

## GENDER CODING IN THE NARRATIVES OF MARIA DE ZAYAS

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### BACKGROUND

In this paper, I look at the constraints on women in the patriarchy of early modern Spain, as reflected in the novels of the popular woman writer of the time, Maria de Zayas. I propose that these constraints take effect thanks to the operation of certain social codes (which I call 'discursive practices'), namely the discourse of Honour, the discourse of the Normative Woman, and the discourse of Enclosure into private spaces. I suggest that such gendercodes were (and still are today) expressed, maintained and transmitted by the church, the state and the family. However, I reveal that despite censorship, strategies for change are formulated, often by voices which are veiled by irony, voices like that of de Zayas, which lay bare the purposes of social codes used to confine and disempower women.

The parallels between the operation of these gender codes in seventeenth Spain and in contemporary South Africa are striking. The discourse of Honour is matched by the code of masculine strength and mastery so prevalent in traditional society, and both depend in large measure for their definition on the complementary code of feminine subservience and dependence, which is a part of the discourse of the Normative Woman. Evident in the institutions of both seventeenth Spain and contemporary South Africa (and indeed any patriarchy) is a set of prescriptions as to what is becoming for a woman, what her proper character and sanctioned behaviour are, and what the appropriate place for womanly activities is, viz., the home. The last discourse, that of Enclosure, has been extensively discussed in feminist theory in the form of the damaging and disempowering (to women) public / private dichotomy, gendered as public – masculine, private – feminine. Social codes regarding women are still maintained through church and state, and the family has gained new significance in this role via television and the media. There are thus lessons to be learned from early modern Spain, and applied in our present society.

The early modern world and particularly early modern Spain was a period of social transformation where the discursive practices of the Church and State competed for hegemony against dissenting voices. On the one hand, the Catholic Church, at this time involved in the process of Counter-Reformation, was reviving dogma and helping to spread it by means of educational religious literature. On the other hand, the early modern state, in its process of transformation, was modifying the concept of secular authority from that of absolute monarchy to one of monarchic-seigniorial alliance, enabling it to become stronger while gaining acceptance by a wider sector of the population.

Based on modern arguments regarding the architecture of gender, like those of Mark Wigley, and studies on the social discourses of the Renaissance, like the work of Peter Stallybrass, one could say that the means of achieving the social transformation required on both fronts was the encouragement of the 'discourse of honour' which relied heavily on the 'Law of the Father', on a 'normative concept of Woman', on the 'generic division of space', and also on 'architecture'. Peter Stallybrass, commenting on the social practices of the Renaissance and aware that, in the Renaissance, the family was thought to be a microcosm of the State, and the house, the means of controlling what was regarded as 'uncontrollable' women's nature, has observed: 'the normative Woman could become the emblem of the perfect and impermeable container, and hence a map of the integrity of the State' (Stallybrass, 1986:129).

This apparently harmonic, hegemonic discourse had a number of fissures which were revealed, on occasion, by a few dissenting voices. At a time when censorship was strict, though, such voices are to be found often veiled by irony or by the language of the marginalized of the time.

One of these dissenting voices is that of Spanish seventeenth century woman writer Maria de Zayas who was a popular and prolific writer. Her two volumes each comprising 10 short novels (or 'novellas') within a frame narrative in the tradition of the Italian Decameron, namely, *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* (Amorous and Exemplary Novels) and *Desengaños amorosos* (Amorous Deceits), were published in 1637 and 1647 respectively. And in general there is a significant difference between the two volumes: the short novels contained in the second volume, published ten

years after the first, are richer, more complex, more modern, and more relevant for the situation of women in today's world. That is the volume I will more often address.

## ENCLOSURE INTO PRIVATE SPACES

In a number of her short novels *Zayas* portrays heroines imprisoned in space. However, as Amy Williamsen (1991) has mentioned, there is a marked difference between the first volume, where '*Zayas* explores the comic possibilities of this architectural sign (being, the house)' and the second volume, where she 'portrays the house as an instrument of torture employed against women' (ibid.:646). Examples of a space that contributes to women's torture abound. Among them are: the enclosure of women in a small room before raping or killing them; the creation of an artificial, unlivable entrapment to punish women; and last but not least, the creation of a fortress-like house which is yet unable to deny access to tragedy.

Both Marcia Welles (1978) and Elizabeth Ordóñez (1985) have suggested in their different ways that *Zayas*' preoccupation with enclosures anticipates Gilbert and Gubar's assertions regarding the 18th century Gothic Fiction: for Gilbert and Gubar 'the house becomes a sign for the 'architecture of patriarchy' which represents the entrapment of women by male-dominated social institutions' (Williamsen, 1991:646). Welles has concentrated on the grotesque aspects of *Zayas*' fiction whereas Ordóñez has alluded to the symbolic entrapment in male-dominated institutions. On the one hand, commenting on the grotesque aspects of *Zayas*' narrative, Welles notes a similarity between *Zayas*' techniques and those sought in the Gothic novel which she expresses in the following terms: 'If at the aesthetic level the intent was the elevation of the spirit through amazement and terror, at the psychological level such chilling details, which prefigure the effects sought in the Gothic novel of the late eighteenth century, provided for the description of intense bodily sensations' (1978:304). On the other hand, Ordóñez's concern that the lives of the characters in a female-authored text usually offer a commentary about the writer's own relationship with the text, has led her to affirm that 'anxieties about spatial confinement may encode, then, anxieties about authorship in textual traditions similarly restrictive to women' (1985:5).

However, in her stories, Zayas does more than note that the house is a sign of patriarchy. She goes on to reveal the fissures of the house, and consequently of the discourses that have constantly 'housed' women, and thus she questions the discursive practices of both Church and State. But before we get to her stories we shall have to observe how they relate to the discourses of her time, namely, to the honour code, the normative concept of 'Woman', the generic division of space and architecture.

## THE CODE OF HONOUR

The 'honour code' was a strict social code which regulated not only societal relationships but also the intimate relationships between men and women. According to Gustavo Correa (1958) honour was a twofold concept which included both a vertical and a horizontal dimension. The 'vertical' concept of honour implied a stratification of society and was inherent in the position of an individual on the social scale. The highest social classes were therefore the ones with the most honour even from birth. The 'horizontal' concept of honour, on the contrary, was based on the complex social relationships among the members of a given community and therefore used to rest on the opinion people had of a person. The horizontal concept of honour ended up representing fundamental values of Spanish culture. A man's value was directly related to his 'manliness' ('hombria') (ibid.:103). Signs of his manliness were his ability to get women, as well as the perpetuation of himself as husband and head of the household, which assured the integrity of the family.

What Correa is referring to here is none other than the 'Law of the Father' to which Wigley refers in the following terms: according to him the primary role of the house, and of architecture, is the control of woman's sexuality. Its role therefore 'is to protect the father's genealogical claims by isolating women from other men. Reproduction is understood as reproduction of the father. The law of the house is undoubtedly no more than the law of the father. The physical house is the possibility of the patriarchal order that appears to be applied to it' (Wigley, 1992:336).

However, necessary for the man's 'manliness' was the woman's 'virtue', 'which refers to the purity and morality of her conduct' (Correa, 1958:103;

note that due to the unavailability of translations, all quotes in English from Correa, De León and Zayas are my own). Female virtue also assumes the 'normative Woman'. The lack of virtue in a woman would threaten the integrity of the family in revealing the lack of manliness on the man's part. The same way a wife's conduct would attest the husband's lack of manliness, a daughter or a sister's conduct threatened to disintegrate the purity of the caste and the moral integrity of the family. Consequently, during the Renaissance, 'the virtue of chastity was assured by the woman's being closed off, immured in her house, while the open door and the open mouth were taken to signify sexual incontinence' (Scolnicov, 1994:7).

Given the prevalence of the 'honour code' in the community, a literary genre emerged, that of the 'Wife-Murder Comedia', a theme also found in narrative, although less often. The most popular exponent of this genre is sixteenth century dramatist Calderon de la Barca. His *El médico de su honra* ('The doctor of his own honour') portrays the husband, who suspects his wife of adultery, killing her by letting her bleed to death (*sangría*), a procedure often found in the literary works of the period. An example of a wife-murder story which presents a number of parallels with Calderon's play is also present among the short novels contained in Zayas' second volume, *Desengaños*. It is the third novel of the volume and is entitled *El verdugo de su esposa* ('His wife's executioner').

