



UNIVERZITA PALACKÉHO, Filozofická fakulta

Katedra nederlandistiky

Křížkovského 14, 771 80 OLOMOUC

☎ 58 563 3216 fax: 58 522 91 62 e-mail: barnardlianne@yahoo.com

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

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

Disertační práce doktorského studijního programu Teorie literatury

Martina Vitáčková

The stated aim of this thesis is to analyze women characters in contemporary women's postcolonial writing in Dutch (from the Netherlands) and Afrikaans, focusing on how and where these characters search (and eventually find) their identity in the new/alterred situation of the postcolonial society. This is a very ambitious aim which would have defeated many a student, yet Ms Vitáčková succeeds in integrating all the strands in a very readable thesis.

Ms Vitáčková gives succinct definitions of "woman"; "female"; "feminine" and "feminist" and expands on her use of third wave feminist thought. She neatly avoids the pitfall of setting feminists against males and thus reinforcing the gender dualism she is fighting, by referring to Spivak's 'strategic essentialism' which implies that when women as a group are repressed, they can use the duality of man – woman in resisting objectification, while keeping in mind a view that female is just one part of a very complex positioning of identities that people struggle with. Her eventual conclusion that contemporary women's literature apparently does not concentrate on the relation between a man and a woman any more, is accurate. This creates anxiety among male

reviewers as can be seen in the controversy around the novel *Agaat* about the whether the fact that the son Jakkie moved to Canada meant that Afrikaners are disintegrating as a group. It is a pity that Ms Vitáčková did not analyse more reviews of the novels she had chosen. A thesis should also be a conversation between different readers of the novels and this is missing in this thesis.

One of the most positive aspects of this thesis is the realisation that reading novels do have an influence on the socio-political situation in a country since readers identify with characters who through their struggles arrive at a new identity which can be used as an example for the reader trying to integrate all the opposites in his or her life, opposites such as male and female and self and other. In contrast to recent political demands in the Netherlands that non-Western migrants must accept Dutch identity, rather narrowly and arbitrarily defined, this thesis shows how the hybrid identity of being in-between has the potential to transverse both cultures and to translate, negotiate and mediate affinity and difference within a dynamic of exchange and inclusion. As such literature is far ahead of social politics in the Netherlands in addressing the problem and the potential of migrants. This also shows the topical importance of the theme of this thesis.

I found the direct translation of the Dutch terms “allochtoon” and “autotochtoon” irritating, since they do not sound natural in English and in Dutch itself the use of these terms is thought to be insensitive and discriminating. The definition given that “allochtonous” refer to people of Africa, Asia and South America (p.10), does not mention Turkey, yet many immigrants were from Turkey. It would have helped if a

formal definition could have been taken from government papers, such as Jaarrapport Integratie 2010.

Although the theoretical concepts were explained succinctly and clearly in a structured way, the organisation of the practical analysis led to repetition of the same point or summary. It would have been better to have had a chapter for each novel where the breakpoint, objects connected to the identity crisis and reconciliation could have been kept together.

Apart from these few issues where I think the thesis could have been better, I have to congratulate Ms Vitáčková on the high standard of work she has produced. She has indeed used the opportunity to consult with the best feminist thinkers in the Netherlands and Belgium and to integrate some of the newest ideas into her thesis. As such her work is very innovative. It is also the first time Afrikaans novels have been part of the research brief of a Czech thesis. Ms Vitáčková is an original and creative thinker with a fine sense of importance of reading a novel in detail and also of putting the novel into a wider philosophical and societal framework.

I therefore recommend that a PhD be awarded for this thesis.

Dr. Lianne Barnard
Olomouc, 25 May 2011