

ABJECTION IN THE NOVELS OF MARLENE VAN NIEKERK

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Thesis presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English

Language and Literature at the University of Cape Town, 2013

Promoter: Prof John Higgins

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Abstract

In this thesis, three of Marlene van Niekerk's novels, translated from Afrikaans into English, are examined, with the focus on the representation of abjection in the texts under discussion. The theoretical point of departure of this study is Julia Kristeva's essay *Powers of horror* (1982), which addresses, in particular, the notion of abjection and how certain abject elements play a pivotal role in people's everyday lives. From a psychoanalytic perspective, abjection is viewed as a revolt against the mother and foregrounds particularly the influence of the maternal body over the subject. In this instance, the subject desires liberation from the hold of the maternal and seeks to subject the mother to abjection. Bodily fluids seeping out of the body, diseases, viruses, dirt and death (and in particular the corpse) are all elements that are encompassed in the concept of abjection.

Manifestations of abjection in the form of the abject mother, abject spaces, abject bodies and the link between abjection and filth are comparatively analysed in the three texts. The thesis concludes by showing that Van Niekerk deliberately inscribes elements of the abject into her texts so as to transgress and deconstruct the norms associated with a patriarchal and racist society in South Africa. Van Niekerk also undermines the norms that underpin such a society: religious indoctrination, gender oppression and Othering. By writing her novel *Triomf* (1999) in a demotic register, Van Niekerk furthermore questions the prevalent assumptions about what is deemed proper language for writing a novel. Writing, for her, thus serves the purposes of abjecting, of rejecting the impositions of the symbolic order. Following the publication of her first collection of short stories, *Die Vrou wat haar verkyker*

vergeet het [The woman who forgot her binoculars] in 1992, there was general consensus that the baroque nature of the language resulted in reader resistance to the text. This explains why she decided to write her first novel in the crude and obscene language of a low-class family, the Benades of Triomf.

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ABJECTION IN THE NOVELS OF MARLENE VAN NIEKERK

So it is a risk, this business of writing. One starts by setting in motion certain forces of which you are not the master – forces of language, forces of the unconscious – and then focus as best you can while you hurtle through space. (Marlene van Niekerk)

The poet, in a sense, writes inside the mother, or from the mother, or from the maternal realm. The poet's jouissance that causes him to emerge from schizophrenic decorporealization is the jouissance of the mother. (Julia Kristeva)

I'm repelled by Kristeva's politics: what seems to me to be her reliance on the sort of banal historical narrative to produce "women's time": what seems to me Christianizing psychoanalysis; what seems to me to be her ferocious Western Europeanism; and what seems to me her long-standing implicit positivism: naturalizing of the chora, naturalizing of the presemiotic. I'm so put off by this that I can't read her seriously anymore. (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak)

Chapter 1: Introduction

The aim of this project is to contribute to the study of South African literature since 1994, which some observers regard as the "post-colonial moment"¹ of South Africa, which saw the autocratic White minority regime replaced by Black majority rule in a new democratic dispensation. More specifically, the emphasis will be on the writing of Marlene van Niekerk, an Afrikaans author, whose novels have been translated into English and for which she has

¹ It is not within the scope of this thesis to engage a discussion of post-colonialism and post-colonial theory. It is well documented in the critical literature that South Africa was colonised by the White oppressor until 1994, when the country had its first democratic elections and a Black president came into power. Similarly, a white South African might see it as 1910 when the country became a Union or 1961 when South Africa became a republic, independent of Britain.

received both local and international acclaim.² Van Niekerk is one of the South African authors characterised by Barnard (2012: 666) as someone who is “[abandoning] the project of forging the broad horizontal fraternities of an imagined national community and [is] instead seeking affiliations and connections at will with various international trends.” Similarly, Flanery and Van der Vlies (2008: 8) point out that the post-apartheid South African cultural text that proves to be an international success,

in other words, that achieves some degree of global presence if not actual material or commercial success is refreshingly, not solely concerned with the aftermath or history of apartheid, or even necessarily the struggle.

Prior to 1994, Afrikaans and English were the only two official languages and dominated the local academic and publishing scene. When the concept “South African literature” is used, it principally refers to literature written in English (De Kock, 2005: 70) with “an overemphasis on difference” between the different language and literatures in South Africa. In the new post-apartheid context, English is the *lingua franca* of the country, with its 11 official languages, but as Hunter (2009: 80) observes, the local publication industry is still dominated by Afrikaans and English literary texts.³ However, in order for an Afrikaans author to gain international recognition, it has become more and more important to have his or her work

² A cursory glance at academic articles and topics of dissertations at South African universities – at both Departments of Afrikaans and Departments of English – show a predilection for the work of Antjie Krog and Marlene van Niekerk. According to Hunter (2009: 79), these two authors are “highly respected” and they continue “to resurrect and confront the ghosts of the apartheid past.”

