid ... Nou is alles soos dit hoort dit is seker die regte ding om te doen vir almal se onthalwe. Daar was tog nie ander genade nie. Het Beatrice gebel om haar te vertel van my besluit & dié is nou heel verlig & bak mooi broodjies & wil my voorstel vir voorsitster van die VLV. Stel jou voor! Ek kan die vrou klap, regtig.

Toestand met J. God sy dank beter noudat ek werk maak van die aangeleentheid. Dat dit soveel moet kos maar ek wil liever nie daaraan dink nie (pp. 38-39).

Sanders (2008:22) notes that Milla here 'establishes a pattern of imperatives noted down as facts', and that through noting down her actions as 'goeie begin', 'regmaak', 'alles is soos dit hoort', and '[d]aar was tog nie ander genade nie', she in fact attempts to justify them as 'right'. Furthermore, Milla does not take responsibility for her own decisions up to this point. Rather she ascribes it to 'Gods grote Voorsienigheid', thereby 'turning deed into duty' (Sanders 2008:22) – duty that is part of the dues that the farmer must pay. Milla explains how she has sacrificed having Agaat (who at this stage in the narrative had still recently been like a child to her) in the house for the sake of the opinion of the community (referring to Beatrice's reaction, and that by placing the coloured girl in the position of maid she has earned the respect of the white farming community again), and for the sake of marital peace (referring to the relationship with Jak becoming better since she has paid attention to 'die aangeleentheid', i.e. Agaat). Ironically, however, Milla says 'Dat dit soveel moet kos maar ek wil liever nie daaraan dink nie' – an indication that she knows that these actions will eventually have some form of repercussion, but for the sake of temporary peace of mind, she ignores thinking about the matter.

Through Milla's actions, she indicates how she makes 'sacrifices' to meet the requirements set for her as woman (*volksmoeder*) by her husband and the Afrikaner community. She also at times betrays how she has internalised these values when, after marrying Jak, she calls herself a 'regte vrou' (p. 36). Ironically, in this passage where Milla describes her actions to move Agaat out of the house, she defies the idea of being a typical *volksmoeder* when uttering her detest at the mere idea of being nominated by Beatrice for being the chair of the VLV²⁷ (also quoted above).

In the normative *plaasroman*, the farmer's wife (the *volksmoeder*) was unquestionably loyal to him. Milla defies this stereotypical loyalty by speaking out to Beatrice about Jak abusing her:

Toe vertel jy haar van Jak, van hoe hy jou behandel het. Jy het haar alles vertel van die verf van die kassies en die sleep oor die sement en die skrape en die bloukolle en hoe dit deur die jare aangegaan het, en hoe hy in homself gekeer was, 'n tydbom wat wag om af te gaan ... Hoekom het ek met hom getrou, Beatrice? het jy gevra, wie is hierdie man? Hoe meer ek na hierdie foto's kyk om te probeer verstaan, hoe groter raak die raaisel (p. 124).

Milla's defiance of the rules of traditional phallogentric Afrikaner society, and her actions – which contradict those of the loyal *volksmoeder* – are given emphasis by Beatrice's response when Milla asks her to talk about her problems with her own husband, Thys:

En toe het jy dit gesien, hoe sy toeslaan, hoe die verweer oor haar kom, oor haar mond en in haar oë. Meer as verweer, afsku, oordeel. Oor jǒu, nie oor Jak nie.

Ek sal nǒit uit die huis praat nie, Milla. Die huwelik is héilig en dit is priváát. Alles rus daarop. Thys hét sy foute maar hy is 'n góéie mens, 'n góéie mán, en ek staan bý hom, deur dik en dún soos ek voor die heilige Here belóóf het (pp. 124-125).

Here Milla's mother's words that 'n Afrikanervrou gaan haar weë in stilte en swye' are again important. Despite Milla's unusual position on Grootmoedersdrift as primary landowner, coming from a lineage of farming women, and the power she holds on Grootmoedersdrift as a result of this, her position within the greater society is here re-established by Beatrice. Women like Beatrice, who 'gaan haar weë in stilte en swye', have some access to the hegemonic power of the males they are married to. The idea of Milla marrying Jak to access his power might be what Beatrice intends to mention in her incomplete sentence: 'Miskien is jy afhanklik van sy ...' (power?). Beatrice's words can be read as a representation of other *volksmoeder-boervroue*, and moreover it indicates the power that the patriarchal Afrikaner society exerts. Milla's mother,

²⁷ The Vroue Landbouvereniging is an organisation established in 1929 in South Africa. To date they are still active, and on their website, www.vlv.co.za, they explain that they still hold to their original motto 'Vir huis en haard'.

despite being the ultimate matriarch, still acknowledges the subservient position of women when she says to Milla ‘van nou af is jy die bed’ (p. 50). As Brink (1990:273) notes,

[w]omen who, even partially, begin to question society and their role within it, lose the privileges of this position, because, having questioned social norms and structures, they are no longer as controllable (Brink, 1990:273).

Beatrice’s reaction and Milla’s mother’s words attest to this. Sadly, Milla adheres to these requirements for women, thereby damaging the only meaningful relationship she ever had: the one with Agaat. This adherence, however, is not only the result of societal pressure. Her emotional needs that had been fulfilled by Agaat could now be focused on her unborn baby, and Milla also acts out of selfishness.

The implicit and explicit redirections²⁸ of traditional Afrikaner gender roles and positions, and the occurrence of domestic violence, directly contrast with the ‘farm as the site of a clear, but fair, social hierarchy’ (Cairne 2007:21). This is of course also tied to the racial hierarchy, but this will be discussed in more detail in the analysis of the relationship between Milla and Agaat. Further on in the close reading, it is indicated that the author’s choice of allowing the character of Milla to form part of the subaltern group, but not fully, adds to the problematisation of the power relations on Grootmoedersdrift.

3.3.2 Milla and Jak’s Different Views on Nature and Farming

As has already been established, Milla inherits much of her views towards nature and farming from her father. Her regard of nature is in essence a relatively eco-friendly approach. Milla believes that not all natural pieces of land on a farm should be used for farming purposes, since this will exhaust the soil. She also identifies the destruction associated with the ‘sg. beskawing’, even describing it as ‘die aanslae’ (the onslaught) against ‘die weerlose aarde’, which is further emphasised by her choice of words: ‘verbrokkel’, ‘ontbind’, ‘verwoes’, ‘gierigheid’ and ‘overskilligheid’, all words related in some way with decline and destruction. As a result of these ideas instilled in Milla by her father, her approach to farming on Grootmoedersdrift is that of a ‘gemengde boerdery’ (mixed farming), which she wants to base on wheat, sheep, cattle and milk production. This approach to farming involves a slow process that will only be lucrative over a long period of time, as she attempts to explain to Jak various times: just after the marriage and the move to the farm, then when she finds out that she is pregnant, and later after Jakkie’s birth:

²⁸ I say ‘redirection’ as opposed to ‘reversal’ because, as will become clear further on in the analysis, certain characteristics of the characters are not a reversal of their normative farm novel counterparts, but ironically parallel to them.

Die grond is alles, het jy vir Jak gesê, gesonde grond gee gesonde diere en gesonde mense (p.69).

So hoe gaan ons ryk word op arm grond, vertel my dit? ... Stadig, het jy gesê, stadig en met verdrag ... Jy het ... vir hom verduidelik hoekom grond ongestoord moet lê vir langer periodes en dat rus die beste manier is om die grondstruktuur ryk en krummelrig te kry (p. 72).

Dit gaan oor samehange, Jak, het jy probeer walgooi, 'n spel wat 'n mens moet speel. Met die natuur. Dis subtiel. Die natuur is subtiel en verwickeld. Alles is belangrik. Tot die kleinste insek toe, selfs die vermolmdde boom, die onderste klip in die drif (p. 91).

Saans was daar die rusies oor die plaas soos gewoonlik, oor jou komposhope, oor jou pampoene tussen die peerbome.

Dis nie 'n laboratorium nie, Jak, het jy gesê, dis 'n gemengde boerdery, die oppervlakte kan nie kaal en steriel wees sonder 'n teken van die prosesse wat 'n plaas gesond hou nie (p. 237).

Milla's identity, as discussed earlier in this chapter, is dependent on the land. To utilise this in my analysis, I take lead from Larsen (2007:342-344), who proposes that instead of focusing on the binary of human vs. nature, in an ecocritical reading the reader should focus on the interchange between the two parties, which takes place on the boundary of interaction. As such, the focus should not be on Milla's simple interaction with nature, but rather on what the interaction between Milla and nature (as embodied in her specific views on and experience with farming) can reveal about her characterisation. In this close reading, I choose to focus on what Milla's interaction with nature might reveal about her relationship with the other characters in the novel.

At this point it is again important to relate *Agaat* to the normative *plaasroman*. When Milla's views are examined against the framework of the normative *plaasroman*, *Agaat* affirms that the farmer's existence relies on his (her) attachment to the land. The importance that Milla attaches to the land, and her subsequent approaches to farming, indicate the strong influence that these matters have on her identity. Ultimately though, her farming methods, despite being 'more attuned to natural cycles' (Pienaar 2005), are inescapably based on the power of a human over nature. A thorough exploration of how this power is explored through the way in which nature is written in the text can be illustrated by comparing the different farming methods and outcomes of Milla and Jak.

Jak's reasons for farming differ markedly from Milla's. Jak wants to know nothing of Milla's approaches to farming, himself being a firm supporter of modern agricultural practices:

Moderne hulpmiddels is die antwoord, Milla, het hy gesê, dis nie meer die Middeleeue nie. Wat karring jy met lusern en lupiene en kompos as daar kunsmis is? (pp. 90-91).

Jak also believes that ‘die maatstaf vir gesonde grond is gesonde opbrengste’ and ‘[g]ereelde aktiwiteit, ... dis al wat nodig is, ... ook as ons twee wil vorentoe boer’, a statement which also contains a sexual allusion, suggesting that Jak wants to take advantage of the land, wants to exploit it, similar to how he treats Milla’s body (p. 73). Through the course of the novel, it also becomes clear that Jak’s farming methods are a result of his vanity. To Jak it is all about show:

Hulle het hom bewonder vir sy slag met woorde. Want hy het ’n daverende bruidegomstoepspraak gemaak, jou Jak, soos jy geweet het hy sou ... Hy het die mense altyd aan sy voete gehad, daarvan gehou dat jy dit hoor. Net soos die troudagtoepspraak (p. 51).

After Milla becomes pregnant, Jak intensifies his vanity:

Hoe voller jy geraak het van die kind, hoe meer tyd het Jak aan sy voorkoms spandeer... Elke oggend en elke aand het hy lang ente in die berge gaan hardloop en byna elke naweek vandat jy swanger was aan tennistoernooie of wedlope gaan deelneem. Hy het die Overberg se langafstandkampioen geword en die Tradouw se baasbergklimmer. Sy enigste verantwoordelikheid teenoor die wêreld, het hy skynbaar gedink, was dat hy nie dik moes word nie, dat hy nie met die jare grof en swaar soos die meeste ander boere moes begin lyk nie. Sy enigste rentmeester was sy stophorlosie, sy enigste regter die badkamerskaal (p. 122).

In terms of being the stereotypical *boer*, Jak also defies the representation of his gender in the normative *plaasroman*. Milla notes that Jak had lost almost all interest in the farm and farming activities at this point (pp. 39-40), and is spending all his time on sporting activities, rather than spending all his time on farming activities, like the farmer in the normative *plaasroman*. Jak’s private room, which serves as a study, gym, and also as a museum, testifies to his vanity:

Sy prestasies het hy om hom uitgestal. Hy het die kaarte van Grootmoedersdrift in sy nuwe stoepkantoor gehou ... Daar het hulle gehang tussen sy rakke vol bekere en gemonteerde medaljes met linte in uitstalkassies, tussen sy foto’s van homself. *Die foto’s op sigself was ’n hele verhaal van een man se ydelheid* (pp. 122-123, my emphasis).