Another example of an honour story is Zayas' chilling eighth story, *El traidor contra su sangre* ('Traitor against his own blood') where the heroine's brother, in their father's absence, takes more than the usual responsibility for his sister's honour. A brief summary is in order. The sister has a suitor of whom her father does not approve because, despite his money, his family is descended from the peasantry (this, by the way, illustrates 'vertical' honour, and alludes also to 'horizontal honour' or the possibility of transcending social class by merit in a mobile society). She continues seeing him, especially at night through the window, and hopes eventually to marry him. Her father and brother plan to send her to a convent in order to pay less dowry for her. The brother, especially, fears that if she were to marry, his inheritance would diminish. Consequently, when their father is away and having found that his sister keeps on seeing the gentleman, he takes her to a 'retrere', an isolated room within the house, stabs her to death, locks the room and escapes.

The action is excessive not only because wishing to marry does not involve offence on the sister's side, but because the brother acts in the father's absence and without his consent. The presence of the 'retrete', the room where the action is executed, which would later be known as a 'closet', associates with it the man's space since that room, initially no more than a writing desk where the man kept all family and crucial documents, according to Wigley (1992), was created as the first masculine private space: 'The first truly private space was the man's study, a small locked room off his bedroom which no one else ever enters, an intellectual space beyond that of sexuality' (1992:347). From a different perspective, though, it could be read as a statement of the brother's anger because the sister, in trying to arrange her own marriage, had transgressed her brother's power and therefore his space, in venturing into the public sphere. Moreover, locking her up in that room, when the lock and the key are symbolic in themselves ('male control is expressed by the physical oppression of lock and key' – Scolnicov, 1994:69) means to 'literally closet away the abject domain from the spatial representation of pure order' (Wigley, 1992:344).

## THE CONCEPT OF 'NORMATIVE WOMAN'

However, for the honour code to work discursively it had to rely on a normative concept of woman. The idea of the 'Normative Woman' was provided for sixteenth century Spain by its educational religious literature. I mentioned in my introduction the Church's reformative efforts at that time, but I will now be more specific.

Following the meeting of the Council of Trent, where the Catholic Church defined its dogma, the publication of religious books proliferated in Spain. This took place mainly during the sixteenth century, giving way to a proliferation of profane literature (Zayas among them) at the end of the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth. According to R.O. Jones, the Counter Reformation corresponded to the intent of reviving the traditional culture by a Church intent on moulding and directing such culture in all its aspects. The teachings of humanism were incorporated and education was considered vital for the task the Church had set itself (Jones, 1983:123). Representative authors of this tendency were: Pedro Malón de

Chaide, whose *Conversion of Mary Magdalene* (1588) presented a moral alternative to the profane books written in his time; St. Theresa (1515–1582) whose religious books of a didactic nature explain the way of virtue and prayer by means of her own mystic visionary experiences; St. John of the Cross (1542–1591) who expresses personal mystical experiences in his poetry, and Fray Luis de León (1527–1591), whose book *La perfecta casada*, an educational manual for the married woman, deserves especial attention.

*La perfecta casada* ('The perfect married woman' and by extension 'The perfect woman') is, I believe, the best source of the concept of Normative Woman of the time. First published in 1583, it was intended as a biblical comment on the poem of Solomon and, on another level, inscribed within the tradition of Renaissance conduct books and specifically marriage books. It attempted to regulate all spheres of a (married) woman's life, indicating what the 'perfect' (understood as normative) woman at all times should be. The justifications for all the conclusions regarding women proposed in this book are undebatable; they are either examples taken from literature or the Bible as if they reflected reality, or they are premises sanctioned by reference to God, nature or 'what is natural'. One of these 'natural' arguments is the explanation of the 'Law of the Father': 'It is true that nature ordered men to marry not only so that their names and lineage be perpetuated in their descendants but also so that they themselves were preserved through them' (de León, 1992:93).

### ENCLOSED BODY, CLOSED MOUTH, LOCKED HOUSE

The 'Normative Woman', says Stallybrass, is like Bakhtin's classical body: 'her signs are the enclosed body, the closed mouth, the locked house' (Stallybrass, 1986:127). Therefore it is not surprising that the discourse on this theme devotes attention to the three elements: body, mouth and house. I propose a comparison between *La perfecta casada* and Stallybrass' article regarding 'the woman as body enclosed'. A contraposition of a few quotes relative to those three focal points of attention will reveal that De León's discourse follows the traditional arguments regarding women.

Linked to the idea of the 'enclosed body' is that of measure, a way of con-

trolling the uncontrollable. It is derived, says Stallybrass, from 'the assumption that woman's body, unlike the prince's, is naturally grotesque. It must be subjected to constant surveillance precisely because, as Bakhtin says of the grotesque body, it is 'unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits' (Stallybrass, 1986:126). De León constantly alludes to the fact that women are more frail and more prone to go astray. For instance, in the following passage, he believes work is the solution for them: 'since woman is more inclined to pleasure and more easily softens and falls prey to idleness, then work is more convenient to her' (ibid.:125). On other occasions Fray Luis de León notes the inferiority of the woman and her need to behave accordingly: 'woman's class, in comparison to her husband's, is humble, and measure and modesty are woman's natural talents' (De León, 1992:176). Similarly, and quoting a Renaissance book of good conduct by William Whately, Stallybrass notes that woman's obedience is necessary, her duties being: 'first to acknowledge her inferiority: the next to carry her selfe as inferior' (Stallybrass, 1986:126).

Wigley also relates the origins of these arguments by mentioning the long-held ideas that the woman 'on the outside' is considered implicitly sexually mobile and more dangerously feminine; and that women lack internal self control, internal boundaries and therefore 'must be controlled by being bounded. Marriage, understood as the domestication of a wild animal, is instituted to effect this control. As the mechanism of, rather than simply the scene for, this control, the house is involved in the production of the gender division it appears to secure' (Wigley, 1992:335 – 336).

The idea of the 'closed mouth' is represented in the constant insistence on the need for women to be silent. Again, De León justifies this on the basis of nature: 'nature did not make the good and honest woman either for the study of the sciences or for difficult businesses but for one and only one simple and domestic business, thus it limited her understanding and, consequently her words and reasoning' (De León, 1992:176). Stallybrass provides the reasons behind this statement: 'Silence, the closed mouth, is made a sign of chastity. And silence and chastity are, in turn, homologous to women's enclosure within the house' (Stallybrass, 1986:127).

'The locked house' is justified by De León as a divine mandate, saying that

'the end for which God ordered the woman and gave her as company to the husband was so that she kept his house' (De León, 1992:180). He also justifies woman's need to stay enclosed based on her nature, saying that God provided women with little strength so that they stayed in their corner (ibid.:181). He is very specific regarding the space allowed to women, which is tremendously limited, as will be clear from the following quote: 'When telling the woman to go around her house he wants to show her the space where she should move her feet and, also the length of her steps, (which is to say, figuratively, the scope of her life) which should be restricted to her own house and neither the streets, nor the squares, nor the orchards, nor other people's homes' (ibid.:180). The requirement that a woman be present at her house at all times, in all its corners, implies that the only task allocated to her is that of surveillance of the house, meaning not only the building but all the servants and inhabitants within it. Moreover, although De León wants the surveillance task to appear as her duty, the reality is, as Wigley notes, that 'the house is literally understood as a mechanism for the domestication of (delicately minded and pathologically embodied) women' (Wigley, 1992:332). In enclosure, the woman is the one exposed to surveillance mechanisms rather than the one effecting them.

Both the honour code and the normative concept of woman relied on a generic division of space where its monument, the house, as mentioned previously, would ensure 'The Law of the Father' and thus 'the father's genealogical claims' (Wigley, 1992:336). 'The generic division of space' which separates by means of opposing terms, the house from the non-house and thus the private from the public, is at once ancestral and an ongoing phenomenon in Western culture, and its origins can be found in Hellenic culture. Hellenic culture associated the inside of the house with the quiet goddess Hestia (and therefore venerated it) and the outside entrance with the mobile God Hermes. According to Scolnicov (1994:6): 'the structural division of space into the interior and the exterior of the house carries with it social and cultural implications. Gender roles are spatially defined in relation to the inside and the outside of this house'. However, according to Wigley 'opposing male mobility in the exterior to female stasis in the interior [...] at once naturalizes and spatializes gender' (1992:334). Moreover, he claims that 'the spaces literally produce the effect of gender, transforming the mental and physical character of those

who occupy the wrong place'. Wigley's original thought consists in reversing the usual parallel between gender and architecture, proposing on the other hand that a different division of space could have produced a different gender, that is to say, that space is a product of gender as much as gender is a product of space.