³ In contemporary South Africa, English, according to Flanery and Van der Vlies (2008: 16) is dominant as a “cross-cultural mode of expression” and the language “most suited to international audiences”.

translated into English. In this regard, the following remark by De Kock (2005: 78-79) is noteworthy:

I still have a residual feeling that English-speaking scholars continue to imagine South African writing as normatively English. ... Recently, I took on Marlene van Niekerk's new novel, *Agaat*, because I knew that Van Niekerk's work is seldom less than momentous in its perspectives, scope and concerns. But even with the expectation of a big encounter, *Agaat* still shook every tenet I had held of what South African fiction might be: I had not before encountered such Joycean play of word and idea in a South African work of fiction, such deep inhabitation of historical lives from the most acute of narrative perspectives. ... This novel is written with mastery of a kind that necessitates literary re-evaluation in several senses, if that is still our work: of the possibilities for probing, large-scale narrative in South African letters; of an expanded capacity for feeling of the kind that [Ashraf] Jamal is so intent upon us recalling into our work; and of the recombination of form in South African narrative writing in ways that are ambitious in a big sense, Van Niekerk has set a new standard for the whole of South African writing.

From this we can deduce that De Kock suggests broadening the concept of 'South African Literature' by thinking outside the boundaries of linguistic inclusivity. Significant is his remark about Van Niekerk's setting of a "new standard for the *whole* of South African writing" (emphasis added) because it demonstrates that henceforth novels published in South Africa will be measured against the scope and stylistic achievements of *Agaat*.⁴

When asked for her views on translation, and in particular of her own work, Van Niekerk (in an online profile, 2007) remarked as follows:

Vertaling is 'n fassinerende proses. Dis die mees intense vorm van kommentaar. Ek ervaar dit tot dusver as opwindend, mens vind uit wat jy eintlik geskryf het. Jy vind ook

⁴ Mary West writes that "there would be some kind of poetic justice in an Afrikaans writer becoming the twenty-first century's most widely read White South African woman writer, given the English claim to liberalism and universality" (2009a: 188).

elke ding uit waaroor jy nie goed duidelikheid gehad het nie, alle kontinuïteitsfoute kom aan die lig. Dis ook 'n kans vir die boek om verder te ontwikkel in sy assosiatiewe reikwydtes. Mens verloor iets, maar jy wen ook baie. [Translation is a fascinating process. It is the most intense form of commentary. Up till now I have experienced it as exciting, because one really discovers what you have written. You also discover everything that you weren't certain of; all continuity errors come to light. It is also an opportunity for the book to develop further in its associative range. One loses a lot, but one also gains much.]

1.1 The Novel in Translation – Reading Van Niekerk in English ⁵

This complex novel, *Agaat*, is, however, inaccessible to most readers in its original Afrikaans and it therefore stands to reason that translation into English was necessary. Discussing the issue of translating literature within the South African context, De Kock (2012: 750-51) comments as follows:

For an Afrikaans novel to be translated into English, for example, has become a special mark of success. Why? Because it potentially globalises the novel's reception, and it means the novel gets written twice: once in the writer's native language, redolent of the younger, arguably less trodden registers of indigenous Afrikaans, and once in the now enriched and transcoded registers of an ever so slightly transformed English.

Gayatri Spivak, who works predominantly from a comparative approach to literature, regards translation as “the most intimate act of reading” (1993: 201) and pleads for change in literary studies, without the usual markers such as “Anglophony, Lusophony, Teutophony, Francophony, etc.” (Spivak, 2003: 9). In her preface to her now seminal translation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1976), she describes this “act of reading” as follows:

⁵ England (2013: 16) believes that it “may not be inapposite to include a space for the discussion of aspects of translation in a multilingual country” and feels the need to raise questions “about estranging the variously familiar and known registers of proximate meaning extant in a shared context” when discussing the interaction between the text in the source language and its translation in the target language.

Any act of reading is besieged and delivered by the precariousness of intertextuality. And translation is, after all, one version of intertextuality. ... From one language to another or within one and the same language. Translation is a version of the intertextuality that comes to bear also with same language. (Spivak, introduction to Derrida, 1976: lxxxvi-lxxxvii)

Intertextuality is the term coined by Kristeva in the 1960s following her reading of Bakhtin. His writing at that stage was still mostly in Russian and in unpublished form. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva (1984: 59-60) opts for the word *transposition* when explaining her views on intertextuality. The sign system of one text is transposed to that of a new text and in the process leads to the formation of the next text. Kristeva, however, cautions that intertextuality should not be regarded as “the study of sources” but rather as a transposition of signs. This transposition of signifying systems undermines the notion of a unified text and results in several new positions of subjectivity. From a linguistic point of view, it results in polysemy and polyvalence of meaning, which according to Kristeva (cited in Guberman, 1996: 189), confirms that any text is the result of the “intersection of a number of voices, of a number of textual interventions.”