Hereafter Milla lists all the different photo’s of Jak:

Jak op gradedag in sy toga, Jak op Elsenburg saam met die landboustudente se atletiekspan, Jak met sy eerste gerf kortsteelkoring, Jak saam met die agent by die nuwe combine, met ’n glas wyn in die

hand by die NP se streekskoukus, Jak op sy Arabiese merrie, gestewel en gespoor vir 'n perderesies, Jak tydens die boeredag in sy wit klere, aangeleun teen sy eerste rooi oopdak-sportmotor, Jak van naby, op 'n studioportret, geoliede hare, glad agteroor gekam, sjarmante Jak de Wet, die gentlemanboer (p. 123).

The places and situations of the photos in which Jak is depicted mostly do not concern any farming activities, and when it does, it is a record of his one and only farming success. All the other photos depict Jak's physical success as a sportsman, and his success within the greater Afrikaner community of the Overberg – away from Grootmoedersdrift. This is revealing of Jak's emasculated position on Grootmoedersdrift, and this takes shape in him constantly removing himself from the farm.

A specific incident where Jak can be read as a subversion of the noble and righteous image of the white farmer is in his interaction with Koos Makkelwyn, a man he hires to care for his horses. Firstly, the representation of the coloured labourer in the normative *plaasroman* is important. According to Gerwel (1987, quoted in Prinsloo & Visagie 2007:44) the coloured labourer is often depicted as a 'jolly hotnot'; stereotypically weak, a social delinquent, always comical, pathetically attempting to mimic the cultured farmer (but never quite succeeding), emotionally bankrupt, and childish. In a comprehensive study of the conceptions of coloureds in Afrikaans literature, Gerwel (1988) indicates that although the coloured was mostly depicted stereotypically (especially before the 1960s), there was a manner of development in this depiction. He views the image of the 'jolly hotnot' as 'die kernkonsepsie ... waarom al die ander toegedigte attribute [ge-]bundel [is]' (Gerwel 1988:20). Gerwel's second category in the development of the portrayal of coloureds is entitled 'Ek het maar net saam met die baas gekom' (Gerwel 1988:74 ff), which, as Van der Merwe points out, also summarises this category: 'coloured characters are mere attendants to the central white characters; they are not portrayed as humans in their own right' (Van der Merwe 1994:23). The first category, which greatly influenced the development of the portrayal of coloured characters, is rooted in the very early Afrikaans literature:

Indien 'n literêre periodisering gemaak moes word, sou die tydperk beskryf kon word as dié van die didaktiese prosa hoofsaaklik nog in die teken van die taalstryd, dus vanaf die eerste *Patriot*-pogings tot en met die volksletterkunde van C.J. Langenhoven (Gerwel 1988:21).

Gerwel (1988:74) places the second category between 1925 and 1935, the years right after Afrikaans first obtained official status in South Africa. It is also important to remember that it was within these years that the *plaasroman* had its heyday. (It is no surprise that in Gerwel's analysis he makes use of both Malherbe's *Die meulenaar* and Van den Heever's *Somer*, both archetypes of

the normative *plaasroman*). The third category Gerwel identifies, is the patronising/paternal ‘Die Kleurlinge is nog kinders’ (1988:134 ff). For this final category, Gerwel uses the work of Afrikaans author Mikro (pen name of C.H. Kuhn), specifically his novel *Toiings* (1935). Gerwel indicates how elements of the previous two categories clearly influence the third, and he summarises it as follows:

... ’n kinderlike onvermoë tot etiese onderskeidings en gevolglik ’n kortsigtige sorgeloosheid, ’n vergryping aan sterke drank en jolyt, losse en luidrugtige katektiese lewens, uitermate groot en swak versorgde gesinne, ruwe vrouemishandeling, naïewe onbegrip vir die inhoud van nagebootsde godsdienstige gebruike, en ’n algemene banaliteit op feitlike alle lewensareas (1988:158).

In the scene between Jak and Makkelwyn, it is specifically this image of the coloured man as irresponsible, immoral, morally inferior delinquent that is undermined. This image was after all reliant on its dichotomous relation to the image of the similarly stereotypically superior white farmer. Makkelwyn speaks earnestly to Jak about Jak mistreating the horses. One of the other farm labourers, Dawid Okkenel, later tells Milla about the incident:

Toe stamp die baas hom voor die bors en sê hy moet sy donnerse bek hou... Toe sê mister Makkelwyn hy sal nie sy bek hou nie en hy sal nie vir hom laat vloek en rondstamp deur ’n bogsnuiter wat nie respek het vir ’n edeldier nie... (p. 143).

Makkelwyn admits that he has no respect for Jak because of Jak’s ill-treatment of animals. This is descriptive of Jak’s opinion that the animals are simply there to serve him. Makkelwyn feels strong in his convictions, and even though he is subordinate to Jak as employee and as coloured man within a segregated society, he stands up for himself. He is described by Milla as ‘’n stewige, netjiese man’ by Milla (p. 143), yet more importantly than Milla’s subjective impression of Makkelwyn, is the suggestion that he is also held in high regard by the coloured labourers on the farm. Dawid consistently refers to him as ‘mister Makkelwyn’, which shows that Makkelwyn is held in high regard in his community.

As the scuffle between the two men ensues (provoked by Jak), Jak is unable to get the better of Makkelwyn, as Dawid describes:

... mister Makkelwyn pen die baas se arms vas dat hy nie kan slaan nie... [D]ie baas is toe al lankal flou gespook en toe staan mister Makkelwyn op en stof sy gat af en hy steek sy hand uit om die baas op te help en toe klap die baas die hand weg en toe sê mister Makkelwyn dan moet die baas nou maar verder self sien en kom klaar met sy royal rossies en die baas moet sy geld wat hy hom nog skuld asseblief na sy broer se huis op Suurbraak vat ... (p. 145).

In this scene, Makkelwyn subverts the stereotype of the coloured man in the normative *plaasroman*, while Jak is an inversion of the noble farmer. In the end it is Makkelwyn who acts nobly by pinning Jak down, preventing him from hurting Makkelwyn, but at the same time he does nothing to physically hurt Jak. Makkelwyn even gentlemanly extends his hand to help Jak up after the fight, which Jak refuses. Dawid, the other labourer who witnesses the fight, refuses at one point to help Jak when asked to do so, replying that he is not paid to do Jak's 'vuilwerk', thereby also defying Jak's authority and implying that he (Dawid) also realises that Makkelwyn is not the one who is in the wrong. This is significant because it subverts the firmly established stereotype of the coloured labourer as portrayed in the normative *plaasroman*. Instead of Jak teaching Makkelwyn about respect for animals (and also other human beings) as one would normally see in the normative *plaasroman*, Makkelwyn through his actions gives Jak a lesson in respect. The coloured man is no longer just an extension of the white farmer, as Gerwel mentioned, he also becomes a fully formed person with values of his own. If viewed from an ecocritical perspective, Jak and Makkelwyn's interaction with the horses points out that, by subverting stereotypical portrayals of the normative *plaasroman*, a person's interaction with animals can also be revealing about their relationships with other people. Although the characterisation of Jak is useful in the subversion of certain stereotypes of coloured characters in Afrikaans literature, it is necessary to here recall the criticism of Krige (2007), Burger (2004) and Venter (2004) that Jak is a stereotype Afrikaner. Jak is in many ways himself a stereotypical collection of many negative traits associated with Afrikaner males. The subversion of the coloured stereotype – albeit mostly successful – is unfortunately marred by its counter being a stereotype in similar kind.

Although the depiction of the coloured farm worker as discussed by Gerwel (1988) refers mainly to male characters, aspects of this representation and how it is subverted can also be seen in the interaction between Milla and Agaat, and obviously also through Agaat's central position in the narrative (as opposed to being a mere peripheral ingredient to the world of the farmer). This will be discussed in the subsequent chapter.

The main site of conflict between Jak and Milla in their different farming approaches is illustrated on pages 73-74:

Hy wou die groot stukke natuurlike veld op Grootmoedersdrift onmiddellik omploeg vir kleingraan. Jy het gesê dis van onskatbare waarde, julle moet dit opdeel in kampe en dit net so ongeskonde gebruik vir wisselbeweiding. Hy wou die braaklande met vyf skottels diep omkeer en skoonploeg en platsleep met 'n spoorstaaf soos hy gesien het by die ander boere. Jy het gesê, nee, ons maak die grond net genoeg los om te saai, met 'n skeurploeg sodat daar nie te veel lug inkom nie en ons anker

die stoppels net liggies in die bogrond. Hy het gesê dit lyk na 'n hotnosboerdery. Jy het gesê dis 'n kombers, dit bewaar die vog, dit bewaar die stikstof. Hy wou elke jaar al die grond tegelyk vol koring saai. Jy het volgehou vierskot is die beste: Koring, braak, ouland, koring, met 'n groenbemesting soos lupiene al om die ander siklus ingeploeg en droëlandlusern onder die koring gesaai vir weiding as die oes af is. Al wat hy wou toegee, was tweeskot. Koring, braak, koring, braak. Hy wou sommer regaf met die val ploeg op die steil hellings soos die Okkenels al die jare gemaak het. Oor jou dooie liggaam, het jy gesê, daar móét kontoere kom want die grond het reeds sleg verspoel op plekke.

In this passage, Milla's protective and less invasive approaches to farming are illustrated very well. All her ideas aim at protecting the land, nurturing it for continuous use in the future. Jak on the other hand wants to farm in a very aggressive and invasive way. Milla realises how destructive Jak's approaches would be, but ironically he is the one who accuses her of running a 'hotnosboerdery' (farming like the coloured farmers) – implying that it is an inferior method, while in actual fact Jak is the one who knows little about farming, since he wants to follow the same methods as the Okkenels and does not understand the need for contour ploughing. The final sentence of this quote can also be read as symbolic of Jak and Milla's relationship up to this point. When Milla says 'Oor jou dooie liggaam ... daar móét kontoere kom want die grond het reeds sleg verspoel op plekke', the contours can be viewed as symbolic of Milla's body and her struggle to become pregnant (she must 'become' round), and that it is very important for this to happen because the land has already suffered a lot of damage (their relationship has suffered, and she feels that she has suffered both mentally and physically).

Eventually, the opposition of Jak's forceful and Milla's more contained farming techniques leads to Jak buying some of the neighbouring land and he begins to farm there as he pleases (p. 74). His attempts succeed. Boasting about his success, Jak sarcastically addresses Milla: 'So, wat sê jy nou, Milla my vrou? het hy gevra. Nou is dit net jy wat moet wys dat jy kan vorentoe boer' (p. 75). At this stage in the narrative, Jak holds the superior position on Grootmoedersdrift. Through his farming successes he has achieved much more than Milla had imagined he would. Milla experiences a great loss of power. This becomes worse when she is constantly confronted by her seeming inability to have children (pp. 90-94). Milla understands that this pressure is not only from Jak, but it is also what is expected of her as the wife of a farmer by the community, as her mother reminds her (p.92). Milla and Jak's arguments about farming turn to her inability to become pregnant:

Jy is een om te praat! het Jak geskel. Subtiel! Ba! Natuur! En jy kan nie swanger raak nie!

Ek sal gaan vir toetse, het jy gesnuif, vir behandeling, daar is moderne hulpmiddels. Vir mans ook.

Was dit toe dat Jak met sy vreemde teorieë oor jou begin het?

Oor my dooie liggaam, het hy gesê, daar is niks met my verkeerd nie. En met jou ook nie.

Dis in jou kóp wat die moeilikheid is (p. 90).