## THE NARRATIVES OF MARIA DE ZAYAS

Zayas who, like Wigley, also questioned the establishment, reveals, to put it metaphorically, the 'fissures' of the house and the discourses housed within it. On a number of occasions Zayas' stories illustrate the lack of security of the house, given the invasions effected on women by both outsiders and insiders. The security of the house walls is particularly questioned in the fifth and sixth stories of her second volume. In the fifth story, *La inocencia castigada* ('Innocence punished') the protagonist, Inés, enchanted by a diabolic magician, leaves her house at night, unlocking it herself, in order to keep tryst with a man who is in love with her. In the sixth story, *Amar sólo por vencer* ('To love in order to win'), a man, dressed as a woman and pretending to be a maid, manages to enter the house and eventually win the favours of the youngest daughter, who decides to escape with him, only to be later abandoned.

These two occasions are testimony to the fact that, as Wigley suggests, space itself is insufficient since 'boundaries are only established by the intersection between a walled space and a system of surveillance which monitors all the openings in the walls' (1992:338). Moreover, aware that their surveillance mechanisms have failed, the male protagonists of both stories take drastic measures: in the fifth story, the protagonist's husband and sister-in-law devise a small chimney-type structure where the protagonist, by way of punishment, is made to live standing up for ten years until she is eventually rescued. In the sixth story the father, angry at his daughter's usurpation of his honour and 'genealogical claims' (Wigley, 1992:336) constructs a wall that falls on her head and instantly kills her. Having the wall, a symbol of the house's boundaries, fall on the head of the protagonist, which is the most important element of the body, constitutes a manifestation of anger which, ironically, takes the form of the failed surveillance mechanism. The father, thus, admits his failure and 'the text seems

to suggest that such extreme implementations of the honour code may lead to the erosion of the social structure itself' (Williamsen, 1991:646).

The security offered by the house walls is even more questionable when invasions of women's space are caused by some of the insiders themselves and sometimes even by very close friends or relatives. The first and last stories, placed not surprisingly in the most significant positions of a volume, are a case in point. In the first story, *La esclava de su amante* ('Her lover's slave'), the respected son of a family who lives in the same house as that of the protagonist, makes her enter his room in order to rape her. The event is described in the following terms: the protagonist, Isabel, is walking towards the room of the gentleman's sister who is a very good friend of hers, in order to get dressed for a Carnival party. She never manages to reach that room though, because as she enters the corridor, the man, waiting at the door of his own bedroom, greets her and shortly after pushes her inside. The rest is left for the imagination of the reader, although its symbolic description, I believe, makes it clear: 'He pushed me inside and locked the door with the key. I know not what happened to me since the shock deprived me of my senses in a deadly swoon' (Zayas, 1983:137). The presence of the Carnival alludes to the masking of the public space, the space in which the private and subjective have no room (Wigley, 1992:377). The lock is itself symbolic of male oppression but also of the sexual act. Moreover, the fact that the event renders her speechless, given what we now know of rape cases, is very telling in itself.

The last story, *Estragos que causa el vicio* ('The ravages of vice'), is an exaggerated version of the 'invasion by the insider' theme. In this story, a man has built a fortress-type house where he keeps all his household members locked up (and they include his wife, his wife's sister and a number of both black and white servants). When the circumstances of his love life get out of control (he is emotionally involved with both sisters) his rage makes him kill all of the household members except the protagonist, who manages to escape to tell the story. Whereas such situations are crude in other stories, in this 'house of horrors', given its magnitude, the situation is ironic. It manifests that a woman is never safe from her lovers, brothers or other relatives, not even inside the supposedly secure structure of the house. It notes, as Wigley does, that 'architecture is precisely not about the transparency it advertises' (Wigley, 1992:379) and it cer-

tainly leaves the reader with the question of whom does the house protect.

I believe economic motives dictated the enclosure of women in seventeenth century Spain. An empire that had been decaying for two centuries, it required the presence of men in a variety of wars started against neighbouring European countries. A country progressively losing its male force required women permanently enclosed in the home for the procreation and raising of the men to be employed in the needed political enterprises. However, as Zayas's stories reveal, the discursive practices of the Church and State, given the insecurity of the house (and therefore of the discourses which housed it) proved insufficient. The family was unable to reproduce the mechanisms set in place for the modern state. One wonders if the surveillance methods did not function or if they were questionable from the start.

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## RESIDUAL 'HERSTORY' AS EMERGENT CULTURE

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### BACKGROUND

The history of African women's literature started long before they became literate. Their literature was oral, rooted in storytelling and the African folktale tradition. Because African women rarely gained access to written expression, their folk culture often went unrecorded. When they began to write creative works, they looked back to their foremothers to recreate the old stories. They drew from the orature of their African culture. They envisioned their (African) foremothers whose use of oral traditions and storytelling had passed cultural values down from generation to generation. The framework of this paper is therefore the concept of cultural continuity, and its thesis is that the passing on of cultural values, mores and history from one generation to the next takes place to a great extent in what is traditionally a woman's domain: the activity of storytelling.

Taking the example of two contemporary women novelists, Vapi and Mda, this study also explores how the literary voices of African women articulate their felt realities rather than what is prescribed for them by the male-dominated tradition. Orature and, consequently, literature are regarded by Gay (1992) as part of many women's struggle to communicate, converse, and pass on values to their own and other children, and to one another. Consequently, the use of orature as a method of education and the orality of the writing style of each author are explored. Traditional sayings and customs are often referred to in this study. It is necessary to understand the oral voicings that have preceded the works written by the two women, for these voicings are part of a cultural preparedness in the writers that is expressed in generational and cultural continuity in the works themselves.

With regard to the oral transmission of customs and values from one generation to the next, it is women who most often fulfil the role of tale-teller and instructor. Igbo sociologist, Mere (in Gay: 1992) comments on this

aspect of women's role in their society and says that women are the primary and most constant agents of child socialization. Furthermore, women as agents of this education are the mainstay of oral tradition. Even a problematic study such as that of Taiwo (1985) corroborates Mere's point by stating that:

*The folk tale is used in a more dramatic manner to initiate children and adolescents into their cultural heritage ... The leader of the performance may be a man or a woman. But it is often the woman who plays the part because she is not as tired after the day's work as the man.*

It is ridiculous that Taiwo attributes women's role in imparting cultural values to the children, to their not being as tired as their men. I would suggest that rather than attributing women's primary role in cultural education to the fact that they have a less strenuous day than their male counterparts, Taiwo might have commented on the nature of women's defined role in family and community socialization.

Generational continuity is not specifically African, since women from all traditional societies and some modern ones have produced unwritten volumes for their children and children's children; still, there are identifiable values and traditions that flow throughout the African context. Just as the biological and social ties of mothers to their children continue in altered forms after the umbilicus has been cut and the child has been weaned, so pre-colonial ideas about women span the spaces between past and present, and bring ancient African ways to the New World. Not only have ideas from and about African women before Westernization continued for generations, but the way in which women have passed on their cultural heritage has endured. By telling the history of their peoples to the rising generations, Black women throughout Africa have kept their heritage alive.

## SOME CONTEXTUAL QUALIFICATIONS

There is little research material specifically on the manner in which women produce and pass on their tales, tales which in turn get encoded in their writings. As this kind of study of African women's literature invites multifarious

comparisons, it has been necessary to set boundaries to contain the research within some framework. The first limitation is linguistic: only works written in isiXhosa (which is the researcher's first language) are considered. The second limitation is one of genre: work in only one literary form, the novel, is examined. This second limitation deserves some discussion.

Many have argued that, even more than the novel, the short story and the play are the most useful of literary genres in terms of reconstructing social values and as vehicles for social change. Moreover, the world as represented in these forms often reflects a given culture dialectically and in more direct ways than in a form such as poetry. In an African context, drama as performed art is oral in nature and emphasizes the relationship between the playwright and the audience. According to Awoonor (1975) drama is an indigenous art form. The short story has been seen by African writers and critics alike as an expansion of the African folktale, and it clearly retains its oral antecedents.