Regarding the process of translating Van Niekerk’s work into English, two of her translators, namely, Leon de Kock and Michiel Heyns, have commented extensively on the translation process and their approach to translating her work. Especially in the case of Heyns’s translation of *Agaat*, his approach could be described as an example of intertextual reading and intertextual translation.

Discussing his translation of her first novel, *Triomf*, De Kock (2003, 2009) points out that the novel could be characterised as a “bastardised text” (De Kock, 2009: 22), consisting of “a

mish-mash of a colloquial, low-class, aggression-tinted, paranoid, stained-by-ideology, bastardised-half-English idiom”. This novel, according to De Kock, is also “peppered with explosive ruptures and assaults against the purity of Afrikaans.” The fact that “purity” was always such a loaded metaphor under the old apartheid dispensation, calling to mind connotations of racial purity, explains why the Van Niekerk decided to rebel against the conventions associated with written Afrikaans.

This overt and subversive use of language reminds me of Kristeva’s concept of *abjection*, because in *Triomf*, we have a distinct challenging of norms and a transgression of what is deemed fashionable and acceptable when it comes to Afrikaans writing and the use of the Afrikaans language. Moreover, within the patriarchal tradition of South African letters, it is also unheard of that a female writer could be so subversive and openly deride her mother tongue. Gallop (1987: 314) argues that one’s mother tongue, or the language we learn at our mother’s breast, is a patriarchal language because it is a language “full of masculinist bias”.

As will be examined below, the intricate relationship between mother and child is central to Kristeva’s theory of abjection and by writing in an “un-motherly manner”, the author views her mother tongue as something abject, as something from which she has to distance herself. The opposite holds, however, in the case of *Agaat*, where there is a definite return to the formalised mother tongue.

Michiel Heyns, who was responsible for the translation of both *Agaat* and *Memorandum*, also commented on his approach to translating these novels. In discussing the translation of

Agaat in particular, Heyns (2009: 124-135) delineates several problematic aspects associated with the text: the title, the name of the farm, the “emblems and sediment of a whole history of human habitation and cultivation”, as well as the cultural references and literary allusions in the text. With reference to Venuti’s theory of literary translation, Heyns decided that if a close equivalent in the target language for aspects of the text in the source language could not be found, he would make use of quotes from T.S. Eliot or Shakespeare. He concludes:

What I learnt from the task of translating *Agaat* is what an oversimplification it is to talk of the meaning of words as if it were bare lexical denotation for which a more or less precise equivalent can be found by consulting a dictionary. Language in action is such a manifold and slippery thing that a one-to-one correspondence is by no means invariable. (Heyns, 2009: 135)

Both translators-as-readers had to make choices to find the proper equivalent which would convey the textual message within the target language and both had to accommodate certain adaptations and choices. This process can also be seen as allegorical in terms of the idea that resistance against the maternal hold underpins the theory of the abject: Heyns chooses allusions and “intertexts” from the English classics (mostly from T.S. Eliot) to convey his interpretation of the discursive elements in the text. In the process, he re-inscribes the text into a new context, away from the mother (tongue) text.⁶

⁶ Compare in this regard De Kock’s (2012: 750) remark: “[I]n the translation of Van Niekerk’s subsequent novel, *Agaat*, translator Michiel Heyns broke the codes of translation too, but in a different way. Heyns extended the allusive range of the Afrikaans original, explicitly adding T. S. Eliot’s *The Four Quartets* as an additional intertext in the translated version of the novel, among other allusive additions.” The major gain of this translation, according to Van Vuuren (2010: 92), is that the so-called *plaasroman* [farm novel] is now “accessible to readers worldwide”. See England (2013) for an analysis of the presence of Eliot’s poetry in Heyns’s translation of the novel.

In his translator's note (to *Agaat*), Heyns (Van Niekerk, 2006) explains his translation method as follows:

Where, however, the author has quoted from mainstream Afrikaans poetry, I have tried to find equivalents from English poetry. I have also taken the liberty of extending the range of poetic allusions. ... Readers will thus find scraps of English poetry interspersed, generally without acknowledgement in the text.

Certain Afrikaans words I have judged too culturally specific to be translated into English; indeed, almost all the Afrikaans words I have used in this translation occur either in the *Oxford English Dictionary* or the *Oxford Dictionary of South African English*, as having passed into South African English usage. For readers not having ready access to these sources, a glossary of Afrikaans words is appended.