Again Jak's vanity comes to the fore: he believes that there is nothing wrong with him. Ironically, Jak accuses Milla of not being 'natural', yet Milla is the one who wants to approach everything 'naturally'. Milla says that she will allow herself to be treated with 'moderne hulpmiddels', quite contrary to her natural approaches to farming, but Jak, who believes in modern farming techniques, does not believe in modern treatments for infertility. Jak's words 'Oor my dooie liggam' echo Milla's words (p. 73-74), and this confirms their different approaches to farming, but also their different approaches to their own and each other's physicality. And so even in their attitudes towards physicality and reproduction, both aspects of humans that are close to nature, Milla and Jak do not agree. Regarding the access to power on Grootmoedersdrift, Milla has now moved even further away from the hegemonic power because of her seeming failure as a farmer (when compared to Jak's successes), and also because of her inability to produce an heir; her failure as *volksmoeder*. Milla herself admits this when saying 'Jy het gevoel almal is teen jou. Jak het soos jou ma begin klink as hy jou tempteer' (p. 92).

On 1 January 1960, matters change on Grootmoedersdrift. Milla finally feels that she is regaining her power when she finds out that she is pregnant. Suddenly, she describes Jak as '[b]otter in jou hande' (p. 113). She decides not to tell Jak of the pregnancy immediately, however, and revels in the position she has now acquired: 'Swanger. Hy kon dit nie weet nie. Hy het dit veroorsaak, maar hy kon dit nie weet met sy lyf nie. Dit was net jou wete' (p. 113). Milla clearly realises that she will reclaim power; not only from Jak, but also from the community. That night at a dinner party, Milla's resentment for being surpassed by Jak with his different farming techniques leads her to find revenge and instigate a dramatic spectacle in which the power relation between them switches again. It must be noted that this revenge is on the one hand a petty way for Milla to embarrass Jak, but it is also a moral issue for Milla. It begins when Milla involves herself in an argument regarding agricultural issues, where many of the farmers are praising the abundant use of artificial fertilizer:

Tweeskot! Tweeskot! het almal geroep... Koring, braakland, koring, braakland, of, nog beter, koring op koring. Met die nuwe kunsmis kon mens nie 'n fout maak nie, was die konsensus, woekeroeste elke jaar, dit was 'n Overbergse wonderwerk. Hulle het na Jak gekyk, hy was die lewende bewys van die wonderwerk, al het hy die grond wat hom so goed behandel het ná vyf jaar verkoop om met vleisbeeste te begin boer (pp. 113-114).

This ‘miraculous’ approach to farming, which differs directly from Milla’s approach, is what Milla uses to her advantage. The land that Jak farmed on so aggressively, the land ‘wat hom so goed behandel het’, was sold to another farmer. Milla knows the result of Jak’s ill-treatment of the land, and she uses it as a weapon. Jak begins discussing the scientific nature of the use of fertilizer, only to be shot down by Milla, who mentions that she does not agree: ‘Wetenskap of te not, ek stem nie saam nie, het jy gesê’ (p. 114). Within patriarchal Afrikaner society of that time, it was very unusual for a woman to interfere in a discussion by men, to not even mention contradicting her own husband. Confessing her cropped up anger of twelve years (p. 114), Milla begins humiliating Jak in front of everyone present. However, her arguments are aimed at more than simply her abusive husband. She also attacks the unnatural farming techniques that have become popular with the other farmers, since she believes and she has seen how these techniques are destroying the environment. Milla thinks to herself that she was ‘kwaad, maar jou geheim van die dag [learning she is pregnant] het jou voortvarend gemaak. Jak moes maar ’n keer vir homself sorg, het jy gedink’ (p. 116). Milla is angry at Jak, but she also confesses that she pities him as constantly in need of her support and protection (‘Jak moes maar ’n keer vir homself sorg’). Milla attacks Jak’s approach to farming by defending her own more natural approach:

Kyk hoe lyk die grond, het jy gesê. Elke jaar valer en skraler. Kyk hoe staan dit van die stof as die wind waai voor saaiyd, kyk hoe spoel dit in die winter. Van aanmekaar koring saai. Van gierigheid. En van benoudigheid (p. 116).

Mens kan nie meer uit die grond wil haal as wat jy daarin sit nie, het jy gesê... Al die kunsmisoeste mag jou ryk maak, maar dis nie ’n langtermynbelegging in die grond nie. Ouland is die antwoord. Dis ’n tradisie gebore uit respek vir die natuur. In ’n toestand van skyndood herversamel jy jou wese (p. 117).

Dis die ritmes van die natuur wat mens moet respekteer ... Dit is waarop landbou gebaseer moet wees’ (p.118).

Milla begins to reveal the results of aggressive artificial farming. Although her anger is aimed at all the farmer’s present who use farming techniques like that of Jak, she has by this point realised that Jak treats her very much like he treats nature: he forces himself upon it (her) to gain as much as he possibly can, using it (her) for his vain ideals, but without any respect or regard for the well-being of the land (Milla). Milla’s ultimate humiliation of Jak comes when she alludes to Jak physically abusing her: ‘As ’n boer jaar vir jaar sy grond skoonploeg en platsleep, het jy gesê, is dit net so goed hy slaan elke aand sy vrou’ (p. 118). It has the desired effect. Milla’s first stage of reclaiming power is now complete. She has not only humiliated Jak in front of the farming community, she has also revealed that he abuses her. Following her arguments against the use of chemical fertiliser

and aggressive farming, Milla gains respect in the eyes of the patriarchal community. This is illustrated in the scene where another farmer, Gawie, sees Jak and Milla off:

By die deur het Gawie julle gegroet. Jou het hy op die wang gesoen en jou skouer gedruk.
 Geluk, Jak ou maat, het hy gesê, jy het 'n vorentoe vrou getrou, pas haar goed op.
 Hy het Jak se hand nadruklik geskud, maar Jak het nie geweet waarom die gaan nie (pp. 118-119).

Although it simply seems that Gawie is congratulating Jak on his wife, Gawie is indirectly showing Milla how he respects what she has done and said. To the vain Jak, who only sees the evening's events as a slight against himself, this is an enormous setback.

Back on Grootmoedersdrift, Milla continues playing an intricate game with Jak to re-establish her power. Firstly she taunts him to the point where he becomes violent and slaps her:

Hy het in die middel van die kamer gestaan en pluk aan sy klere.
 En dat grond soos 'n vrou is wie se man haar slaan! Watse stront is dit nou miskien? Jy soek daarvoor, jy weet dit, jy soek my en jy soek my tot jy my kry!
 Ja baas, het jy vir hom gesê.
 Hy was dit nie gewoond nie. Jy het in die klap ingezyk sonder om te koes, reg in sy oë.
 Jak, jy kan dit nie meer aan my doen nie, het jy gesê.
 Hy het jou platgestamp op die bed (pp. 119-120).

Milla, who had in the past accepted Jak's twisted authority by simply allowing him to beat her, now defies his authority. She has already defied his superiority as a farmer, and also now defies his authority within their relationship. As a response to this, Jak reveals his grotesque domination of nature, and he applies it to Milla:

As jy my grond wil wees, sal ek doen daarop wat ek wil. Klap is niks! Stamp is kinderspeletjies!
 Vertel my tog watse grond jy is? Klei, dalk? Vuilsand? 'n Donnerse klipbank? Toe, jy's mos die ekspert hier! Klas jousef 'n bietjie, dit mag die man help wat jou moet bewerk! (p. 120)

This relates to earlier in the narrative where Milla attempts to explain to Jak about the different kinds of soils found on Grootmoedersdrift and how to use and treat each type of soil correctly (p. 71). In Jak's subsequent words, he relates his ignorance regarding the proper utilisation of soil to his constant emasculation on Grootmoedersdrift:

Wat doen mens met grond, hê? Wat doen mens daarmee? Jy kap 'n paal daarin, jy ghrop dit, jy skraap 'n dam uit. Of jy grawe 'n gat vir jousef en val jou moer los. Dis wat met my gebeur het! (p. 120)

Milla continues her plan to disempower Jak. Second to her plan, like so many times before, she seduces him, admitting her excitement at the thought of his 'onmag':

Jy het jou swart onderrok se bandjies oor jou skouers getrek en op die bed gaan lê. Wat noem mens dit? So oopgesprei? *Jy wou dit voel, sy onmag. Dit het jou opgewonde gemaak om daarvoor te wag. Jy het gevoel jy het 'n voorsprong, vir die eerste keer* (p. 120, my emphasis).

Brutally overpowering her, Jak attempts to physically force his power on Milla, yet she defiantly enjoys the exchange:

Jy het gelag, dis wat jy gedoen het ...

Jy het jou hande agterom sy heupe geslaan en hom dieper in jou ingetrek. Jy het 'n ritme aangegee. Vir jousef.

Kom maar, het jy gefluister, jy bly die beste, kom maar. Ons is vir mekaar gemaak!

Dis wat jy van jousef gehoor het. Jy wou dit voel. Droog. Seer. Lekker. Jy het hom gehad waar jy hom wou hê, jy was klaar met hom, hy was net goed vir versiering. Om dit te weet, was die beloning (p. 121).

Milla now holds the power again. She informs Jak that she is pregnant, and she uses it to control him. In the end, Jak loses this struggle, for time and again Milla proves that her farming techniques and relationship with the land and animals, yields more success than his does.

After this incident, there are a number of scenes where Milla re-establishes her dominance over Jak, in which his powerlessness is evident. The imported Simmentaler cattle that Jak had purchased are not used to the grazing fields of the Overberg, and, unlike the seasoned Jersey cattle of Milla, eat the poisonous tulips that grow in the veld (pp. 260-274). Viewed from an environmental ecocritical perspective, the European Simmentalers are, as a result of trade by humans, alien in Africa, and subsequently their foreign nature in the unfamiliar surrounds of the South African environment has disastrous effects. Jak's 'artificial' methods of farming and the alien nature of what he brings to Grootmoedersdrift (like his cattle), reinforces his role as an intruder on the farm already established by his background and his vanity.

Through redirecting the gender roles of Milla and Jak in *Agaat*, Jak (the vain and insecure Afrikaner male) is denied his traditional position of power bestowed upon him by the patriarchal

Afrikaner society and he is figuratively emasculated on Grootmoedersdrift. Ironically his death comes at the hand of the farm itself, so to speak, when he, who had often raped (quite literally impaled) Milla, wrecks his car when driving through the fjord on the farm and is impaled on a tree branch:

Die Alfa se agterlyf het uit die water gesteeek. Die een agterwiel het nog gedraai. Die dak was afgeslaan.

Jak het 'n ent verder oor die water gehang.

'n Afgebreekte watteltak het voor by sy bors ingegaan en agter by sy rug uitgekom.

Agaat het nie na jou gekyk nie.

Haal hom daar af, het sy vir Dawid en Julies beveel... (p. 643).

The farm labourers' joking response to his death summarises how little impact Jak had on Grootmoedersdrift:

Die báás van Grootmoedersdrift!

Ajéé!

Daar sien hy toe sy gát!

In die drif van Grootmoedersdrif! (p. 644)

The final line of of the joke serves to strengthen the image of Jak impaled on the tree branch. Jak was forced off the farm in the 'drif' of Grootmoedersdrift. The ambiguity of 'drif', literally the shallow crossing through the river, figuratively the passion of a woman, is the end of Jak.

The relationship between Jak and Milla is extremely complex. On the one hand, they are the complete opposites of their counterparts in the normative *plaasroman*. On the other hand, they strongly affirm certain aspects of the types in the normative *plaasroman*. Their different approaches to farming on Grootmoedersdrift, both complex and threaded through the entire narrative, serve as the basic axis around which their relationship revolves. In this part of the close reading it has been shown that this axis is effectively used by the author to explore the power relation between the genders in *Agaat*.

4. CLOSE READING: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MILLA AND AGAAT

This section focuses on the relationship between Milla and Agaat, especially in terms of Milla as coloniser and Agaat as colonised. Issues regarding nature/culture, Bhabha's notions of hybridity and mimicry, as well as the allegorical implications of the relationship between these two characters are explored. The relations of power between Milla and Agaat are paramount to this section.