Although it is harder to make these kinds of connection with the novel, a European genre, African critics such as Julien (1992), Chimweizu (1993) and others, have suggested that the modern African novel has evolved from the African epic in terms of structure, content, and the world it creates. Moreover, Russian theorist Bakhtin (1981) has also argued that even the traditional European novel incorporates oral antecedents. For much of the literature of Africa, the debt to orature is so evident that Gay (1992) made a neologism of the two terms to convey the idea: 'oraliterature'. By this, she means to refer to written creative works which retain elements of the orature that informed them.

In particular, the works chosen for discussion here, Mda's *Ntengu-ntengu macetyana* and Vapi's *Litshona liphume* are oraliterature. They reflect the authors' aims of recreating the orality of the spoken word and the active presentation of the oral tradition within the confines of a book of fiction.

## LITERARY STRATEGIES OF WOMEN ARTISTS

Evans (1983:13) notes that African women writers use specific literary strategies to communicate their concerns and warns that 'the critic who

deals with such multi-talented artists as women, must at least be conversant with the modes of the artist's expressions.' Farrer (1975) also contends that in order to build a sound theoretical foundation for the study of women in society, research designs and study objects must consider women's creativity and expressive behaviour. This paper is an attempt towards that goal, and it is to these expressive strategies that we now turn.

## CHOICE OF TITLE AND THEME

Mda's title – Ntengu-ntengu macetyana ('fork-tailed drongo', a bee-catching bird) – is a folkloric title borrowed from a well known folktale in which the bird, intengu, saved two girls from a cannibal by constantly calling: 'Ntengu-Ntengu Macetyana kaz'abantwana babantu aba benze ntoni na?' meaning 'Shame, shame what have these poor souls done?' In the folktale every time the drongo poses the question, a miracle happens, and the children are saved. Mda, an African woman who grew up in a culture of tale-telling, is continuing to tell her foremothers' story in the present generation. In her story, Nanziwe, a sixteen year old girl, has to leave home and get a job so as to maintain her widowed mother and little sister. Her brother, Sithembile (literally meaning 'We are hoping') leaves for Johannesburg immediately after his father's death. He never contacts his home and the family loses hope of ever getting help from him. Nanziwe therefore has to shoulder the responsibilities of an heir who could one day come back home to claim his rights.

The title may therefore be read as expressing the author's wonder and surprise at this unjust treatment of women and children. This wonder and surprise become more vivid when Mda relates how Mathabo is battered for no reason by her husband, Nanziwe's brother, Phelane, whose real name is Sithembile. She says:

*Uza kuxela imini yile, Mathabo uvelaphi ngobusuku? 'Andi ... ' Bhu ngebhanguza esemandlalweni njalo. Jwi phaya ibhunguza hlasi induku. 'Vuka, uxele uvelaphi?' Bhu kwakhona ... Kowu! yabuyela kwasemfazini imdubha nje ngoku nangamanqindi, imbhula ngenduku, ithi isemagxeni ibe isemilenzeni iyithoba nje naphi na.*

(You are going to tell the truth, this is the day. Mathabo, where do you come from at this hour? 'I don't...' Bam! with a big fighting stick whilst still on bed. He threw the kierre away and quickly picked up a stick. 'Get up and tell where you come from.' Bam again ... He! He got back to the wife, beating her up even with fists, thrashing her with a fighting stick from the shoulders, legs, all over.)

(Mda, 1989:76).

It should be remembered that it is Xhosa traditional practice that the eldest male child automatically becomes the heir by right of birth. He takes over the responsibilities of being head of the family – takes over, that is, both the advantages and the hardships of an heir in the African sense. These include advantages such as owning land and other property/ies, and hardships such as caring for and providing for the extended family. That is what *indlalifa* (an heir) traditionally speaking means.

It is of interest to realize that in real African traditional culture, an irresponsible son would be deposed from his position and be deprived of his rights as an heir. It is only the corruption of culture that allows 'heirs' like Sithembile to become heirs at all. There has consequently been an emergence of new and interesting terms in Xhosa women's discourse such as *iphila* derived from *ukuphila* (to live), a literal opposite of *ukufa* (to die), which is the root of the word for an heir, *indlalifa*. The term *iphila* is used by contemporary women to refer to their informally acquired status as breadwinners and therefore as the economic providers for their parents, children and siblings, while the 'rightful' heirs, just like the Prodigal son of the Bible, do nothing but wait for their fathers to die so that they can squander what 'rightfully' belongs to them.

But one issue is clear: tradition has always secured the position of males, and traditional society in contemporary times makes it even worse by securing the position of our brothers regardless of ability. By echoing the drongo, Mda perhaps hopes for a miracle to happen so as to save the harassed women and children.

Despite his wayward and irresponsible behaviour, Sithembile is not called to order by the community. In traditional Xhosa culture, a man who beats up his wife would be challenged by another man of his age to an open

fight so as to demonstrate his physical strength appropriately, instead of taking advantage of women. The challenging party would hope to teach him a lesson never again to take advantage of a woman. The challenge can be seen in the same light as the intervention of the drongo in the folktale: both correct an act of injustice to a woman. A woman-abuser would even be fined in a traditional court to pay a sheep or goat which would be slaughtered and eaten by members of the community. The offender would also be invited to join in enjoying the spoils of his fine. In this way he would be washing the wounds of his victim and as well accepting that he now has a court record. In this way the community would be intervening just like the drongo in the folktale.

Vapi uses the title *Litshona liphume* ('The sun sets and rises again') to encourage widows and orphans who might suffer any kind of victimization, to resist and wait patiently for deliverance. A title such as this contests the image of 'typical' African mothers and daughters as weak and fearful with a dead-end destiny which is brought upon them through manipulation of traditional customs by today's man. Under such titles African women writers strongly articulate the anguish of defenceless women. Vapi's character Siphokazi is an orphan, who is traditionally supposed to be adopted and cared for by her uncle, Xakekile. He however, together with his wife, instead mock the girl (Siphokazi) for being so poor and needy. Xakekile's aim is to get rid of her and therefore of the responsibility of providing for her, and at the same time earn himself some profit (lobola), by arranging a forced marriage for her. Through the character of Xakekile's wife, the author explains:

*Kaloku, ntombam sinoyihlomncinci, uyise kaNomalike njengabazali bakho abakhoyo ngoku kufuneka sihlafunile ngawe xa ungasebenzi nokusebenza kuba ke besimelwe kukuba sixhapse imilomo yeyamagxa akho imali. Ke ntombi, ndize kukuxelela ukuba siza kwendisa.*

*(So my daughter, your uncle, Nomalike's father, and I, as your parents that are still alive, have to earn something through you, especially since you are not even employed. We are supposed to be made comfortable by your earnings. So, girl, I have come to tell you that we are marrying you off).*

Vapi (1994:55–6)

Such a statement can be interpreted as an expression of that 'dead-end

destiny' that awaits many unprotected female minors. The supposed protectors of orphans are overcome by greed and plan to exchange their responsibility for gain. If Siphokazi were to get married, Xakekile and his wife would be relieved of the guilty conscience of knowing that they were supposed to nurture her. Instead, they would gain a lot of ikhazi (cattle from lobola) especially for a girl that had been through higher levels of learning. Strangely enough, this couple had a daughter of their own, even older than Siphokazi, Nomalike. Why did they not force her to get married?

Siphokazi, however, gets tired of suffering and fights for a better life. She decides to liberate herself from poverty and works very hard on her studies. She fights fiercely to get a decent job rather than being a domestic worker. She is content in her belief, which is articulated by the title of the novel, that good will triumph. Although society makes her suffer and victimizes her by denying her the jobs she qualifies for, she will fight for deliverance. She believes strongly that after darkness comes the light, that is, the sun may set but it always rises again. Indeed, in the end she does get a decent job and creates a better lifestyle for herself.

These two writers are voicing their concern about the corrupt uses of tradition in victimizing women. For example, Nanziwe in Mda's novel never gets married to her fiancé Diliza because his corrupt brother is interested only in getting lots of money from Miya, that is Diliza, and anyone else that would be prepared to pay for an innocent girl like her. The trust that Nanziwe has for a brother she hardly knows, has a cultural base. Sithembile is her own brother and can, therefore, do no harm to her. Rather he would fight tooth and nail to protect her, according to Nanziwe's understanding of what a blood relative is (*isizalwane segazi*). After all, who in a foreign environment like Johannesburg, would be responsible for her wedding arrangements, if not her own brother, in the absence of immediate family elders?