The source language, namely, the Afrikaans mother tongue of the original novel with all its allusions and references to Afrikaans culture, is now replaced by texts in English in order to find equivalence in meaning. In Kristevan terms, the translation process in the case of *Agaat* is an example of abjection: the engagement with the mother text is now reflected in the global language of the "Father", of the "Symbolic Order". In order for the text to gain recognition within this symbolic order, aspects of the Afrikaans mother tongue, in which the text was originally produced, needed to be altered.⁷

On the other hand, does the need for an interventionist translation of *Agaat* not illustrate what Spivak (1999: 164) describes as "sanctioned ignorance"? The reader of the text in translated form has no knowledge of the language of the original, but for the sake of "globality", the text is translated and studied as part of a national literary discursive formation. Spivak also

⁷ I am indebted to my examiners for pointing this out in their respective reports.

cautions that the translator ought not to approach the translation process “from a position of monolingual superiority”.

An exceptional feature of Heyns’s translation is the use of diacritic accent markers in English when trying to reflect the emphasis on the words in the original Afrikaans. Heyns (2009: 127) wanted his readers to understand the cultural world of the source language text.⁸ In assessing this translation, Minter (2013: 55) writes as follows:

From a literary perspective, the small inclusion of diacritical markings in the English translation does render the language alien to some degree. These changes are not indecipherable, or in any way difficult to read, as they occur occasionally rather than constantly. But they constitute an alteration which an English reader would not be able to ignore. This grey area between retaining the ‘feel’ of the original, while at the same time translating it into another language is an interesting aspect of *Agaat*. Certainly, the choice to include the markings of Afrikaans is a way in which Heyns has chosen to negotiate what is seen by many critics as the difficulty for any translator, namely the choice between creating a translation that is faithful to the original or new in its own right.

The “markings of Afrikaans” referred to by Minter is also an attempt to “emulate the sound, or at very least the look, of Afrikaans on the page” (2013: 55) and to retain a sense of Afrikaans sensibility. I do feel, however, that the use of these diacritical markings could result in some sort of resistance by the reader to the text, especially since it is a completely unusual way of writing in English.

1.2 Lost in Translation – Kristeva’s French in English

⁸ For an insightful discussion of the language of *Agaat* see Moore-Barnes (2010).

Similarly, the issue of translation is also applicable in the case of Kristeva, since she wrote her original texts in French – and given that I am not familiar with French, I had to rely on the English translations of her work, as most Anglo-American readers of poststructuralist theories do. The following remark by Anne-Marie Smith (1998:7) is also significant in this context, namely that French is not Kristeva’s mother tongue, yet she professes to have “an energetic and exclusive attachment to the French language as the place where she constructs meaning”.

In one of Kristeva’s earlier texts, translated into English and given the title *Desire in Language* (1980), a “translators’ note” (written by Tom Gora and Alice Jardine) is included:

Julia Kristeva’s work at once demands and defies translation. In responding to that challenge, our primary concern has been to make her work as accessible as possible to an English-speaking audience. It may be that in spite of our efforts a number of awkwardnesses remain (Kristeva, 1980: xi)

The editor of that collection, Leon Roudiez, who has become one of the major translators of Kristeva’s works, also refers to translation as a laborious task (“the result of much labor”) and observes that in the case of Kristeva, there is often not a “text” in the traditional sense of the word: “it is a form of expository prose that has something specific to communicate” (Kristeva, 1980: 12). The most complex problem for her translator, however, is:

She is nearly always, if ever so slightly, off-centred in relation to all established doctrines. ... To put it another way, while she may borrow terminology from several disciplines and theoretical writers, her discourse is not the orthodox discourse of any one of them: the vocabulary is theirs but the syntax is her own.

The translator must try to establish a logical pattern in order to convey the essence of her/his argument to the reader. This also explains why Roudiez felt it necessary to include a terminology list in *Desire in Language*, in which he defines certain words and neologisms in her work.

Roudiez was also the translator of *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva's study on abjection, which forms the theoretical basis of this thesis. In his Translator's Note, he refers to the "more metaphorical, more literary" style of the work (Kristeva, 1982: vii), which puts further obstacles in the way of the translator.