4.1 The Origin of the Relationship between Milla and Agaat

Burger (2006:179) views the complex relationship between Milla and Agaat as the axis around which the tension in the novel is constructed. He mentions that Milla (the self) will never be able to understand Agaat (the other), and that Milla's struggle to see as Agaat sees and to know what/how Agaat thinks ultimately fails as a result of the barrier of language. Burger (ibid.) further notes that through attempting to understand more of Agaat, Milla explores herself. In this section Bhabha's notions of mimicry, and to a lesser extent hybridity, are discussed in connection with Agaat's use of the Afrikaans language and other elements of culture (like the songs, farming and embroidery), and the ways in which this forms an important border of interaction between Milla and Agaat. In order to discuss the ways in which these women interact with each other and in turn interact with the environment around them, the origins and development of their relationship (also its allegorical interpretation) must be explored against the backdrop of South African history and also within the context of the literary tradition of the *plaasroman*.

The relationship between Milla and Agaat begins on 16 December 1953. Milla visits her mother on the farm to get away from Jak (p. 679). Milla's mother tells her about Agaat, a child born to Maria Lourier, a coloured woman who had served as Milla's nanny when she was a child. Milla, at this stage still unsure whether she will be able to bear a child of her own, admits to being moved when confronted with the emaciated and abused little girl. When hearing the sound Agaat makes when attempting to pronounce her name, Milla feels a kind of change inside her:

Jy het jou kop gedraai met jou oor teenaan die kind se gesig en die ggggg-klank nagmaak. Jy kon haar asem op jou gesig voel. Dié keer het jy die ggggg duidelik gehoor, soos 'n sug het dit geklink, soos 'n watertjie in die fynbos, baie sag, en veraf, soos voor 'n mens nog besef wat dit is wat jy hoor.

Dit was die begin. Daardie klank. Jy het tegelyk leeg en vol gevoel daarvan, verdriet en jammerte in jou keel voel stoot. Ggggg agter in die keel, asof dit 'n klank was wat aan jouself behoort het.

Jy het terugstaan en jou arms om jou lyf geslaan. Iets in jou onderbuik het geruk (p. 682).

Notably Milla experiences a similar feeling just before she begins giving birth to Jakkie:

Skielik was dit lou tussen jou bene. Binne-in jou het iets gesak en gebeur en gedruk (p.186).

Jy het voel glip, jy het geskeur, jy was oop, jy het geskree, jy het geroep, bitterlik, jy het geluister na, het jou ore gehou soos.

Soos kuile, soos kolke, soos eggohoudende klowe, soos winde weerskant vallende water het jy hulle gehou tot jy gehoor het wat nie van jou was en ook nie van Agaat nie.

Die geluid (p. 190).

In both these scenes, sound is significant. When Jakkie is born, the sound of him crying is the connection that Milla waits for – the assurance that this child, her child, is alive. Similarly, when she first encounters and speaks to little Agaat, sound is again important, because the sound that Agaat makes somehow connects Milla to the child and convinces her that she must take Agaat. Like during Jakkie's birth, Milla feels something move in her underbelly, albeit not physical. For Milla, who longs for a child, this sound activates a sense of motherly affection in herself.

When informing Jak of her intention to bring Agaat back to Grootmoedersdrift and to care for and raise her, Milla establishes that she has now taken possession of Agaat: 'Jy hoef niks te doen nie, Jak, dis my kind en ek sal haar grootmaak' (p. 685). A more allegorical aspect that adds to this, is that Milla, in her diary dated 16 December 1953, guesses Agaat's age at four, five or six years. Later Milla's mother finds out from the labourers on Goedbegin (her mother's farm) that Agaat was born in either 1947 or 1948 (p. 581). If Agaat is in fact five years old at this stage, Agaat's year of birth coincides with the official advent of apartheid: 1948. This, combined with the date upon which Agaat is found by Milla, allegorically affirms the relationship between Milla and Agaat as coloniser and colonised. Rossouw (2005) also notes that the dates in *Agaat* are very important, and provides an extensive list of important dates in the novel and how they are related to noteworthy dates in South African history.

The date upon which Milla takes possession of Agaat, 16 December 1953, is important for two reasons. Firstly, the 16th of December, known as 'Geloftedag' (The Day of the Vow), commemorates what is viewed as an important part of Afrikaner history, namely the Battle of Blood River²⁹ ('Die Slag van Bloedrivier'). This battle was fought on 16 December 1838 near the

²⁹ For an in-depth re-approach to the Battle of Blood River, see Grønstad (2009).

Ncome River (later renamed 'Bloedrivier') between the Voortrekkers (Afrikaners) and Zulus. The Voortrekkers, reportedly vastly outnumbered by the Zulus, were the victors. Every year some Afrikaners celebrate the Battle of Bloodriver on 16 December, when the Voortrekkers made a vow to God that they would forever celebrate this day as a Sabbath if he would only make them victorious in this battle. Laband (1995: 97) notes that the Voortrekkers, holding true to their Calvinist roots, 'were encouraged to believe that they were the chosen servants of the Lord in a just and holy cause'. The 16th of December was a national holiday under the apartheid government. Since 1994 the day has remained a holiday, yet the name has been changed to Reconciliation Day, and is therefore no longer a national celebration of the Voortrekker's victory over the Zulus. The Day of the Vow forms part of the 'sacred history' of the Groot Trek (as Van Niekerk, 1996:144, calls it), and has without a doubt contributed greatly to the popularisation of heroic stories that form part of Afrikaner mythology. Secondly, the year, 1953, is the year in which the National Party won the elections again, solidifying their power (and apartheid legislation).

It should be noted, however, that this seemingly one-dimensional allegory of apartheid (and a binary opposition of white versus black/coloured) may enforce a broad view that does not take into account the complexity of the relationship between Milla and Aagaat (and the complexity of oppressor and oppressed in South Africa). As such, although one cannot ignore these allegorical elements (most notably dates), various elements of the relationship between these two women are taken into account in this study.

In the following parts and for the purpose of clearness and brevity, the intricacy of the love/hate bond between Milla and Aagaat will be discussed against the backdrop of a few events in the novel.

4.2 Nature vs. Culture

In *Agaat* the issue of the coloured Aagaat's 'primitive' connection to nature, as it is perceived by Milla, is addressed.³⁰ The diaries that Milla keeps reveal a great deal of how she views Aagaat, other coloureds, and even other whites. Through the course of the narrative the author subverts this romanticised ideal of the colonised as by default close to nature (especially closer to nature than the coloniser him/herself), and explores the construction of the binaries of 'human' and 'natural'.

³⁰ Van Niekerk is not the first Afrikaans author to include this issue in a postcolonial novel. André Brink's *'n Oomblik in die wind* (1975) tells the story of a love affair between a white woman, Elisabeth, and an enslaved coloured man, Adam (Aob) at the early Cape, and how – through the cunning 'natural knowledge' of the slave Adam – they survive for a long period of time in the wilderness away from civilisation. Viljoen (2002:97-98) criticises the novel for its depiction of Adam as a noble savage. She notes that by sketching Adam as the noble savage, the author might be reinforcing certain stereotypes rather than deconstructing them. This is also explored in Brink's novel *A Chain of Voices* (1982).

Milla's diary entries show how she attempts not to simply raise Agaat as any child would be raised, but to 'civilise' her. In this respect, it must be noted that Milla often describes and analyses Agaat as a wild animal that she is caring for and attempting to tame. In her diary, Milla explains how she feeds Agaat:

Ek moet haar forseer om te eet, haar voor tussen my knieë vasdruk, met die een hand die kake vanmekaar trek, lepel tussen tande indruk, tiep, vinnig die mond toedruk. Met die ander hand die keel vryf dat sy kan sluk. Net slap melkerige pap, baie suiker. Wil niks kou nie. Het 'n bottel met tiet by haar gesit, sy kyk nie eers daarna nie (p. 486).

This description is in itself not of particular prominence. It becomes revealing, however, when it is compared to two other scenes in the novel: when Milla is paralysed and must be fed by Agaat, and how Milla describes Agaat raising abandoned little birds.

Sy kom met die eerste teelepel, hou dit naby, wag tot sy die ritme van my asemhaling kan sien en sit dit tussen die in- en die uitasem in my mond. Ek hou die klein bietjie lous pap op my tong tot ek dit kan sluk ...

Ek sluk nog 'n keer ...

Verstik jy, Ounooi? Wag, wag ek help jou. Rustig maar ... Sluk, Ounooi, sluk, ek sal vryf, kom nou, sluk 'n slaggie.

Ek voel haar vingerpunte op my keel. Liggies masseer sy, soos Leroux haar dit voorgedoen het, net beter, omdat sy al ontelbaar veel klein sterwende diertjies in haar lewe gevoer het (pp.43-44).

Ironically their roles have been reversed. Agaat must now feed Milla. Moreover, Milla recounts how Agaat cared for abandoned birds:

Voëltjies. Niemand wat hulle kon grootmaak soos Agaat nie. Met brood, met rou koringdeeg uit haar mond, gekou met haar spoeg. Van duif tot lammervanger. Almal deurgehaal het sy. Altyd. En laat vlieg uiteindelik. Uit die hand, die wye lugte in. Soms het die aanhankliker soorte bly terugkom vir 'n rukkie. Sy sou gelei wees, sou die eerste paar dae nog kos uitsit, elke oggend minder, om hulle af te leer. Later het sy hulle verjaag by die enommelborde wat sy nie meer vol brood en saad gemaak het nie. Vlieg! Word wild weer! Sorg vir julleself nou! het sy geroep en haar arms in die lug gegooi (pp. 44-45).

There is a struggle between the ideas of 'wild' and 'tame' in these scenes. Agaat is better at feeding her, Milla says, because she has cared for and raised so many birds. Milla does not make the connection that when Agaat feeds her and when Agaat feeds the birds, certain events from

Agaat's childhood are mirrored. Milla did the same to Agaat, but Agaat's conduct differs from Milla in terms of the birds. Where Milla raises Agaat with a specific purpose in mind, i.e. at first to be her child and then later her servant, Agaat raises the birds to help them and to have them become wild again. (The mirroring of scenes from Agaat's childhood and later life is discussed in more detail in the close reading regarding mimicry and hybridity.) The underlying ideologies of the caretaker thus comes to the fore in these scenes: Milla raises Agaat in a specific way to instil certain ideas and traits in her, to remove the 'animalistic' elements in her, to tame her, and to change her into what she views as 'human'. Agaat raises the birds, but does not want to hold onto them: she wants them to return to their 'natural state'.

Another one of Milla's observations (recalling Agaat's behaviour as a small child) that sheds more light on the nature/culture dichotomy is Agaat's response to physical contact:

As ek haar regop sit, wil sy nie haar bene styf maak nie. Val om, speel dood as ek naby kom. Wat wilde diere doen, insekte, as hulle gevaar voel dreig. Omval. Skutkleur. Probeer om nie gesien te word nie. Instink (p. 487).

Milla thinks 'Here weet wat met die skepsel gebeur het, weggegooi, vergeet van' (p. 485), empathising with the little girl. Agaat's response to physical contact with another human being might be considered an instinctive response to protect herself from harm, but Milla does not seem to fully consider the psychological impact of the abuse Agaat was subjected to. In this instance it seems that for Milla the boundary between nature and culture is briefly blurred, since she understands that humans will adapt to protect themselves if necessary. Yet her strict ideas of what constitutes nature and culture hinder her understanding of an instinct that is not barbaric at all, but only a form of self-preservation.