Unfortunately, Sithembile abuses the tradition and 'auctioneers' his sister to the highest bidder, Kimundu who hails from Kampala. Nanziwe does not know Kimundu's background. She breaks her engagement to Diliza because of the lies about him spread by her brother, and she marries Kimundu, a businessman successful by foul means, who acts as security for

Sithembile's business concerns and family when he (Sithembile) is in gaol. The marriage is thus seen to be arranged by Sithembile for purely selfish security reasons. Yet when all fails, Nanziwe becomes the victim of fate and has to accept that she brought her catastrophe upon herself. Vapi's Siphokazi has to make the same act of acceptance and take the blame when she and her siblings starve. Did she not refuse to get married when a chance presented itself?

In her discussion of Afro-American literature, Audre Lorde says that:

*... (this) literature is certainly part of an African tradition that deals with life as an experience to be lived. In many respects it is much like the Eastern philosophies in that we see ourselves as a part of a force, we are, for instance, to the air, to the earth. We are part of the whole life process. We live in accordance, in a kind of correspondence with the rest of the world as a whole. And therefore, living becomes an experience, rather than a problem, no matter how bad or how painful it may be. Change will rise endemically from the experience fully lived and respondent ...*

(Lorde, 1983:266)

This is very much felt in African writing. Readers see in the works of authors like Mda and Vapi, that life is not a turning away from pain, error and suffering, but a process of seeing these things as part of experience and learning from them. This is a particularly African characteristic and it is evident in the best of African literature (much of which is produced by women).

Mda's Nanziwe does not turn away from her problems in despair, but fights for survival. After long suffering she gets back home, re-organizes herself and starts all over again. The same happens to Vapi's Siphokazi, whom a sexist society relegates to domestic work as cook, nanny, maid, etc., and denies entrance into security employment. Society channels her into a familiar void when the crush of modernity eradicates the avenues which partially liberated her foremothers. For instance she can no longer survive on the wild vegetables and fruit that used to sustain her foremothers (*intlokokotshane, amagaqa ombhongisa nawesiphingo*). Siphokazi perseveres because she knows she is more than what she is made out to be by those who use culture against women. This is how African women see themselves: strong, influential and capable, and not as the weaker sex.

Both titles *Ntengu-ntengu macetyana* and *Litshona liphume* express an attitude of being able to cope with pain and suffering. In Mda's *Ntengu-ntengu macetyana*, after long suffering, Nanziwe emerges a mature, experienced woman who does not give up on life. During her difficult times she keeps on hoping that a miracle will happen, just as the drongo performs a miracle to save the children from the cannibal. And, just as the children run as fast as they can when the drongo's miracle gives them a break from the cannibal, Nanziwe neither gives up in despair nor leaves everything to a miracle. She knows she has to do something to save herself; she has to be ready so that when a miracle happens she will take the right step. She learns deep lessons about life during her hard times and in her suffering, always keeps the hope of deliverance alive.

In Vapi's *Litshona liphume*, Siphokazi knows deep down in her heart that there is no unending hardship. She does not run away from her problems but fights on, believing that just as her troubles have come, so will they dwindle one day and happiness will replace them, provided she keeps on fighting and hoping for the best.

## DIDACTICISM

One underlying principle of African literature which contrasts with preferences in some other cultures, concerns didacticism. Dorsey (in Evans, 1983:172) highlights the importance of didacticism and says:

*From even the most trivial anecdotal jest to grand works of poetry and fiction, the Black audience demands a meaning, a message.*

This principle is well-illustrated in folktales which, above and beyond their function of entertaining, also have a didactic aim. With regard to the oral transmission of customs and values from one generation to the next, it is women who most often fulfil the role of the tale-teller and instructor. Women are the primary and most constant agents of children's socialization. Furthermore, women in fulfilling the role of educators are the maintainers of the oral tradition. As a requirement of purely literary form, didacticism may not be necessary, but certainly it is quite natural, especially to women writers who in a way find it proper to take on their tradi-

tional role of educators and to voice their heritage. Both writers, Vapi and Mda, use female characters to illustrate the passing on of cultural mores and value systems to the children.

Mda articulates the important African cultural practice of showing respect to strangers in her narration of Nanziwe's reception in Queenstown. MaGaba, a domestic worker, gives Nanziwe a place to sleep although she does not really have enough space to accommodate her. Moreover, she is expecting visitors, a party of her friends, to come for a drinking spree. Though she is reluctant, she still takes Nanziwe in because it is traditional to take care of strangers. Mda articulates this tradition when she says

*Kunzima kuba kaloku (umntu) akayonkunkuma, yona iyabuthwa iye kulahlwa!*

*(It is difficult to neglect a stranger because a person is not like rubbish which can simple be thrown away).*

(Mda, 1989:9)

Vapi as well makes use of orature as a method of education via a female character, MaMiya. When Xakekile crookedly arranges a marriage for Siphokazi, he and his friends get a lecture on tradition from MaMiya, a family elder.

Indawo yokuqala nina baseMantanjeni, nditsho kuni Malihambe noMalingemingam, ndiyaqala ukunibona ekhapha oko ndanigqibela ngalaa mhla nabeka ihlaba edlakeni likayise kaSiphokazi. Ukuba ibiziindwendwe zakhe eziya, ngezikulo kaZwelibanzi umzi, yaye ngezisaziwa ngabafazi basekhapha ... . Izithethi zaseMaXesibeni zemicimbi elolu hlobo ndiyazazi. Nithi kutheni zingekho nje apha phakathi kwenu?

(In the first place, you from Mantanjeni, I mean you Malihambe and Malingemingam, it's the first time that I have seen you here since the day of Siphokazi's father's funeral. If these people had come for Siphokazi, they would be here in Zwelibanzi's home, and the family women would know about their presence ... I know the family spokespeople who decide important issues of this family. What do you think is the reason for their absence?)

(Vapi, 1989:66)

Here, MaMiya is definitely fighting the corruption of tradition by those who use it for personal gain.

The underlying principle contained in Mda's novel is an important one which is also illustrated in a Xhosa proverb: *Isisu somhambi asingakanani*, literally meaning the stomach of a traveller or stranger is not big, it is easily filled up. This proverb is understood to mean that it does not take much time and energy to satisfy someone in need. The lesson being taught is that of kindness to strangers, a lesson which would be relevant in encouraging South Africans to treat tourists well so as to promote tourism in this country. The reader identifies and accepts the lesson easily since it has its foundation in a popular proverb.

Vapi's message is clear: traditional Xhosa women have recognition and a voice, no matter how minimal it might be. The lesson is that women have a role as educators and voices of the heritage. To ignore women in important family decisions is corrupting culture. This is illustrated in MaMiya's insistence that family women should have been consulted in Siphokazi's wedding arrangements if cultural norms were considered at all in this matter. By using an elderly female character, Vapi motivates the reader to accept the lesson of consulting women in important family decisions, instead of ignoring them on the pretext that culture does not require their recognition. The choice of a character of MaMiya's age is in keeping with the traditional role of grandmothers and mothers as transmitters of customs and values.

## FOLKTALE IMAGES

In both language and content there are certain elements that appear to characterize the style of African women writers in general, and Xhosa women writers in particular. Their language is often formal, but filled with very graphic concrete images. Both of the writers under review tend to have favourite images, and even favourite times at which they repeat these images without negative effect. Vapi, for example, uses the same metaphor whenever she portrays liars and cheats:

*Afika la marhuncu eengcuka ezambethe ufele lwegusha*

*(Then came these greedy wolves in sheep's skin)*

(Vapi, 1984:63)

*Uthi wakugqiba ukuba yingcuka, nangcuka le yaziwa nanguthathatha uzithi khatha kufele lwegusha.*

*(When you are the worst wolf that is known by everybody even small children, and you cover yourself in a sheep's skin.)*

(ibid.:69)

*Such constant reference to a wolf leaves the reader with a vivid image of the type of character Xakekile is. Vapi further says:*

*Inene ubuqholo obu bengcuka uzithe wambu ngabo buseza kukujikela.  
(Really one day this disguise of a wolf that you are covering yourself with, will eventually turn against you).*

(Vapi:1989:69)

In some cases the use of repetition allows the writer an opportunity to create some rather startling and impressive effects, as evidenced in Vapi's story. She says:

*Ngale mini ndandiququzela ndiukeza ndixela isikhukukazi sitshiswa liqanda.*

*(On this day I was busy, moving about like a hen about to lay an egg).*

*Waququzela, eukeza exela isikhukukazi sitshiswa liqanda.*

*(She busied herself, moving about like a hen about to lay an egg).*

(ibid.:42)

This kind of repetition leaves no doubt about the high level of energy and enthusiasm of the character being sketched.

