



Dissertation Report for MARTINA VITÁČKOVÁ

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

General remarks

This is an intellectually ambitious project that aims to use recent theoretical insights to analyse a corpus of novels written by women writers in Dutch (all from the Netherlands) and Afrikaans. The focus of the thesis is the way in which the novels and their writers respond to and are part of shifts in the western gender system; more particularly, this finds expression in the identity crises of the female I-narrators. The thesis views this crisis as involving issues of race as well as gender, so that marginalisation and power relations are at the heart of the analysis.

The project's aims and objectives are clearly explained in the first chapter, the overall aim being 'to offer a theoretical background combining the insights of postcolonial theory/ies and feminist (literary) theories [...]' (p.9) The candidate discusses an impressive range of theoretical works of feminist and postcolonial theorists, displaying a mature understanding so that she is able to take a clear position in relation to them, and also to forge her own overall critical framework for the analysis. A key starting-point is the rejection of binary thinking which privileges one of the two elements resulting in marginalization of the other. I agree with the candidate that a position within (or beyond) the third feminist wave also implies a postcolonial stance as an integral part of the theoretical framework. The first chapter explains this convincingly.

The candidate's other aims include an intention to introduce these 'theoretical and methodological innovations' to both the Czech academy and to the field of international Dutch Studies. While I am not qualified to make a pronouncement on the former objective, I can certainly confirm that international Dutch Studies is ready to open up to new approaches and am fully supportive of this aim. In this respect, the research contained in the dissertation could be of international importance. Another objective of the thesis is also in keeping with this international orientation: i.e. to introduce these 'minor' writers to a wider audience – I use the term 'minor' in the Deleuzian sense to cover the marginal identities as women of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This is a highly commendable undertaking which succeeds here (though the audience at this point is limited) because of the very clear readings given of the selected novels.

Methodology

On p.10 the project is described again, highlighting the research into 'a new concept of women's identity on a broad-based literary corpus, covering various cultural backgrounds, ages, sexualities, beliefs etc.' The candidate proposes using interdisciplinary and intersectional principles to guide the investigation, arguing that "'immigrant authors" [...] are a natural part of the literary field in the Netherlands.' Explicit discussion of what Braidotti (2006) calls 'racialization' and 'racism without races' would have benefited this section, and the relationship between cultural difference and race is never really explained. Even the phrase 'natural part of the literary field' seems tentative or avoidant, since postmodern

theory has made it quite clear that the function of the term 'natural' is to obscure power relations. That said, I completely agree with the stated overall approach.

The combination of sound theoretical basis and case studies is clearly one to which I subscribe, though it does involve an element of risk in that it can be a challenge to bring the two rather different modes of thought together. I will comment on this later. The candidate has understood the advantage of juxtaposition – that it is in itself an application of a theoretical insight aimed at resisting a linear and authoritative narrative stance. Or, in the words of the candidate: 'it [postcolonialism – JF] does not agree with the existence of one absolute truth and is against any totalizing or globalizing practices.' (p. 15)

The final element of the method raises certain questions which I will rehearse here in brief. I quote: 'The project as such is clearly interdisciplinary, not necessarily because it thinks both postcolonial and feminist theory, but mainly because it applies approaches to literary characters that are most used on "real" people.' (p.16) The literary analysis is carried out using a psychoanalytical method. It is certainly the case that the candidate is aware of the possible charge of naivety in 'pretending' that fictional constructs are real people, and she makes clear that the method will be used in combination with other disciplines on the basis that the unconscious of literary characters emanates from a real person, the writer. Now it is the case that our world is increasingly complex, but I wonder whether the insertion of psychoanalysis does not introduce an unnecessary complexity into the methodology. It is possible to see a literary work, or indeed any use of language, as symbolic (as, for example, Claire Kramsch does in *The Multilingual Subject*) and therefore amenable to analysis which looks behind the words. Psychoanalysis with its notion of the unconscious is generally thought to presuppose a unitary subject which is at odds with the idea of multiple and fluid subjectivity. I also note that the use of psychoanalysis as explained on p. 103 'in the sense of a form of therapy or talking cure' is what might be described as an informal application and is not really distinguishable from the more general cultural idea of psychoanalysis. The research questions on identity (p. 14) support this view.

The analyses of the selected works

Despite the reservations expressed above, I view the literary analyses as successful: they are illuminating and reveal perceptive readings of the six novels. Interestingly, although they may be looking for similarities between the cases, they do bring out what is particular to each woman writer. I think the choice of texts is excellent from the point of view of the research aim and the project to introduce and analyse these six novels to a wider audience. Also, the dissertation reads very fluently when literature is being discussed. I do not propose to discuss each individual work, but I would like to comment on what I consider to be a less successful aspect of the readings, though this should be seen against an overwhelmingly positive assessment of chapters 2 and 3.

The first aspect is where the decision to focus only on the character of the narrator means that another character who is very interesting in the context of the project's aims, is rather neglected. For example, Dee in Hella Haasse's *Steuteloog* is described as sharing the 'same cultural identity' as Herma, which in my view is rather reductive. Dee's extremism is a fascinating counterbalance to Herma's reasonableness, and both Dee and Non are very different representations of in-betweenness when compared with Herma. The single focus seems to come from the assumption that an I-narrator has some kind of privileged relationship with the author, but I am still not wholly convinced.

The assumption of this special link between author and first person narrator has also led to the decision to take objects that are meaningful to the narrators as one of only four points of analysis – in psychoanalytical terms a form of object relations theory is being applied here. While these objects are clearly crucial for an understanding of the characters' identity crises, the discussion can be a little repetitive, especially in the case of the shells in *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat* in 3.3.2.5. Also, the focus on the shells leads to a narrow reading of Helena's crisis. The dictionary is another significant object linked to a wider

identity crisis, and the whole problem of preserving a cultural identity which is in the process of marginalization for 'good' reasons adds a whole new dimension to the identity discussion. It is a pity that the method did not allow for broader discussion.

The conclusions

Each individual analysis is given a conclusion which is then built on in subsequent discussion. For example, section 3.3.3 takes the act of reconciliation as its focus, building on the discovery that 'Now, after they have admitted and accepted their traumas from the past, they can move forward and do something significant with their lives [...]' I cite this because in my view, it bears traces of traditional humanist thought – of the belief in progress. In a postmodern view of the subject, such as Braidotti's the agony of becoming is acknowledged, as is the view that once the subject is open to becomings, this is a never-ending process.

The dissertation concludes in chapter 4 that the old fixed category of white male is losing its fixity, and thus its power to define the other. The analysis of the narrator-characters demonstrates the impact on these women's identities. The texts are chosen so that they represent a good range of cultural dynamics. The ultimate conclusion is that a return to the security of one's origin is no longer possible, and characters are compelled to engage in the negotiation of a new self that is 'hybrid, fluid and multilayered'. In addition, the inclusion of motherhood and its treatment in the novels helps to highlight an important shift in feminist thinking between the second and third waves.

In my view, the dissertation makes a substantial contribution to knowledge and understanding of postmodern theory in the context of international Dutch Studies, and also to knowledge of contemporary Dutch and Afrikaans women's writing. It represents a sustained attempt to engage with new and challenging ideas which means that it has taken risks which in my view were well worth it. It is most certainly merits consideration for the award of a doctoral degree.

Postscriptum

As an English speaker I would like to note that the text of the dissertation would need thorough editing of the English as a condition of permission to publish.

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