Milla notes that Agaat might have a mental disability (because of her unresponsiveness), and then writes: 'Doofstom miskien? Ek onthou die snaakse hoë piepgeluide. Agterlik dalk? Mens weet nooit met die mense nie. Generasies van inteelt, geweld, siektes, alkohol. Kinders van Gam' (p. 490). Milla here utilises a stereotype that coloured people are inferior to white people not only as a result of incestuous relationships, violence, illness and alcohol, but also because they (people of colour) are descendants of Ham, Noah's cursed son.³¹ This is only one of the many instances

³¹ The so-called Curse of Ham is mentioned in the Bible in Genesis (9:20-27) in which Noah, Ham's father, places a curse on Ham's son Canaan, after Ham saw his naked father because of drunkenness in Noah's tent. Braude (1997:103) notes that the idea of Ham's descendants being 'blackened' by the curse 'has constituted one of the standard justifications for the degradation ... of the African black in both South Africa and the American South'. Black/coloured people were seen as descendents of Ham, their skin being their mark, and so they were regarded as inferior to European peoples. This belief is important within postcolonial theory since it sheds more light on the complex European attitudes toward the Other from the Renaissance onwards (ibid.).

where Milla uses her religion to motivate her actions towards Agaat. When Jak complains about Milla taking in Agaat, she replies by asking him where his faith and heart is. Milla also states that ‘civilised’ behaviour is a prerequisite for being a Christian:

Moeilik om vir Agaat te verduidelik van die doop. Noudat sy mooi groot is en kan sing en praat, het ek gesê, en gehoorsaam is en haarself kan was en aantrek en haar knope en gespes en veters kan vasmaak en die Bybelstories almal ken en elke aand haar gebedjie opsê, moet sy met water uit die vont gemerk word op haar voorkop as ’n kind van die Here (pp. 582-583).

Firstly, for Milla, what Agaat has learned thus far serves as proof that she has been tamed, and only now that ‘nature’ (as perceived by Milla) has been removed from her and replaced with ‘culture’ (again as perceived by Milla), she becomes human. Milla believes that Agaat’s ability to wash and dress herself is a step away from nature towards culture. Although the community in which the De Wet family lives relates Christianity to ‘humanity’, the use of religion in the process of colonisation must also be kept in mind. Secondly, therefore, this quote, which is loaded with patronising sentiments, must be read in conjunction with what Milla wrote on the first page of the diary that describes how she found and raised Agaat:

In opdrag van die almagtige God, Bestuurder van ons aller lot en Bewaarder van die Boek van die Lewe, wy ek Kamilla de Wet (gebore Redelinghuys) hierdie joernaal aan die geskiedenis van Agaat Lourier, dogter van Maria Lourier van Barrydale en Damon (Joppies) Steefert van Worcester sodat daar ’n rekord vir haar kan wees eendag van haar uitverkorenheid en van die kosbare geleentheid wat sy op die plaas Grootmoedersdrift gekry het tot ’n Christelike opvoeding en tot al die voorregte van ’n goeie Afrikanerhuis. Sodat sy by die lees daarvan eendag kan oordink die ondergrondelike weë van die Voorsienigheid, wat deur my, sy dienswillige dienaar en vrou van sy volk, gewerk het om haar te verlos uit die bitter ellende waarin sy sekerlik sou kreppeer het synde ’n verskoppeling onder haar eie mense. Ek bid vir genade om hierdie groot opvoedingstaak wat ek aangepak het tot eer van die Here te volbring na die beste van my vermoë.

Laat sy wil geskied.

Laat sy koninkryk kom.

Want aan Hom behoort die mag en die heerlijkheid,

Tot in alle ewigheid.

Amen (pp. 707-708).

It is clear that Milla, like the apartheid regime, motivated the oppression of black and coloured people in South Africa by using Christianity and thus the notions of creating ‘civilisation’ and ‘better lives’ (the propagating of the idea that life before European colonisation was surely horrible). This paternal/patronising attitude of Milla falls within Gerwel’s category where ‘Die

Kleurlinge is nog kinders' (1988:174 ff). The clear historical allegory must be viewed in more historic specificity. According to Giliomee (2004:405) the term 'apartheid,' as it is known today, was used for the first time in 1929 in a booklet published after a conference of the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk) in the Free State.

Giliomee (2004:399-494) gives an interesting and in-depth account of the ways in which the church (specifically the Dutch Reformed Church) influenced and was influenced by apartheid. Although it is far too long to be dealt with in this study, the Dutch Reformed Church (of which the De Wet family in *Agaat* are members) served as one of the pillars on which the policies of apartheid were built.³² If *Agaat* is read as an allegorical novel in which Milla represents the Afrikaner and Agaat represents one of the many parts of the oppressed people of South Africa, one can clearly identify the links between the condescending and patronising views and words of Milla and those of the Dutch Reformed Church. As Reverend Jan Christoffel du Plessis had written in 1929 (Giliomee 2004:405), the 'heathens' (referring to the black and coloured people of South Africa) had to be evangelised, but they also had to be made and kept aware of their own racial identity, which corresponds to the issues of mimicry and hybridity faced by the coloniser. In similar manner, Milla allows Agaat to 'enjoy' a life almost on par with that of Afrikaners (in Milla's own twisted view), but she must always be aware of her tragic origins, her position (she remains a coloured woman, and therefore lower than a white person, something Milla attempted to constantly remind her of throughout her life), and she must be ever thankful to Milla (like the 'heathen' to the Afrikaner) for saving her from a life of sure misery.

The importance of Protestantism within Afrikaner nationalist ideology and its subsequent importance in the normative *plaasroman* must also be noted here. With reference to the normative *plaasroman*, J.M. Coetzee (1988:83) notes the farmer's utmost belief in being at the mercy of God's will. Strong religious belief was viewed as central to the Afrikaner, as was also attested by Afrikaner nationalism: being an Afrikaner (even sometimes going so far as to say being Afrikaans) meant being a Christian. Willemsse (2007:211) notes that to this day some Afrikaans cultural organisations set Christianity as a prerequisite for membership – even though a large number of people in especially the coloured community are followers of Islam.

Milla not only raises the 'savage' Agaat through religion, but she also forces Agaat to learn the ways of farming. Because of the limited scope of this study, only a few events that are important for the postcolonial and ecocritical reading of *Agaat* will be discussed. The first will be the birth of

³² But one example of this (Giliomee, 2004:405) is the way in which other 'white' churches were referred to as 'susterkerke' (sister churches), while separate churches for 'blacks and coloureds' were referred to as lesser 'dogterkerke' (daughter churches). The racialised hierarchic relationship between white, black and coloured was inescapable – even in the church.

Jakkie – wherein the focus will be on the conceptual power relations between human and nature, but also human and human, and how these relations tie in with the nature and culture boundary between Milla and Agaat – and the second where Agaat and Milla must treat the cattle after they have eaten poisonous plants.

4.3 Conceptualisations of Power through Interaction with Nature

4.3.1 The Birth of Jakkie

When Milla becomes pregnant at the end of 1959, Agaat is but 13 years old. At this point in the narrative Agaat is demoted from child to servant, and she is given a room in the outbuildings. The process of retraining Agaat to become a servant takes almost nine months, as Milla also begins to train Agaat as a farmer. Milla gives her three books as a kind of Afrikaner curriculum: the *FAK-Volksangbundel*, a collection of Afrikaner folk songs; a book on embroidery, probably *Borduur só* (quoted in the front of the novel); and what Milla refers to as the ‘Boerehulpboek’, likely the *Hulpboek vir boere in Suid-Afrika* (also quoted in the front of the novel). The importance of these books is supported by the quotes in the early pages of the novel. They represent Afrikaner culture, theoretical farming know-how, and everything that Milla wishes to instil in Agaat.

Milla’s practical training and Agaat’s knowledge of the Boerehulpboek is tested soon when Agaat must (unexpectedly) assist Milla in the birth of her son. Milla’s attempt to reach the clinic before Jakkie is born and her and Agaat’s journey over the mountain passes can be read on two levels. This journey that Milla undertakes is not only a physical journey, but also one that says much of Milla’s conceptual interaction with nature, the way in which she sees nature and how she sees humans (herself, Agaat and Jakkie) in relation to nature. Travelling over the mountain pass has an important role in the novel, because, as with the first time Jak and Milla travelled over the pass (early on in the novel) to go to Grootmoedersdrift, so now the journey through the pass signifies change.³³ When Milla feels the first contractions while still on Grootmoedersdrift, she attempts to convince herself that she will have enough time to get over the mountain pass and to the clinic (pp. 181-182). Cautious as ever, she has Agaat pack everything they will need in the event that they do not make it to the clinic before the child is born and Agaat needs to assist with the birth. She consoles the frightened Agaat:

³³ The significance of the Tradouw pass and the meaning of the name is also referred to in the title of the English and Italian translations of the text (*The Way of the Women* and *La via delle donne*).

Toemaar, het jy gesê, ons het mos al baie kalwers gevang ek en jy. Alles werk presies net so, jy ken dit uit jou kop uit. Maar dit sal nie nodig wees nie, dis soos met die eerste kalf, hy kom stadig (p. 183).

Despite what she says here, and despite knowing that Agaat can deliver calves with success, and despite having instilled both practical and theoretical knowledge in the young girl, Milla does not truly think that Agaat will be a capable midwife, as she admits to herself: ‘...mens moet twee hande hê vir ’n bevalling’ (p. 181), and ‘... gee dat ons net oor die pas kom betyds, want daar is regtig nie genoeg hande hier nie’ (p. 185). However, realising that she might not have any other choice, she reminds Agaat of the similarity between human birth and the birth of cattle. Through this, Milla begins to reveal more about her views of nature.

In the beginning of the novel, Milla recounts how she and Jak had travelled through the mountain pass to Grootmoedersdrift (pp. 32-37). This was regarded as a journey towards opportunity, yet the journey through the pass with Agaat becomes threatening: ‘Die bergwande het opgedoem, elke keer nader, ruwer, gryser’ (p. 185). When Milla does eventually go into labour, Agaat responds with regular precision. The figurative change that the journey through (and the birth in) the pass brings about, changes the power relation between Milla and Agaat, as it had established the initial power relation between Jak and Milla. As Milla tells how she gives birth to Jakkie, she constantly notes how Agaat’s actions are similar to the birth of a young calf on the farm:

Sy het ... jou bolyf toegemaak met ’n kombers soos julle met die koeie gemaak het in die winter. Sy het ’n kombersrol onder jou kop gesit.

Jy’s so rustig, het sy gesing, en ek voel my o, so eensaam en alleen (pp. 187-188).

Like Milla always sings to the cows on the farm, so she instructs Agaat to do here, and Agaat begins to instruct Milla on breathing and pushing:

Åsem, åsem, åsem, drúk, het Agaat gesê.

Jy het haar swak handjie laag op jou buik gevoel, daar het dit getas, dié kant en daardie kant van die bolling het dit gedruk, soos ’n spaantjie aan ’n bol deeg, en jou liggies bymekaargemaak van onder jou nawel en afgestryk oor jou onderbuik, een twee drie keer. Soos jy haar geleer het om oor diere te voel, of die lam dwars lê, of die kalf gebrug is ...

Nou móét jy, nou móét jy! Agaat het mooigepraat. Saggies, vinnig, dringend, die taal wat jy met die Simmentalers gepraat het wat so moeilik gekalf het. Jy het jouself gehoor, jou stem was in haar. Jy het jou pa gehoor met die diere, toe jy klein was, toe jy langs hom gestaan het in die ou stal op Grootmoedersdrift, die taal van vroue wat hy beter kon praat as jou ma (pp. 188-189).

At this point the shift in power begins taking place. Agaat, applying the knowledge that she has learned from Milla, begins to exceed even Milla's skill as farmer, even though she is helping a woman to give birth, and not an animal. If one reads this scene within the context of Bhabha's concept of mimicry (1984:126), it is interesting to note how similar Agaat becomes to Milla in this scene. Milla acknowledges this similarity when she says '[j]y het jouself gehoor, jou stem was in haar'. Before leaving Grootmoedersdrift, Milla, thinking that Agaat's knowledge would not have surpassed her own, had her doubts about Agaat being able to deliver Jakkie. She is proven wrong, however, since Agaat has in her farming knowledge started to become 'the same', like Milla, but 'different', thus better. Milla recognises her knowledge, and the knowledge of her mother and father in Agaat, but Agaat has improved this knowledge. Agaat is thus the colonised that poses a threat to the coloniser, for she shows that Milla is not superior to her in terms of knowledge (civilisation), showing just how constructed this performative superiority of Milla really is. In this scene, Agaat's ability to speak 'die taal van die vroue', like Milla's father, is especially important considering the location and dire situation.