A determining factor for Roudiez, as translator, is the "nature of the French language and its limited vocabulary" and the fact that Kristeva, like Derrida and Lacan, preferred to make use of polysemy. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva employs Lacanian terminology, and where Roudiez was unable to deduce the meaning from the context, he had to rely on psychoanalytic dictionaries.⁹ Smith (1998: 10) discusses two examples in which translation from French into English has led to an adverse critical reception of Kristeva's work in the Anglo-American tradition. The one example is the translation of the French pronoun "il", where the generic form of the word only refers to the male child. Another example is the translation of the word "*féminin*":

⁹ Evans (1996: ix) supports this assumption with regard to the untranslatability of psychoanalytic concepts, because, as he points out, "[e]ach psychoanalytic theory articulates these terms in a unique way, as well as introducing new terms of its own, and is thus a unique language, ultimately untranslatable." Homer (2005: 8) examines the difference in style between Freud and Lacan and describes Lacan's writings as "seemingly impenetrable".

In English the term ‘feminine’ immediately assumes connotations of culturally-imposed gender difference and stands in opposition to feminist. In French, the term describes quite simply and neutrally that which belongs to women – women’s bodies, needs, clothes, bicycles, etc.

This misinterpretation, together with Kristeva’s emphasis on the maternal, resulted in Anglo-American feminists’ criticism of what they described as the “conflation of the feminine and the maternal” (Smith, 1998: 10).

One of the main commentators on Kristeva’s critical project, Kelly Oliver, who writes from a feminist perspective, believes that Kristeva’s work is full of contradictions (Oliver, 1993b: 1) and that she deliberately sets out to challenge conventions. With reference to the theory of abjection, Oliver is of the opinion that Kristeva’s writings are “both sublime and repulsive”.

In discussing the translation of critical terminology, Ragland (1995: 1), writing about Lacanian psychoanalysis, sees her own position as that of the translator as an “emendator”:

Taken from the Latin *emendare*, an emender is one who takes out a fault or blemish, makes scholarly corrections, suggests a different reading.

Regarding the problematic nature of translating psychoanalytic theory, one has to realise that Freud’s theories had already been translated into English when the French psychoanalysts, such as Lacan (1977), rediscovered his work and devised their own translations of his concepts. As a result, the existing English translations of his work had to be retranslated to take the conceptual parameters of Freudian psychoanalysis into account. Ragland (1995: 9) also refers to the problem of finding English equivalents for *moi* and *je*:

Je becomes the speaking subject, or the subject of social conventions, or the intellect, not taking desire into account. *Moi* would be rendered variously as the

subject of personality, or individuality, or a representor or signifier of a ‘self’, symbol, and so on. One should resist translating *moi* as ‘self’ or ‘identity’ – although this is often difficult – since both words have specific and complicated histories within English philosophy and psychoanalysis.

What this suggests is that my interpretation of Kristeva’s writings on abjection is also a form of emendation. In this study, I too offer suggestions as to how to read her work and, in the context of this study, how to read Van Niekerk’s works as “fiction-as-criticism” – as allegories of the abject.

1.3 Marlene van Niekerk’s novels – an overview

For her unique portrayal of life in South Africa prior to and after 1994, Van Niekerk relies mainly on metaphors pertaining to what Julia Kristeva calls *abjection*. The novels are either populated by low-class white people talking in a demotic and vulgar language or by a refined landowning class using a discourse filled with references to classical music and the arts in general. A common denominator of all the novels under discussion is a preoccupation with disease: the diseased body and spaces such as a sickroom where a particular character has to die or with the inhumane and clinical hospital ward devoid of any warmth and compassionate care – all facets of a predilection for the abject, the abhorrent and an existence on the periphery of society. By focusing, in her writing, on what is repulsive to society, Marlene Van Niekerk could be grouped with other African writers such as the Nigerian Wole Soyinka and the Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah, whose fiction about postcolonial Africa “features a striking conjunction of scatology and political satire” (Esty, 1999: 22). The two authors use “excremental language to present political and corporate misdeeds in terms of unhealthy

digestion” and their grotesque visions of Africa are characterised by what Mbembe calls “aesthetics of vulgarity” (Esty, 1999: 23). An excellent example of a South African text that is “immersed in a poetics of pollution” (Anderson, 1995: 640) to express anger about the suffering of the black community in apartheid South Africa is “What’s in this Black Shit”, written by Mongane Wally Serote in 1972. This poem prefigures Van Niekerk’s preoccupation with faecal matter in *Triomf* because, just like Serote, she uses references to excrement to comment on life in apartheid South Africa.

In all three novels under discussion, namely *Triomf*, *Agaat* and *Memorandum* (henceforth indicated as *T*, *A* and *M*, respectively, when passages are quoted from the texts), there is a distinct conflict with the mother figure as an attempt to liberate the self from the so-called hold of the maternal over the subject – aspects central to Kristeva’s theory of abjection. It is a reflection of what McClintock (1995: 71) describes as follows:

Kristeva argues that a social being is constituted through the force of expulsion. In order to become social the self has to expunge certain elements that society deems impure: excrement, menstrual blood, urine, semen, tears, vomit, food, masturbation, incest and so on.