Vapi also uses deadly weapons to create graphic images of destructive, critical, negative words. She talks of iimbokotho zamagama (ibid.:13). (Big, destructive words, ready to crush).

Again she says:

... ekhupha iimbumbulu zamagama

( ... emitting bullet words).

(ibid:14)

Mda derives her favourite images from folktales. The image of the Jewish woman and her dog is the same as that of the cannibals like Nomehlwa'mancinane in folktales. She says :

... gqi isiqukrukazi sejudakazi esisifuba singumthwalo, sirhuqa injana emqolo usitywetywe unesisu esiburhuqa phantsi.

(Suddenly there appears a stout Jewish woman with a broad chest pulling a small dog with a flat back and a stomach so low that it touches the ground).

(Mda, 1989:4)

When MaGaba, the Jewish woman's maid hides Nanziwe in her room, to save her from the dog, the night, and above all, the employer, since she (MaGaba) does not have a right to keep a stranger on her employer's property, the resultant image is the same as that from the folktale of Intengu. In this tale, two girls lose direction and land at Nomahamle's home. They are shocked to learn from her that her mother is a cannibal. She hides them away. They are scared of the night, the dog at the doorstep and as well the mother of the home who happens to be a cannibal.

Mda alludes a lot to folktales. She says of Johannesburg, through the mouth of Nanziwe:

Aye kwaseRhawutini eliya laginya umnakwabo.

(She must go to the same Johannesburg that swallowed her brother).

(ibid.:15)

It is generally cannibals in folktales who swallow people and animals. She further says:

Akacingi ukuvuma umama nam andifuni kuya apho kukho izigebenga.

(My mother would never let me go to where there are murderers).

(ibid.:16)

Mda alludes also to the tale of the wolves who gave up the hope of getting grapes from a high grapevine and consoled themselves by saying: 'The grapes are sour anyway'. Diliza (Miya) gives up hope of reaching Sithembile in Randfontein in the same way as the wolves in the tale.

*Wayeka uMiya ngelokuncama kweengcuka zigoduka.*

*(Miya stopped in the same way the wolves gave up the sour grapes).*

(ibid.:55)

Vapi as well uses the same strategy of alluding to folktales for vivid images. In the dialogue between Siphokazi and her friend, Nokusasa, Nokusasa remarks that the local people refer to Siphokazi's parents as:

... (z)iintaka eziphuma amasi

( ... birds that excrete buttermilk).

(ibid.:24)

Siphokazi's parents earn this description because they give generously to needy people who come to ask for any available edibles in their home. In the folktale of a bird that excretes buttermilk, the family that keeps the bird is saved from hunger by asking the bird to excrete milk, and the family feeds from that rich milk.

African proverbial language and the storytelling tradition are the main sources for the imagery of these writers.

The images that appear to be favoured most by both writers express traditional values and mores. The wolf metaphor used by both writers, for example, expresses the importance of honesty and reliability. In Xhosa tales the wolf is always dishonest and unreliable, it always disguises its identity so as to victimize someone or gain some benefit by foul means. The wolf's lies often turn against their author, and he is always caught out by his own tricks. If he fails to deceive others, the wolf will even lie to himself, saying for instance that whatever he did not succeed in getting was not worthwhile anyway. The lesson given through the image of the wolf is that dishonesty rebounds against its author. Constant liars cheat

only themselves because people, even children, in a community can see through their lies.

## AFRICAN COSMOLOGY

Vapi employs mythology that is a study unto itself, and yet her work can be read by anyone with enjoyment and understanding. She uses mystical powerful totems like the snake, *uMajola*, a totem of the Jola clan. She explains the ritual that accompanies the birth of a child. The baby gets a ritual bath; she undergoes a purification and gets protected from evil spirits, the supernatural snake acting as liaison between ordinary people and the ancestors. The ritual of a drumming song, and especially the accompanying dance, are a celebration of African roots. MaNgwanya makes supplication to the ancestors for their pardon of offences committed against them, intentional or not.

Vapi has the ability to blend an acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time. This is indicative of traditional African cosmology, or the way in which African people looked at the world. Morrison explains the belief in magic by Black people as follows:

*We are very special people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accept what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things.*

(Morrison, 1983:342)

To blend those two worlds together at the same time is enhancing not limiting, and that kind of knowledge has a very strong place in Vapi's work. Mda on the other hand does not reflect the African cosmology as strongly as Vapi.

## CONCLUSION

Vapi and Mda's feminine sensibility runs deep. The womanliness of their stories is evidenced by references to children, family, home and the con-

cerns of the ordinary woman. The single most striking feature of these women's Xhosa novels is their home- and family-centredness. Their values, their subjects, and their principal characters are drawn from the everyday life of traditional communities, from the daily life and work of ordinary people: the business of growing up, courtship, marriage, having children and earning a living. Both novelists find images and actions to express their profound ambivalence about women's position in society. While they assert that women are to be praised for their goodness, they both show themselves to be caustic observers of the realities of women's existence.

This does not however mean that the concerns of women writers are entirely different from those of their male counterparts; rather, the manner of production and the focus of their material reveal a different aim. They speak for the formerly unvoiced members of the community – the wife, the mother, the grandmother, the widow, the young child. By attending to the unheard ones, these women writers show their caring and suggest an 'alternative mothering' process, in which they reconstruct residual herstory as emergent culture. The suggestion made here has gender-specific ramifications. The textual background of women's stories for example is the constant discourse of the community of women, advising, instructing, commenting, sympathizing and gossiping. Their voices are a community chorus. This kind of collective talk is part of oral social structure, and it surfaces strongly in women's writings. The works examined in this study not only attest to the continuation of the African cultural heritage, but also clarify how these values have been and are being passed on by women through the generations.

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## GENDER ROLES AND ADVERTISING

Amanda du Preez

*I am an advertisement of a version of myself – David Byrne*

### THE FEMME FATALE

I am feeling today like a confused Chief-Inspector Morse, or a fumbling Detective Colombo who has arrived too late at the murder scene of a beautiful young woman, known only as the mythical figure of the *femme fatale* or the deadly female. Let me introduce you to our murder victim: The *femme fatale* is the icon created by men during the *fin de siècle* (late nineteenth century) to prove women's so-called naturally devious nature. Men could flirt symbolically with the icon of the *femme fatale* without standing a chance of losing anything significant during the interaction. The *femme fatale* has become a fetish, a male projection of the fear of femininity and simultaneously the fascination with femininity.

However, all that is left of the *femme fatale* on the eve of the twenty-first century are fading traces and glimpses of her once glorious existence. The clues to her identity are well-hidden in the sheets, on the walls and in the closets of this once feared and yet adored figure. She is not resting quietly in peace; instead she continues to appear in magazines, on TV-screens and on silver screens, like a ghost, an apparition, that haunts and teases her audience. In fact, the *femme fatale* of the *fin de millennium* has staged her own death and continually restages her own death. The *femme fatale* of the late twentieth century has become a 'disappearing body', a living-dead Houdini.

In an attempt to trace the clues left by the *femme fatale*, I shall use the work of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, analyst of contemporary culture, to throw some light on the 'disappearing body' of the *femme fatale*. Baudrillard has fleshed out the theory of the so-called disappearing body as part of his 'resuscitatorial ideology of the simulacrum' (Kroker, 1992). Central to Baudrillard's theory is the assertion that the real things

of the world have been replaced by the 'hyper-real' (Andersen, 1995:93). Culture has become little more than a 'hallucination of the real', a 'simulational' world characterized by an endless series of copies of previous forms. Meaning is lost to the extent that it is no longer possible to make a perceptible distinction between the real and the hyper-real. In Baudrillard's terms: TV is the world.

According to this ideology of the simulacrum, the moment when the *femme fatale* or any other image appears, whether in a photograph or on a screen, is also the exact moment of her disappearance or symbolic death. The moment she appears is when she becomes an empty shell – a commodity – a selling line for jeans. The *femme fatale* has attained the status of a pure sign without referent, empty, senseless, absurd; and that is exactly why she still seduces us, according to Baudrillard (1990:61–63). So although she has become 'meaningless' in the traditional sense of the word, she is still enchanting and fascinating and moreover she is still very seductive, as the *Sissy Boy Jean's* girl will show.