After the child's birth, Milla realises what Agaat has done despite her physical handicap: 'Agaat se onpaar hande wat die daad vir jou verrig het,' (ibid.). Milla's constant comparing of the process of Jakkie's birth to that of the cows and calves on Grootmoedersdrift indicates the dependence of the cows on Milla, and the relationship between her and the animals. When they struggle to give birth, Milla is the one who helps them through it. When Milla gives birth, Agaat does the same to Milla. If need be, Milla holds the power to cut open the cow to assist her in giving birth. When Milla gives birth, Agaat, although she hesitates, holds the power to cut open Milla to assist her in giving birth, as illustrated in this scene:

Jy kon nie meer nie. Jy was op.

Hy sit hy sit sy kop sit vas in die gat.

Agaat was in paniek, jy kon hoor.

Vat die skêr! het jy gegil. Jy het dit gevoel, die koue staal teen jou, dit het te stadig gevoel, sy het gewefel.

Knip, gót! het jy geskree, knip tot by die hól oop! (p. 189)

If one reads this in conjunction with the figurative shift in power explained above, it is clear that Milla's interaction with nature takes shape specifically on the conceptual level of power relations (in Larsen's terms), like when she helps the cows in birthing. Therefore – although the birth of a calf and the birth of Jakkie is a very real and physical interaction between human and nature, also because Milla relates it so closely to animals giving birth – Milla's interaction with nature is also on a higher, abstract level. This abstract level is reflected in the ethical dimension regarding respect

for animal life, and respect for human life, which Milla attempts to explain to Agaat: ‘Sy kan j ou maar los, het jy ges e, al bloei jy vreeslik, dit maak nie saak nie. En dis weer anders as by die koeie, het jy ges e’ (p. 184).

In the birth scene Agaat also takes possession of the baby Jakkie, as indicated by her words to Milla: ‘Alles is reg, ... my m eme, ek het hom by my, hy is veilig, ek hou hom vir jou, ons is nou-nou daar!’ (ibid.). The child becomes a metaphorical instrument of power, a sceptre, so to speak, of a position of power on Grootmoedersdrift. Milla could only beget this sceptre through Jak (his seed), and once she had it, she triumphed over Jak. Now, Agaat takes the sceptre from Milla. Interestingly, when Milla awakes in hospital, she does not want her baby, but demands that Agaat, who has climbed into the hearth again, is brought to her:

Hulle het die bondel gebring, jy wou hom nie h e nie, jy het gehuil.

Bring vir Agaat, bring haar hier, gaan haal haar, bring haar na my toe, het jy gehuil, bring vir Agaat, ek wil vir Agaat h e (p. 191).

This indicates that Milla and Agaat have moved closer to each other (as mother and daughter) through the process of Jakkie’s birth, yet the arrival of Jakkie (being a physical birth for Milla, and for Agaat an emotional birth of her own child) brings about change in the relationship between Milla and Agaat. Milla’s refusal to hold the child (especially as she does not refer to him as ‘my seun’ or ‘my kind’, but unpersonally as ‘die bondel’) indicates that she does not view Jakkie as human yet.

Agaat’s possession of Jakkie is mentioned in the end of the novel, when Jakkie recounts the fairytale Agaat had always told him:

[T]oe haal sy die kind uit die bloed en die slym en sy knip die string en sy maak hom skoon en sy draai hom toe in doeke en sy gee hom ’n naam waar net sy van weet.

Jy-is-myne, het sy hom genoem ...

Ek is ’n slaaf, maar Jy-is-myne, het sy altyd in sy oor gefluister voor sy hom oorgegee het aan sy moeder (pp. 716-717).

Milla realises that the child born to her is not of her, but of Agaat, while Agaat, unable to bear children, becomes an emotional mother for Jakkie. While Agaat holds out her arms to Milla and says ‘Gee, ... gee hom vir my, ek sal kyk’ (p. 191), both women realise that their relationship has changed.

4.3.2 The Poisoned Cattle

In the case of the poisoned cattle, the conceptual shift in power that has taken place between Milla and Agaat at and since Jakkie's birth is further explored. The ecocritical reading offered here is not focussed explicitly on the elements of nature, but rather the boundary of interaction between the animals and characters, and the interaction of characters with each other. In this short analysis of a part of chapter ten in the novel, there will again be focused on how the events are used to further explain the power relation between Milla and Agaat, and Agaat and the other farm labourers on Grootmoedersdrift.

In October 1960, the De Wets suffer a great loss with the break-out of botulism on Grootmoedersdrift. Milla blames Agaat for the disaster, and although she almost immediately admits to herself that her anger and resentment is misplaced and that it is not Agaat's fault, she is unable to apologise (p. 241). As a result of this, Agaat takes up the Boerehulpboek and makes a proper study of diseases that could be potentially crippling for livestock. Agaat even challenges Milla to ask her anything from the book, saying 'ek het alles geleer, ek ken nou alles, ek sal nooit weer 'n fout maak nie' (p. 260). What Agaat says here can be interpreted as her internalising this aspect of a Western culture, while also defiantly exposing the limits of this knowledge: it can all be learned, it has limits that are attainable. Like before, Agaat must prove to Milla that she has gained knowledge, and therefore culture. Agaat defiantly learns the information in the Boerehulpboek since she knows that with knowledge comes power, another sign that she has internalised many Western values. Like the numerous folksongs from the songbook of the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge (FAK) that she sings and parodies throughout the novel, Agaat here again illustrates her uncanny memory.³⁴ A year and a month after the case of the botulism, Agaat's knowledge of cattle disease and how to treat them is tested again when the Simmentaler cattle, which Jak has imported from South West Africa, today called Namibia, eat poisonous tulips. After informing Milla of what is happening, Agaat immediately moves to the kitchen to prepare to treat the sick animals. Two of the maids, Saar and Lietja, arrive with some of the farm workers' children. One would expect Milla, the farm woman, to take the lead, but instead, she stands in disbelief with her hands in her hair (p. 265). Agaat begins to establish not only to Milla, but to all present, that she is now taking charge: 'Agaat het jou 'n kyk gegee van ruk-vir-jou-reg-op-die-daad' (p. 265). Agaat proceeds to start making the remedies that must be given to the cattle,

³⁴ As there is argued in the following section, Agaat does not have/acquire a voice in the novel. Keeping this in mind, it is interesting that her incredible memory is hinted at throughout the narrative, especially since Agaat's version of how she was found and raised by Milla differs significantly from Milla's own recounting of the same events. Van Niekerk's choice to use Milla as the main narrator is perhaps not only on account of her (Van Niekerk's) own expressed inability to represent the Other, but she might also be commenting in postmodern fashion on the way in which mainstream history is often documented. One could refer to this as the unreliable narrator (Milla) versus the reliable possible narrator (Agaat).

organising the actions of not only Lietja and Saar, but also of Milla. As she carries out Agaat's orders, Milla begins to realise that Agaat has surpassed her in skill as far as this aspect of farming goes: 'Jy het alles verstaan wat Agaat beveel. Jy sou dit net nie alles self so presies kon onthou nie' (p. 266). Agaat's authoritative position is also indicated by the words used to describe her actions: 'bevele uitgedeel', 'geskree' (p. 265), 'georder', 'gedirigeer' (p. 266), and by the imperative tone of her sentences:

Vier dosyn eiers, wit en die geel apart! het sy vir Saar georder.

Vier koppies brandewyn by die wit! Roer! In die hanslammers se bottels! Skroef toe! As die koffie klaar getrek is, kry dit afgekoel! Gooi dit in koeldrankbottels! Maak gou gou gou! Bring die rol rubberpyp met die rekring om die punt agter die spensdeur! En 'n mes! Sit dit reg! Opskud! (p. 266)

When they get to the camp in which the Simmentalers are closed off, Agaat moves quickly to start treating the big valuable bull Hamburg. The bull, weak from the poisonous plants, must be moved from the holding pen into the crush pen. Agaat begins organising everyone at hand, and at one moment she is mocked by the young coloured children, to whom she replies: 'Skei uit! ... Staan reg, gee aan wat ons order en hou julle se bekke of ek moer vir julle' (p. 269). Milla describes how she will never forget how Agaat's authority established itself that day: 'Jy sou dit nooit vergeet nie, *die onmiddellike gediensigheid van almal*, klein en groot. *Iets het van rat verander daardie middag op Grootmoedersdrift*' (p. 270, my emphasis). There is a brief moment where Milla attempts to dissuade Agaat from leading Hamburg into the crush pen by his nose ring before he can be treated (p. 270), but Agaat barely pays it any attention. With Agaat's authority over everyone on Grootmoedersdrift – even Milla – now defined, Agaat enters the pen and begins to lead the bull into the crush pen:

Loodreg op die dooie strook tussen die bul se oë het Agaat beweeg, stout en hoog haar houding ...

Sy het haar vinger in die neusring gehaak, haar rug gedraai, 'n tree vorentoe gegee ...

Die bul het sy kop laat sak. Weerskante van sy bek het slobbers kwyl teen die sementmure geslinger. Sy klein ingesakte ogies was op die kruis van Agaat se skouerbande ...

Triomf toe die bul sy groot muil oor die dwarsstang stoot, toe jy die hefboom afdruk, en sy kop inwig, en Agaat ontsnap deur die valhek. 'n Gejil van die kleingoed, uitroep van bewondering toe sy daar uitkom (p. 271).

Here it is important to note how Agaat establishes a sense of wonder and respect amongst the other farm labourers who had previously mocked her (''n Gejil van die kleingoed, uitroep van bewondering toe sy daar uitkom'). At the same time, she claims authority over Hamburg the bull, the most powerful and dangerous animal on the farm. Later, when the cattle have all been treated,

the young children mock Agaat again, saying ‘Aitsa! So ’n witkepebesdokter, hoe blaas sy brandewyn in ’n bul in!’ (p. 274), but Milla notices that the mockery is different from that of earlier: ‘Daar was ’n nuwe respek in die geterg en in die houding, selfs van die groot mans toe hulle die borde en die bekers kom teruggee in haar hande’. Agaat therefore proceeds from being mocked to inciting awe, and eventually gaining respect and authority on Grootmoedersdrift.

In the birth scene and scenes immediately following upon that, the shift of power from Milla to Agaat is established. In the scenes where the sick cattle are being treated, a further shift of power from Milla to Agaat is established, and this time, the shift is even greater, as Agaat has proven her authority over the farm animals, and now also acquires authority over the other farm labourers and to some extent over Milla.

4.3.3 The Voice of Agaat

As has been indicated in the theoretical section of this thesis, *Agaat* can be considered a *plaasroman*. An important part of the *plaasroman* is the position of the white farmer and the coloured labourer in relation to one another. Prinsloo & Visagie (2007:44) observe that *Agaat* clearly comments on the stereotypical relationship of binary opposition between the farmer and labourer prevalent in the normative *plaasroman*. As has been mentioned, *Agaat* differs from the normative *plaasroman* because the coloured labourer is no longer on the periphery of the narrative, but moves into the centre. In the normative *plaasroman*, the labourer is stereotypically projected as a weak, social delinquent, always comical, pathetically attempting to mimic the cultured farmer (but never quite succeeding), emotionally bankrupt, and childish (Gerwel 1987, quoted in Prinsloo & Visagie 2007:44). Although there are instances in *Agaat* where the farm labourers are depicted in such stereotypical fashion, the author does this on purpose to further problematise the issue: ‘hierdie stereotipering [word] eers bevestig en daarna ondermyn as deel van ’n postmodernistiese procédé om kommentaar te lewer op die talle stereotiperings wat oor die plaaswerker in die normatiewe plaasromans voorkom’ (Prinsloo & Visagie 2007:46, 58). An excellent example of this is the scene involving Jak and Koos Makkewyn discussed earlier in the close reading. This problematisation also becomes clearer when one analyses the focalisation in the novel, which is exclusively by Milla. The entire narrative, except for the prologue and epilogue and Agaat’s fairytale, is told from her perspective, and she admits at one stage that she is unable to view things as others view it (specifically Agaat):

Hoe moes dit voel om Agaat te wees? Hoe kon jy dit ooit te wete kom?