These “impure” elements form the basis of Van Niekerk’s novels and there is a definite challenging of existing patriarchal norms in her work. The tradition of the farm novel (*plaasroman*), with its patriarchal-dominated regime is openly deconstructed and rewritten with a matricentric regime in *Agaat*, first headed by the character of Milla’s mother and later by Milla and then *Agaat*, who inherits the farm after Milla’s death.

With regard to the abject nature of bodily fluids mentioned by McClintock, it plays a significant role in all three novels discussed here: excrement and semen in *Triomf*, vomit and other excretions of the body associated with the diseased in both *Agaat* and *Memorandum* – as examined below.

My interpretive and theoretical framework for each of the chapters in this analysis will entail applying particular facets of Kristeva's theory of abjection (explained in the next chapter in more detail). It is within this theoretical frame that I wish to examine three novels by the South African author Marlene van Niekerk. As indicated earlier, all three novels first appeared in Afrikaans, but for the purpose of this discussion, I will predominantly make use of the English translations. *Triomf* was translated into English by Leon de Kock, and Michiel Heyns translated both *Agaat* and *Memorandum* into English. *Triomf*, one of the first literary texts published in postcolonial South Africa in 1994 (Viljoen, 1996)¹⁰ depicts a dysfunctional family whose existence epitomises elements of the abject: They live in abject poverty, they are outcasts, their language is characterised by crude references to the body, and they are racist and incestuous.¹¹ The mother figure, Mol, is an object of sexual and verbal abuse and is in an incestuous relationship with her son, Lambert, and with both of her brothers.

¹⁰ According to Titlestad (2012: 680) the novel “signalled the arrival of a major presence on the post-apartheid literary scene.”

¹¹ Rob Nixon (2004) describes the novel as a “riotous portrait of a burned-out family of hillbilly Afrikaners struggling haphazardly to adapt to the new South Africa”, whereas in her assessment of the novel Viljoen (1996b: 70) calls it “a gross caricature of the nuclear family and all the values it embodies.” Schillinger (2010) compares the first two novels, describing *Triomf* as “a sharp, rollicking, bitter allegory of the politicized

The second novel, *Agaat* (2006) [awarded the *Sunday Times* Literary Award in 2007 and released in the UK as *The Way of the Women* (2007)], covers the period 1947-1996 and deals with Milla, who suffers from a progressive neurological disease that leaves her immobilised. Milla is only able to communicate through eye movements and blinking. *Agaat*, the character of the title of the novel is her servant and companion. Milla, as the bed-ridden farm owner, is completely dependent on *Agaat*. Theirs is an intricate mother-child relationship, and Milla's death will eventually result in *Agaat*'s release from the hold that the abject, diseased body of Milla has over her. The diseased body of the female subject (including the detailed description of the seepage of bodily fluids, of bodily decay and grotesque disfigurement), the bed as abject space, and the interaction between Milla, her husband and her son, as well as her dependence on *Agaat*, are facets of the abject that open up important ideas in an analysis of this novel.¹²

The third novel, *Memorandum – A Story with Paintings* (2006) recounts the story of a retired public servant, Johannes Frederikus Wiid, who is dying of terminal cancer. While spending one night in hospital, he has to share the ward with two Beckett-like characters, Mr X and Mr

-Afrikaner hysteria that accompanied the demise of apartheid” and *Agaat* as a novel about two women embodying apartheid and who “together, over 50 years, inscribed upon each other a scroll of wrongs, betrayals and sacrifices that cannot be redressed, only reread.” For Jackson (2011: 360), *Triomf* is “a poignant, individuated, and in some sense trans-historical accomplishment over and against its participation in South Africa’s meta-narrative of transition.”

¹² Jaggi (2007) observes that “nurse *Agaat*’s disquieting combination of caring tenderness and almost sadistic relish, solicitude and control, reveals its perverse origins in the mixed messages of Milla’s distance and affection.” Olivier (2012: 322) describes the novel as “an extended wake at the deathbed of the farm novel”. The portrayal of a character who is at the end of her life but who feels compelled to “narrativise the world out of which she comes” is, according to Jacobs (2012: 72), one of the tropes in contemporary South African fiction.