However, the *femme fatale* as icon no longer refers to anything symbolically. There is no dangerous creature lurking behind her smile. If she looks dangerous, it is only because she is simulating danger. She has escaped the 'terrorism of the referent' and has entered the surface play of appearances. She has become a 'look' and in this specific case she appears in the world of advertising as 'the look' of the *Sissy Boy Jean's* girl, where image has become everything.

As for fashion and appearances, what we seek these days is less beauty or attractiveness than the RIGHT LOOK (Baudrillard 1994:23). Everyone seeks their own specific look, which got nothing to do with claiming a specific existence or mode of being, but far more with performing an appearing act. So it is not: 'I exist, I am here!' Nevertheless and rather: 'I am visible, I am an image, look at me!' It seems as if everyone has become the manager of their own appearances, where appearances or the 'look' has come to mean nothing more than a special effect, with no particular significance. Yet make no mistake, power is still associated with appearances or looks.

## REACTIONS TO THE ADS

At first sight, the series of *Sissy Boy Jeans* advertisements, brainchild of the Cape Town-based *Jupiter Drawing Room* advertising company (who recently won an award for them), seduce women viewers into believing they are truly liberated and invigorated. The ads convince us that this is the face of the 'New Woman' who is taking control of her destiny and sexuality. Let no man stand in her way – for if he dares he will be cut down to size literally!

However, it will be argued that this version of feminism, or rather this appropriated version of feminism, has in fact become nothing but a hard-selling line for recent advertising campaigns. 'Feminism' as portrayed in the *Sissy Boy* ads is a feminism instrumentalized and simulated by late capitalism to sell jeans. *Sissy Boy Jeans* are not alone in this; recent Edgars' jeans ads had at the same innuendos. The women we see in these ads are tough no-nonsense cyber babes with attitudes from hell. Nevertheless, it will be asked: 'Has this *femme fatale* type become a role model for young women?' If so, I would argue that feminism, any version of feminism, is in trouble. More importantly, what happens to feminism in the age of simulations?

The slogan of the *Sissy Boy Jeans* ad is: 'Wear the pants!' I will suggest that it is not the *Sissy Boy* woman who is wearing the pants, but the late-capitalistic system underpinning the advertising business. The metaphorical pants are still worn by the same system that has worn them for decades. It should not come as a surprise then to learn that the advertising business in South Africa, as elsewhere, is still male dominated. Men create this ad for women. A 'feminist' vantage point is added to lend a politically correct flavour. How liberating this type of feminism can be, remains an open question, and an issue at the focal point of this discussion.

## WHAT IS ADVERTISING?

Let us kick off with some general notes on advertising. According to Diane Barthel in *Putting on appearances: Gender and advertising* (1988), advertising is about appearances, or simulations in Baudrillard's terms. If

we accept that advertising is indeed about appearances, what we see in ads is not the product as such, but rather the idea of the product. To put it metaphysically, the product appears to us as projected idea. When we buy a product, we buy into that simulated idea or into the 'look' of the product.

Furthermore our identity, in as far as the term 'identity' is still applicable, is expressed by and through the products we choose. It is almost as if the product becomes an extension of ourselves. By selecting products that suit our identities, or what we think our identities are, we try to create individual appearances. We are 'putting on appearances' so to speak. Ironically the more we try to create an individual appearance and identity, in other words the more we put on appearances, the more we start to look alike. The crowd of models in the Peter Stuyvesant ads is a good example. They all claim an individuality but they all look amazingly and boringly alike. They are all well-shaped, tanned, sexy, cool, trendy, etc. Ironically, telling the one from the other is almost impossible. So much for individuality.

The products that we buy are also linked in our minds by advertising to instant change and diversion from boredom. When we buy a product we assume or rather we hope that suddenly, nothing will be same again! We buy a specific look when we buy a certain product. When we buy Revlon makeup for instance, we secretly hope to transform ourselves into a Claudia Schiffer or a Cindy Crawford. But that hope is obviously to no avail. You may ask: 'But who wants to look like Claudia or Cindy?' The fact that makeup is a multi-billion dollar business suggests that millions of women aspire to look that way.

Stuart Ewen in *All consuming images* (1988) argues that these standards of perfection that are created by models in ads, invite the viewers to compare themselves with what they are presented with. Soon the viewer/consumer realizes that she or he cannot live up to that standard of air-brushed perfection, which only exists in the world of advertising. This failure to live up to the expectation of perfection ultimately leads to the 'loss of the self' according to Ewen. The consumer has been tricked into desiring something external to his or her own subjectivity or 'authentic sensibility'. The consumer then suffers from 'mediated desire' (Andersen, 1995:104), which is a state of yearning that is not the consumer's or sub-

ject's own, but has been instilled by an admired Other, for instance a smiling Cindy Crawford who looks like a million dollars. The consumer's own desire has been mediated and compromised, and in the end the consumer is alienated from his or her selfhood, according to Ewen.

An interesting and rather disturbing fact is that the advertising industry is still dominated by men. So men, usually white men, are the creators of ads, while women on the other hand are the users of ads and consumers of products (apparently 80% of all goods are sold to women). Obviously this relationship of men as the creators of ads and women as the consumers of ads can be depicted as a power relationship. The creators of ads, create the needs of the consumers. This is a powerful position to be in.

### ADVERTISING, GENDER AND SEX

Diane Barthel (1988:6), in *Putting on appearances: Gender and advertising*, indicates that advertising is not only about 'putting on appearances' but it is also about gender, seeing that gender forms part of advertising's social structure and psychology. Advertising promises a specific gender appearance and the *Sissy Boy Jeans* ads are such a case in point. Baudrillard goes a step further. He associates a gendered quality with advertising. According to Baudrillard (1970:213) advertising as such assumes the role of the female seducer and manipulator. In other words just as a female seductress latches onto the desires of others, so advertising latches onto the desires of her consumers. Baudrillard typecasts advertising as a 'feminine' activity. The male creators of advertising seduce female consumers by means of the so-called feminine activity of advertising.

This suggests how complicated the gender relations of advertiser and reader are. According to this view, women are seduced by their own traditional gender quality, namely femininity. Advertising, as a male-dominated activity, wears the mask of femininity to latch onto and capitalize on women's desires. However, did these desires exist before the seduction of advertising took effect? Or were women's desires responsible for creating advertisements?

Advertising does recognize the weaknesses and needs of the consumer

and its strategies depend on initially catering for these needs. But the modernist and utopian concept of personal identity as an independent entity, is unveiled by advertising as a false fantasy. Advertising influences our identities just as our identities influence advertising. We are not closed-off entities but rather inter-relational and fluid structures that are influenced and influence simultaneously. A mutual mimetic relationship exists between ad and consumer and this is perhaps one of the important reasons why advertising is so successful.

By this, I am not suggesting that the advertiser creates the need for men and women to feel sexually viable for instance, just as advertisers do not create the insecurities that people have about being able to love and being loved. These are core insecurities that cut right through to the heart of self-esteem and identity. What advertisers do though, is to keep these insecurities and needs intact by capitalizing on them. Women especially, thanks to stereotyped role models, fall prey to the advertising world's suggestions and appearances.

In tackling the topic of sex and advertising we may ask: 'Does sex in advertising sell?' And the answer is: 'Sometimes'. We may also ask: 'Does sex in advertising attract attention?' And the answer is 'YES'. 'Does sex in advertising influence people?' 'YES, and vice versa.' In other words consumers also influence the sex in advertising. This is a truly mimetic relationship.

When advertisers link a product with sexuality they lock into people's deepest fears of being unloved. Advertisers offer their products and images as the ticket to love, but what they're really providing are more masks for people to hide behind. We may add that when advertisers use sex in ads they also capitalize on and reaffirm old stereotypes. It is exactly these stereotypes hiding behind the attractive face of the ad that I want to challenge. What has happened recently in South African advertising is the appropriation of feminism by a late-capitalist logic. In explaining this point of view we will start with the first example of the Sissy Boy Jeans ads.