Sou julle kon uitmaak wat sy sê as sy dit kon verduidelik? Sy sou dit in ’n ander taal as die een wat julle haar geleer het, moes uitlê (p. 574).

On the reason for Agaat hardly ever getting the opportunity to tell her version of events, to ‘say her say’, Van Niekerk says the following:

Sy bly die Ander, die geheim, en ek kon haar nie laat fokaliseer nie. Sy is die bron van selfverstaan van ander wat háár sien en probeer interpreteer. Sy bly ’n projeksie, ’n spook van al die karakters se verlange en vrees. Sels so domesticated soos sy is, bly sy die Ander (Smith & Van Niekerk 2004:3).

Prinsloo & Visagie (2007) argue that Agaat does indeed acquire a voice in the novel. They use the example of Agaat and Milla communicating through a system where Milla, by the use of her eyes, indicates letters on an alphabet card and spells out questions for Agaat. Agaat often does not answer these questions, and other times she gives an answer that seems totally unrelated to the question (2007:46-51). Because Agaat must point to the letters, Prinsloo & Visagie (*ibid.*) argue that in this situation, Agaat not only has the power to decide when she wishes to make her voice heard, she also has the fundamental power to decide when communication will take place, and as such, she acquires a voice. The argument of Carvalho & Van Vuuren (2009:43) – that Agaat’s power lies in her ability to ease or hinder Milla’s narrative – aligns with that of Prinsloo & Visagie (2007:46-51). Carvalho & Van Vuuren (2009:43) note in this respect that Agaat’s mimicry becomes a ‘means through which to internally challenge and disintegrate a hegemonic discourse’ (i.e. Milla’s version of the narrative). Prinsloo & Visagie (2007:50) use Agaat’s short version of her own life (told as a fairytale to Jakkie, and only recounted at the end of the novel), which differs markedly in how it is told by Milla, to further support their argument of Agaat acquiring a voice in the novel (Prinsloo & Visagie 2007:50-51). Although there is merit in this argument in that it highlights the volatile power dynamics between Milla and Agaat, and in that it effectively illustrates the power associated with what Bhabha (1984) identifies as mimicry, I do not agree with Prinsloo & Visagie that Agaat has/acquires a voice in the novel.

Spivak questions the specific identification of ‘the’ voice of the subaltern: ‘[o]ne cannot construct a category of the subaltern that has an effective voice clearly and unproblematically identifiable as such, a voice that does not at the same time occupy many other possible speaking positions’ (Spivak in Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007:200-201). Although Agaat does have the power to communicate and decide when communication will take place, she still only communicates through elements imposed upon her by Milla. She ironically speaks in Afrikaans folksongs, idioms and expressions, twisting their meanings in various ways – and yet that is not the voice of Agaat, but a reflection, albeit twisted and altered, of Milla’s voice. See for example Agaat’s use of two idioms on p. 197: ‘’n Boer maak ’n plan al is die kalf in die put’. Agaat, although she subtly

challenges Milla's version of events, does not present her perspective on matters; through her use of familiar Afrikaans songs, expressions and other things learned from Milla, Agaat communicates only through what is familiar to Milla (and thus to the reader). In this regard, Burger (2006:178-179) notes that the only way in which the Self (here Milla) can ever know the Other (here Agaat) 'is wanneer hulle opgeneem word in die subjek se taal, as hulle karakters word in die subjek se vertelling – waardeur die verteller die gevaar loop om die ander se "andersheid" op te los in sy/haar eie taal'.

Prinsloo & Visagie (2007:51) effectively identify Agaat's mimicry of Milla and argue that Agaat's subversion through mimicry allows for her own identity to be revealed.³⁵ Agaat does indeed to a certain extent become a mirror image of Milla. I contend, however, that when one regards Agaat against the framework of what she has been taught by Milla, one sees 'the same, but not quite'. One may ask whether the unfamiliar, unconnected, undiluted, unfiltered and autonomous voice of Agaat is ever heard. Ironic twists of expressions and folksongs do not constitute an 'essence' of the Other. It can even be argued that supposing that the Other's (the colonised's) distortion of the Self's (coloniser's) language is simply a representation of the remnants of the Other's own identity yet again situates the coloniser as the centre without which the colonised – again in the periphery – has no identity. The twisted versions of the hegemonic discourse can only be understood through knowledge of the hegemonic discourse, not through the subservient discourse of the one who mimics (i.e. Agaat), for Milla (and for that matter the reader) does not know nor learns the 'real' Agaat. Furthermore, all comments regarding identity become highly contestable as a result of the dynamic nature of identity. I subsequently agree on this point with Carvalho & Van Vuuren (2009:52) when they say that 'Agaat's mimetic means of expression, whilst unquestionably subversive, do not ultimately succeed in collapsing Milla's narrative authority over her'. The ambiguities presented by Agaat are only familiar elements of what is mimicked; it is still impossible to discern what specificities it may reveal of Agaat herself. Since Agaat also tells her version of her life in the form of a fairytale (pp. 710-717), it is not easy (if at all possible) to distinguish between what has been exaggerated, understressed, left out from or inserted in her story – and even more, Agaat's story can hardly be fitted into the narrative structure of the fairy tale. The fact that the lingual distance between Agaat and the reader is never bridged, results in the reader still not being able to hear or understand Agaat. Agaat will always remain, as Van Niekerk herself notes, the unfathomable other.

³⁵ It must also be noted that Prinsloo & Visagie (2007) and Carvalho & Van Vuuren (2009) make some errors in their analyses of some of Agaat's mimicries. They view the mysterious dance that Agaat performs as something that she has held onto from her life with the Louriers. This is untrue. Although Agaat does change the dance into something that Milla struggles to understand (or even identify – which is another form of mimicry), Agaat originally learns the dance from Milla when she is a small girl, as Milla begins her 'rehabilitation' of the abused and scared little girl ('Die Sonnegroet', p. 500).

In order to place *Agaat* into context regarding Bhabha's notions of mimicry (mentioned above) and hybridity, it is necessary to discuss the Afrikaner cultural norms specified in the novel. Regarding the social construction of 'nation', Botes (2009:54) notes the following:

In the same manner that Butler (1990; 2004) proves that the identity category "sex" is a social construction that needs the abject "other", the body which does not comply with the regulatory ideals imposed on it, so the social construction of the "nation" is highly dependent on the "other" – those who do not fit into the ideal for the nation. The "nation" is thus established through exclusionary means.

This is also the case with *Agaat* being raised by an Afrikaner woman (in an Afrikaner home). Milla even states that *Agaat*, despite the fact that she will never be able to be part of the Afrikaners, will have many of the benefits of an Afrikaner upbringing – except belonging to the 'nation', of course (pp. 707-708). Read within the allegorical context of the relationship between Milla and *Agaat*, *Agaat* illustrates Botes's statement quoted above, especially when one analyses several of *Agaat*'s actions in relation to Milla. Homi Bhabha (1984:127) uses the term 'mimicry' to denote the colonised's imitation of various aspects of the coloniser's cultural identity to ultimately gain access to the power of the coloniser by acts of imitation. Milla represents the norm of apartheid South Africa, established by those in power: she is white, she is an Afrikaner, she is a Christian, and she is a woman who at least pretends to function within the patriarchal society of Afrikanerdom, while also possessing economic power as the owner of Grootmoedersdrift. *Agaat* represents (ambiguously) that which differs from the norm, but that without which the norm cannot exist: she is coloured (read non-white – a term which also shows that whiteness can only be defined through the existence of other races), she is not an Afrikaner, she is not (at first, and arguably later still not) a Christian, she holds no economical power on the farm (although she later inherits it), and on another physical level she has a disfigured limb, denoting the abject in Kristeva's (1982) terms. However, *Agaat* speaks Afrikaans like an Afrikaner,³⁶ she knows the Bible and doctrines of the church very well, and she manages to divert attention from her physical disability by the incredibly rigid neatness of her uniform and cap. Using Butler's notion of performativity, Botes (2009:55) notes that, as in the case with gender, 'there is no "I", no subject, who is prior to discourse and thus not subjected to the process of materialization' in the case of identity. The norm that Milla represents is a constructed one; there is nothing 'natural' about the norm she represents:

When one says "I am white", for instance, one is not "reporting an already determined state of affairs but taking part in a practice which itself constitutes the state of affairs" – and through various

³⁶ *Agaat*'s use of Afrikaans is much more similar to the way in which Milla and Jak uses the language, than to the way in which Dawid, Saar, Lietja, Lys, and other labourers on the farm use it. *Agaat* speaks what can be referred to as 'Standaardafrikaans' (i.e. the standard set by white speakers of the language).

repetitions of this utterance the notion of what it is to be white is formed. Through much repetition, this notion of whiteness only appears to be natural and prior to the social construction of race.

She further mentions that

race is as performative as gender. The colonial identity appears to be natural and to predate the contact between coloniser and the colonised subject, but the colonial identity is only formed through its encounters with the colonised subject. Therefore, as Bhabha (1985:150) points out, “the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference”.

There are many instances in *Agaat* where Agaat mimics/imitates Milla. Firstly it must be noted which events she is possibly mimicking. On the 20th of March 1954 Milla writes in her diary:

As sy nie ordentlik met my wil praat van aangesig tot aangesig nie, kry sy nie kos nie en sy bly in haar kamer. Dis die reël. Twee dae nou.

21 Maart '54

Weer in die hoek met die kneukel in die mond. Asvaal in die gesig, haar moesies lyk swart. Ek sluit haar net eenvoudig op. Sy moet my leer gehoorsaam. Ek stuur Saar om die pot leeg te maak. Ek sê by die deur wat daar is om te eet. Maar sy moet mooi vra in 'n volsin wat ek vir haar moet inskep. My geduld is op (pp. 541-542).

Milla abuses Agaat by depriving her of food in the hope that this will force the child to begin communicating in full sentences. Milla thus conveys to Agaat that if she does not do exactly as Milla says, she will starve. Later in the diary entries Milla also admits to having given Agaat a hiding for not using the toilet to relieve herself. Keeping these torturous tactics of Milla in mind, Agaat's first expressive mimicking of Milla is very interesting in what it reflects. On 15 November 1954 Milla writes:

Saar kom roep my nou net agter in die tuin, kom kyk, mies, wat speel Agaat. Op my tone by die kombuisdeur in en loer vir haar agter die deur. Daar is dit die inkwisisie van die lappop op die telefoonstoeltjie! Sy sit die pop vol riviersand aspris so dat sy moet afval. Dan val sy af, dan kry sy 'n klap, dan val sy af, dan kry sy 'n vinger in die oog!

Sit pop, sit! As jy nie mooi regop kan sit op jou stoel en vir my kyk nie, en vir my antwoord as ek met jou praat nie, dan bel ek die polisie!

Daar klim Agaat op die telefoonstoeltjie, vat die buis van die mik. Hallo hallo polisie? Kom haal haar, kom sluit haar op! Sy's vol semels! Sy kyk vir my astrant! Sy hou vir haar stom! Sy doen haar besigheid in haar broek!