Y, and their enigmatic riddles and fragments of erudite conversation prompt him to explore the message in their ramblings. He decides to write a meticulous memorandum in which he explains everything that happened to him during that night. In his search for clues and references, he befriends Joop Buytendacht, a supportive librarian, and the two of them enter a fascinating world of architecture, bird life, philosophy and music. Wiid decides not to go for an operation but rather to face death while satisfying his curiosity and thirst for intellectual stimulation. Once again, the reader is confronted by an abject space. In this novel, it is the hospital (supported by the inclusion of Adriaan van Zyl's paintings depicting order and structure in hospitals). The disruption caused by the diseased body of the main character contrasts starkly with his life as a municipal official, where he kept a record of all his doings and where he was always in control. Within the context of Kristeva's theory, the librarian embodies the caring, benevolent paternal figure, who is charged with liberating the subject from the abject, acting as the Angel of Death that is escorting him.¹³

1.4 Van Niekerk's novels as allegories of the abject

As indicated, my reading of the three novels offered in this thesis is informed by Julia Kristeva's theories and my approach will be similar to that of Dovey (1988), who in her

¹³ The novel should be viewed as an accompaniment to the paintings (Van Niekerk, 2007: 21). Sanders (2009: 106) regards this collaborative project as an attempt to "[draw] into narration the meditations of one terminally ill in order to record the unrecorded." Roux (2009: 27) views the novel as a complex semiotic system that gives particular significance to van Zyl's paintings within its context. For an extensive reading of the novel see Britz (2007).

analysis of J.M. Coetzee's earlier novels, opts for "fiction-as-criticism". This implies that certain theoretical assumptions are articulated in the text under discussion (1988: 9):

[E]ngaging in the contemporary theoretical debate in a way that circumvents certain of the problems facing critics who adhere to more conventional forms of critical discourse. My purpose, then, is second degree criticism, of ... criticism-as-fiction within the context of contemporary theory, drawing attention to the theoretical issues the novels articulate and to the modes of novelistic discourse with which they engage.

Following this approach by Dovey, my reading of Van Niekerk's three novels will show that this reading does not constitute Kristevan psychoanalytic criticism but is based on the claim that the novels themselves constitute such criticism. Such an allegorical reading of a text could be regarded as producing mere reductive descriptions of the novels. It is my view that Van Niekerk's works show such an acute awareness of the reasoning behind Kristeva's whole project that one interpretation of her work could be to define it as allegories of Kristeva's theory of abjection.¹⁴

In my allegorical reading, three points elaborated by Becker-Leckrone (2005: 8) in her discussion of "Kristeva in the English Department" will be taken into consideration:

1. a commitment to rigorous and plural interdisciplinarity;
2. an understanding of texts as dynamic 'processes' involving forces previously deemed outside the boundaries of the literary work; and

¹⁴ Apart from the three novels translated into English, Van Niekerk has also published two collections of poetry in Afrikaans, a collection of short stories (*Die Vrou wat haar Verkyker Vergeet het* in 1992) and a postmodern novel consisting of four interrelated texts called *Die Sneeuslaper* in 2010 (Van Niekerk, 2010a). In 2010 the controversial play, *Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W*, which is a satire in the tradition of Juvenal, dealing with, among others, the rape of innocent children in post-apartheid South Africa, was staged (Van Niekerk, 2010a).

3. a self-consciousness that acknowledges the implication of critical discourse in that which it studies.

For Kristeva, reading is more than a mere application of theory to literature and she opts for the word “implication” (Kristeva, 1980: 94) to describe the interrelation between theory and text. Felman (in Becker-Leckrone, 2005: 17-18) develops this notion of “implication” further and comments as follows:

The notion of application would be replaced by the radically different notion of implication: ... the interpreter’s role would here be, not to apply to the text an acquired science, a preconceived knowledge, but to act as a go-between, to generate implications between literature and psychoanalysis – to explore, to bring to light and articulate the various (indirect) ways in which the two domains do indeed implicate each other, each one finding itself enlightened, informed, but also affected, displaced, by the other.¹⁵

In one of the first local attempts to engage with Kristeva’s theories when analysing English literature, Fotheringham (1990: 58) explains a Kristevan analysis as follows:

A Kristevan analysis is both the psychoanalysis of the subject and the analysis of the text: *semanalysis*. To be Kristevan, the approach must promise to show that the subject is a *sujet-en-procès*, that is, divested of ecological unity, and is caught in the dialectic of the signifying process – the contradiction of the symbolic and the semiotic. Concurrently, the analysis of the text must focus, as Kristeva’s does, on a poetic