### **THE SISSY BOY SERIES OF ADS**

In the first ad of the campaign Sissy Boy is a demolition babe who has

taken the phallic hammer in her own hands and demolished the kitchen sink. It reminds one strongly of the lyrics of a Eurythmics song entitled 'You have placed a chill in my heart'. In this song Annie Lennox sings of '... a woman just too tired to think of the dirty old dishes in the kitchen sink'. No more 'barefoot and pregnant' in front of the kitchen sink! It also reminds one of another feminist saying: 'You start by sinking into his arms and end up with your arms in his sink'. Sissy Boy does not sink into suburbia for she is free and in control. Sissy Boy is a no-nonsense girl. She has liberated herself from all repressive systems. Or could this be the inverted face of those old repressions?

The text accompanying the ad is very witty, aggressive and apparently very woman friendly. It reads as follows:

*... some generally untalented and specifically psycho son of a bitch and all I can bring myself to say is up yours space cadet, life's just too damn short for this unshaven macho crap and if you ever get the urge to speak to me again just hold your breath and you might get over it because if I have anything to do with it you won't speak to me, my sister, my answering machine or my dog for the rest of your tragic life.*

The fact that we see Sissy with the metaphorical phallic hammer in her hands is an attractive image due to its androgynous qualities. Here we have a female armed with a traditionally male weapon. Visually she combines both feminine and masculine gender qualities. She is dangerous and armed.

Sissy's makeup is vampire-like, with black circles around the eyes, compares favourably with the *femme fatale* visual type created during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Sissy shares visual characteristics with the mythical figure of Salomé as she was portrayed by the fin-de-siècle artists of the previous century. Salomé was interpreted by the avant garde artists of the Symbolist movement specifically as the decapitator of men. She seduces and devours. Salomé is sometimes depicted with knife or sword in her hands to demonstrate her deadliness. Sissy Boy with the hammer in her hand hints at the same message. Sissy differs from her nineteenth century sister though, because she supposedly embodies the liberation of women. While Salomé was a male fantasy created by men to

prove women's devious nature, Sissy on the other hand is created by the *fin de millennium* culture to turn woman into a liberating sign in order to sell a commodity.

But will women be liberated by an ego-phallo-carno-logo-centric contrived image or sign such as *Sissy Boy*? Is it possible that women's liberation will come through exactly the deconstruction of male fantasies of the *femme fatale* type? Is this what the *Sissy Boy Jeans* ads are doing? – namely deconstructing the old male fantasy of the *femme fatale*? If so I support them wholeheartedly, but it seems more as if they are promoting *femme fatale* behaviour as liberating. Camille Paglia, controversial virago, supports the theme of *femme fatale* behaviour because she suspects all women of being born devious and dangerous, in other words being born *femme fatales*. In *Sexual personae: Art and decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (1990: 13) Paglia asserts:

*The femme fatale is one of the most mesmerizing of sexual personae. She is not a fiction but an extrapolation of biologic realities in women that remain constant.*

It will be argued here that women are neither born as victims nor are they born as vixens. If anything they are born androgynous, nothing more and nothing less, although societal and debilitating gender roles have made them less for ages. Elisabeth Badinter (1992: 111) in her book *The Unopposite Sex* asserts our androgynous nature: 'We are born androgynous, then we assert our gender. And then if we are secure in our identities, we become androgynous again'. Therefore those who consider the *femme fatale* type as a liberating role model should be warned; it may just be the other side of the victim coin.

The second *Sissy Boy* ad in the series plays with the 'size issue'. The text reads:

*'So he told the world HE got YOU. He told them it was HIS charm, his wit, his intellect. He told them you were lured by HIS great looks. Then he even told YOU how wonderful he was. It's called exaggeration. Like promising to move heaven and earth for you. Particularly the earth. Well, tell him there's one little thing he forgot to enlarge upon. Tell him to enlarge THIS'.*

'Enlarge on this!' challenges a very seductive and scarcely-clad *Sissy Boy*. She indicates a smallish size between her thumb and forefinger. The man in the background indicates a much larger size stretching from one hand to the other. We also see a subtle small airbrushed penis on the man's pants. The airbrushed penis falls exactly between the woman's fingers. It is suggested that *Sissy Boy* has the man eating out of her hand so to speak. But could this be a Bobbit thing? Could this be Loreena sizing up her old hubby? (– with good reason, granted).

The Freudian overtones are obvious – men are lacking in size and in any case they stand to lose whatever they have. How does the old 'castration fear' and 'penis envy' theory fit into this ad? If you are one of those women who think castration leads to liberation, think again. Castration is part of a patriarchal and repressive system. I am not convinced that women are 'natural born castrators'. How free are women when they fall into a patriarchal mindset? Anyway, what does size have to do with anything? If you argue that he is less of a man because of his size, chances are that you have been in macho-chauvinist company too long.

In the third ad in this series we see how *Sissy Boy* invites the viewer to sex. She is dressed to kill, her pose is inviting and the mouth is simulating a Marilyn Monroe pout. The text affirms the message: 'He'll also need something skin-tight to slip into'. We are further informed that with every pair of jeans you buy, you will receive a free condom just in case you need it. By the looks of *Sissy* she will definitely need the condom. Chances are that you will also need a condom if you buy the jeans, at least that is the implication. Is this the face of the liberated female? Taking control of her own destiny and very importantly of her own sexuality? *Sissy Boy* seems to be in absolute control. She uses condoms and promotes safe sex by putting a cap on it.

The trade-name *Sissy Boy* itself also hints at other possible meanings. Is she a gender-bender? An androgynous cyberbabe? She is a boy but also a sissy; is she a weak boy? a cry baby? a deformed male? The name *Sissy Boy* is definitely being used ironically. But could she be a male fantasy? She is awfully slender and elongated, almost phallic in appearance. This slender androgynous form overlaps with the late nineteenth century femme fatale. The unnerving boyish-girlish figures of the late nineteenth century echo

Sissy Boy's ephebian character. Could Sissy Boy be the reincarnation of male obsessions and fears in a late twentieth-century guise?

On the other hand, she may very well be a Baudrillardian 'symbolical transsexual', 'a fatal sign-slide between the genders', who suffers from 'amnesia on the question of the sexual referent', as the meaning of the sexual referent is effaced by the cold light of the 'obscenity of communication' (Kroker 1992:79). In other words she has become indifferent about gender identity.

In the last example of the *Sissy Boy Jeans* ads under discussion we see a female hand with the sign for masculinity ♂ swinging around her little finger. The copy reads: **(man)- i-pulate**. On the righthand side we see the small dancing figure of *Sissy Boy* joyously celebrating her victory. She encourages women to manipulate, exactly that which women have been accused of for centuries. Women manipulate when they want their way, we are told from a very tender age. Men are warned against lustful women, because they seduce and play games to get what they want. And now *Sissy Boy* encourages us at the dawn of the twenty-first century, to behave in exactly the stereotypical way that feminists have denied and fought against for decades.

But what does manipulation mean in an age of appearances and images? In an age of indifference, manipulation can only be simulated. We are seduced into believing that we can still manipulate when in actual fact all that is being manipulated are signs without symbolic reference. *Sissy Boy* does not refer to a hidden symbolic temptress behind the scenes. What you see is exactly what you get: an image, a look, an appearance.

But do not be mistaken; appearances are still associated with power. The cultural construct of the *femme fatale* assigns women the power to control men, even to destroy them, by using their beauty and ability to compel men's attraction. Yet this form of power remains within the bounds of patriarchy. A woman who chooses to exercise that power is confined to the given categories of attraction and appearance. Hopefully non-patriarchal forms of womanly power would look much different.

Even if the *Sissy Boy Jeans* ads appeal to women's desire for success and

power, the commodity itself cannot satisfy these yearnings. One does not become independent, successful or powerful by wearing *Sissy Boy Jeans*, even if you believe these are the ingredients that will make you happy. Social and economic power cannot be brought within the realm of consumables; in other words it cannot be purchased. It will have to come through political, social and economic change.

The *Sissy Boy Jeans* ads create the image of the androgynous vixen in the late twentieth century. The sign-slide androgyne that appears in the *Sissy Boy* ads is witty and very intelligently presented, but she may just be the face or the look of late capitalism. The liberating moments of the masculinized female have been co-opted by late capitalistic strategies to sell a product, but it still has to be debated whether becoming masculinized is truly liberating for all women. Should we embrace the coy *Sissy Boy* type or should we be sceptical about what is really sold to us? Can capitalism wear a more attractive look than *Sissy Boy*? I doubt it. I conclude: Wear these pants but do not expect instant liberation. The femme fatale is dead, murdered – long live the image of the *femme fatale*!

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