Nie 'n gebrek aan verbeelding nie, wat ook al verder mag makeer! (pp. 597-598)

Although Milla sees this game of Agaat as a product of Agaat's imagination, Agaat is imitating what Milla has done to her. Similar to the little Agaat, the doll is called 'astrant', 'stom' and she relieves herself with her clothes on. Furthermore, Agaat identifies Milla's disdain for something physical about her that she cannot change when she mentions one of the doll's 'crimes' being 'vol semels'. One could refer this to either Agaat being coloured, or to Agaat's one arm being misformed, or even to both these physical characteristics. This is one of the first instances in which Agaat mimics Milla's behaviour (and Milla's cruelty). Milla's remark that Agaat has no lack of imagination is ironic, for clearly what Agaat is doing is not a product of her imagination, but a mimicking of Milla.

As an adult, Agaat has refined her talents for mimicking Milla. In a scene where Agaat bathes the paralysed Milla, Agaat uses various Afrikaans idioms and expressions through which she communicates with Milla. At first Agaat says 'n Boer maak 'n plan al is die kalf in die put,' to which Milla protests with her eyes. Agaat simply replies by saying 'Askies, Ounooi, moet nou nie eksepsie neem nie, dis net 'n spreekwoord' (p. 197). Although Agaat denies it, what she actually implies with her use of the expressions is that she is now the Boer on Grootmoedersdrift, and that she still has to take care of the ill Milla, the trapped cow. By calling Milla a cow, Agaat is also referring to Jakkie's birth where she was again the Boer and Milla the cow. Agaat continues with another expression: 'Môrestond het goud in die mând, ... bewaar elke splinter vir die vuur in die winter.' Milla then explains that this is an old trick of Agaat, one they both know well:

Elke keer die klem op die laaste woord. Asof sy haarself verweer met voorafvervaardigde sinne wat sy deur toon en nadruk aanwend *vir haar eie doel*. Ou laai. *Sy het nie respek vir wat spreekwoorde regtig beteken nie, sy maak haar eie Afrikaans op soos sy aangaan*. Dis haar manier as sy ontstig is. *Die ou pappegaaigewoontes. Naboots met 'n dubbele bodem* (p. 197, my emphasis).

In this passage, Milla identifies that Agaat is mimicking her. It is here as Bhabha (1985:150) says: 'Consequently, the colonial presence [in Agaat's words – R.F.] is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference'. Milla indicates that Agaat has prefabricated her sentences for her own purposes ('voorafvervaardigde sinne ... vir haar eie doel') and that although she (Agaat) repeats a myriad of Afrikaans expressions and idioms very well in their original form and appearance ('the colonial presence' here being the language), she attributes her own meaning to them ('Sy het nie respek vir wat spreekwoorde regtig beteken nie, sy maak haar eie Afrikaans op soos sy aangaan' and 'ou pappegaaigewoontes'), thereby signifying both repetition and difference. The final sentence

(‘Naboots met dubbele bodem’)³⁷ is especially important, because here the reader also sees that Milla (considered the norm, the self) knows how Aagaat (considered different, the other) appropriates the Afrikaans language and uses it to express her own ironic meanings – which Milla often does not grasp – and how this subversion is one of the ways in which Aagaat challenges Milla’s hegemonic position. Aagaat’s mimicry also becomes a parody of Afrikaner culture, as she both mocks and celebrates elements from this culture.

Regarding the conversation between *Aagaat* and the normative *plaasroman*, specifically with regard to the stereotypical depiction of the coloured farm labourer, *Aagaat* subverts this stereotype very effectively, as illustrated above. However, it should be noted that Van Niekerk does not simply challenge the stereotypical depiction of the coloured farm labourers in the *plaasroman*, she also comments through the text on the difficulties of this issue even within postcolonial literature. Despite Aagaat not being the stereotype described by Gerwel (1988), Van Niekerk indicates that the issue regarding the subaltern voice still remains. Through the movement of the coloured labourer from the periphery into the centre in *Aagaat*, the novel also illustrates much of Bhabha’s concept of hybridity. Aagaat, allowed access to many aspects of Afrikaner life and culture (as Milla mentions in her ‘foreword’ to her diaries about raising Aagaat) and removed from her own family, is denied access to full membership of the Afrikanerdom, and she thus takes on a hybrid identity and through mimicry subverts the hierarchy forced upon her. One example of this is during the preparations for Jakkie’s baptism. Aagaat excitedly makes a dress (in which male and female children are traditionally baptised in Afrikaner churches) for Jakkie, and asks Milla whether she will be allowed to bring Jakkie into the church. (This role is traditionally fulfilled by a family member.) Milla’s writing in her diary attests to how Aagaat is denied access to many aspects of Afrikaner society:

Maar dis tog nou regtig ongehoord ’n klimmeid in die kerk & dis alles klaar afgespreek in elk geval & J. se niggie sal hom indra in hulle ou familiedooprok (p. 229).

Aagaat is not part of the ‘them’, but she is also never part of the ‘us’ (Prinsloo & Visagie 2007:58). Regarding what forms part of Aagaat’s hybrid identity, Carvalho & Van Vuuren (2009:50) mention some interesting examples, including her singing of Afrikaans folksongs and her embroidery of her white caps. Regarding her caps, they note:

Of all the non-verbal communication methods Aagaat exploits, embroidery is most significant. Milla introduces Aagaat to the art of embroidery, decorative needlework, knitting and crocheting as an initiation into the “age-old arts & rich traditions from the domain of woman” (p. 169). The craft is intended to instruct Aagaat in the ways of a good Afrikaner woman and to act as “proof that I [Milla]

³⁷ Interesting to note is that this phrase appears in the English translation of the novel as ‘Double barrelled mimicry’.

haven't wasted my time with you" (p. 169). Aagaat spends a vast deal of time embroidering and is exceptionally secretive about every project she undertakes. Chris van der Merwe believes her embroidery is indicative of "die ontwikkeling van 'n eie individualiteit en 'n eie skeppingsvermoë" ["the development of an own individuality and own creativity"] (Van der Merwe 2004: 5). Yet her embroidery has a representative quality and symbolic substance that belies its perceived frivolity (Carvalho & Van Vuuren, 2009:50).

They also mention that Aagaat's cap becomes a space on which she can 'write' and 'rewrite' her own story, and so the cap 'is thus the negative sign of Aagaat's servitude', but it is also 'simultaneously a positive space of personal and well-guarded creativity'.

The situations in which Aagaat sings certain folksongs often delivers an ironic twist relevant to both the meaning of the song and her actions. The same can be said of her use of Afrikaans expressions and idioms. What these verbal examples of Aagaat's hybridity might reveal, however, could in itself constitute a thesis. Due to the limited scope of this study, there is unfortunately not enough space here to supply greater depth and insight into this matter.

5. Conclusion

In this study a combined ecocritical and postcolonial reading of *Agaat* by Marlene van Niekerk was undertaken to explore the importance of the farm Grootmoedersdrift in relation to the main characters in the novel. The farm functions as a site of power struggle between Milla, Agaat and Jak; a power struggle often reflected in the interaction between humans and nature. As a modern form of the Afrikaans subgenre of the *plaasroman*, *Agaat* converses with certain characteristics of the normative *plaasroman*, sometimes challenging its stereotypes while at the same time exploring current-day issues of identity in a postcolonial South African milieu.

The first section of this study gives an overview of ecocritical and postcolonial theory useful for this topic. Regarding ecocritical theory, a practical approach has been taken. Different fundamental notions by Glotfelty (1994) and critical remarks on the field of ecocriticism by Estok (2005) have been taken into account, while also considering the value of ecofeminism for this study. Ultimately, the approach by Larsen (2007), which focuses on boundaries of interaction between human and nature, has been utilised alongside the insights of Glotfelty and Estok. As far as postcolonial theory is concerned, the notion of the subaltern (Spivak, 1988) and Bhabha's theory of mimicry and hybridity (1984, 1985) have proven useful in the interpretation of the different power positions available to Jak, Agaat and Milla. Where relevant, the postcolonial and ecocritical theoretical outline was also discussed insofar as it is relevant to the normative and modern *plaasroman*. Here discussions by amongst others Gerwel (1988), Coetzee (1996) and Devarenne (2006, 2009) were employed in relation to the concepts of the portrayal of coloured characters, the importance and history of the *plaasroman* subgenre in Afrikaans literature, and the notion of the *volksmoeder*.

In the second section, in the discussion of the relationship between Milla and Jak and their different approaches to farming and nature, this study sought to highlight the way in which *Agaat* as modern *plaasroman* explores the struggle for power between characters that both embody and defy traditional notions of gender identity as it is often depicted in the normative *plaasroman*. The farm, the site of this conflict, has been proven to be instrumental in this portrayal. The relationship between coloniser and colonised is explored against the background of the normative *plaasroman*, focusing specifically on the notion of the subaltern. As in the case with traditional depictions of gender, *Agaat* also investigates traditional depictions of the relationship between the coloniser and colonised (here Milla and Agaat), as it is also reflected in their interactions with nature on the farm and ultimately with each other.

Jak initially holds the power over Milla because he is more successful at farming, and because Milla is initially unable to fulfil her ‘natural’ duties of bearing an heir to the farm, but this power is later switched around. When Milla’s less invasive farming methods prove to be more viable in the long term, Jak loses his hold over both the farm and over Milla. When Milla becomes pregnant she gains further power and Jak becomes an emasculated figure on Grootmoedersdrift. In this exploration of the power struggles between genders, the farm becomes an important aspect of the narrative. Furthermore, the gender power struggle is additionally explored through Milla’s internal struggle: although she longs to be the ideal *volksmoeder* for her community, she is also passionate about the farm she inherited and her duties to the land, which are irreconcilable with the subaltern position afforded to Afrikaner women in South Africa of that time. Through Milla’s performative portrayal of the *volksmoeder*, it is revealed that this identity, like the mythical relationship of the Afrikaner male to the land (which is also subverted by the unconventional positions of Jak and Milla), is forged and perpetuated by society. In the close reading the unconventional characterisation of both Milla and Jak comes to the fore.

In the same way that Milla (the subaltern) gains power in her relationship with Jak (the hegemonic centre of power), and how this can be observed in the characters’ interaction with nature, Afaat (the subaltern) gains power from Milla (the hegemonic centre of power). This is reflected in Afaat surpassing Milla as both a farmer and a mother. Furthermore, the ‘teaching’ (in the form of farming) to which Milla subjects Afaat reveals the complexities of mimicry and hybridity in the relationship between coloniser and colonised. After having been demoted from daughter to servant, Afaat’s subtle mastery of aspects of Afrikaner culture becomes a threat to Milla, who is ultimately left in the care (and at the mercy) of the servant who has become the heir to Grootmoedersdrift.

The research questions set out in the first section of this study have been answered. Through the combined approaches of ecocritical and postcolonial theories and concepts to *Afaat*, it has been proven that these methods can functionally inform an interpretation of a literary text. In the case of this study, it has revealed much regarding the relations of power between different characters in the novel, especially regarding the boundary of interaction between human and nature, as well as human and human. This interpretation is further functionally informed when the novel, a modern *plaasroman*, is contrasted to the subgenre of the normative *plaasroman* by exploring concepts like the traditional portrayal of the subaltern, the presence of mimicry and hybridity, and how these notions aid the investigation of the connection between coloniser and colonised.

Place, here the farm, might in some cases be functional when viewed entirely separate from human aspects, but in the case of the close reading of *Afaat*, where place acts as the central site of exposition, the postcolonial elements of the text are *informed* by the ecocritical concerns, and so it

has provided a far more efficient methodology than would have been the case if any one of these two theoretical approaches had been used on its own.

Agaat is a novel of enormous scope. As such, it has proved impossible to do a postcolonial and ecocritical reading of the entire novel. However, it is hoped that this study has opened up more possibilities for future research on *Agaat* specifically, and on postcolonial Afrikaans literature in general. In terms of ecocritical theory, *Agaat* has provided an interesting question on what can be considered as ‘human’ and ‘nature’ respectively. How this distinction is explored in various literary works is a question that can be expanded upon in future studies.

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