¹⁵ Smith (1998: 69) comments on Kristeva’s idiosyncratic psychoanalytic practice evident in a reading of a poem by Nerval: “She does not only make no distinction between the poetic subject and Nerval but juxtaposes fragments of discourse of different origin and status until we are unsure whether she is reading this poem as a literary critic, a clinician or as a lyrical poet.” Examples of Kristevan readings of texts include Fotheringham (1990), Astore (2001), Bingelli (2009), Bousfield (2000), Crangle (2011), Czarnecki (2008), Drbal (2005), Harradine (2000), Howsam (2003), Peckham (2001) Pentony (1996), Powell (2005), Powrie (2003), Priest (2001) and Wilkie-Stibbs (2006) and Grogan (2011). Fotheringham (1990: 5) is of the opinion that “to undertake a Kristevan reading of a literary text is to embark on an arduous and hazardous voyage. Arduous, because it is to adopt a new vocabulary – one that is steeped in linguistics and the formulae of neo-Lacanian analysis, ... hazardous, because it is to attempt to speak in the voice of someone who has worked towards dissolving meaning and those very processes that once constituted ‘literary analysis’.”

practice which *devalues* meaning, propositions and words to the *advantage* of a rhythm, a music, a melody.

Part of this analysis is to focus on “the processes that have produced the text itself”, resulting in what could be described as “playful-critical madness”, coined to describe the critical mode associated with the so-called French Feminists (Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva), designated to “amuse, to disrupt the status quo, to re-politicize our thinking about the relationship between philosophy, writing and physicality” (Fotheringham, 1990: 205-288) The critical projects of these three French women are characterised by

this personal, confessional and poetic way of writing, where they directly address the reader as the other, the ‘you’ in an intimate relationship.

When analysing the interrelation between theory and text in this thesis, my assumption is that the reader is acquainted with the three novels under discussion. The discussions will focus on the elements of abjection in the three novels and show the implications of reading the texts through the lens of Kristeva, bearing in mind that for Kristeva, interpretation

involves examining how the work of art operates as a productivity that *exceeds* established rules or conventions. (Barrett, 2011: 34)

Barrett (2011: 97) is of the opinion that Kristeva’s emphasis on the “rites and rituals of defilement” is one way of exceeding established conventions, for example, with regard to femininity in a patriarchal society. As a spatial concept, abjection disturbs the boundaries between the child and the mother’s body, resulting in the latter becoming the first object to be abjected because of fear and loathing of the mother.

The readers of this present study should also take heed of the following self-reflexive remark by Gagiano (2000: 41):

The style of analysis adopted in [this thesis] relies on a thorough prior acquaintance with the texts discussed. Though the discussions may serve an introductory purpose in some ways, they are written on the distinct understanding that a great deal else is ‘happening’ in these texts that readers of the present study are assumed to be aware of – in order to judge the fitness of the choices of examples.

Readers should also take into consideration that although the theoretical framework of this thesis is grounded in psychoanalysis, I am not a trained psychoanalyst but a reader of literature, an issue raised by Chnaiderman (1981: 165-168). According to her, reading a text from a psychoanalytic perspective implies that one has to “free oneself from the fascination of a certain meaning articulated by a certain logic”, especially since the psychocritic reader does not subscribe to “the logic of meaning”. Based on Derrida’s assumption that there is no absolute origin of meaning, it even becomes necessary to rethink the concept of “scientific”. According to Wright (1999: 16-17), a psychoanalytic reading of a text

rests on the assumption that sexuality is the crucial factor in the constitution of the subject ... it relies on finding structural images in the mind, pointing to the way the present is determined by the past in terms of a subject’s sexual history. ... A psychoanalytic reading therefore primarily involves being alert to the presence of sexuality in the text. Since we are sexually identified by means of language and since we can be altered by language, we suffer the imprint of desires of others: every statement is a redirection of someone’s desire.

As will be discussed below, *desire* plays a major role in psychoanalysis and is distinguished from *need* and *demand*. The importance of language and the way in which language is inscribed by desire will also be examined.

Regarding the connection between psychoanalysis and literary theory, Homer (2005: 121) points out that in classical psychoanalytic criticism, the emphasis was on “the content of literary works and the psychology of the author or characters”, whereas Lacan focused on “the form and structure of the texts”. Literature provides “the language through which psychoanalysts can speak its concepts and its truths.” Brooks (1987: 334) is of the opinion that a psychoanalytic reading of a literary text “tells[s] us precious little about the structure and rhetoric of literary texts”. Cautious of the post-structuralist suspicion of providing a final interpretation or meaning to a text, he posits that a psychoanalytic reading of a literary text implies an intervention by the reader/analyst and that such an intervention “must also be subject to [our] suspicious attention”. Brooks (1987: 348) does not subscribe to the notion that psychoanalysis “imperialistically claims to explain literature” but, following Cave, he believes that “psychoanalysis may be nothing but literature” and the relation between literature and psychoanalysis is “nothing more than a play of intertextuality.” To substantiate this, he writes that

The critic has to make a transit through a systematic discourse elaborated to describe the dynamics of psychic process. ... Psychoanalysis is not an arbitrarily chosen intertext for literary analysis, but rather a particularly insistent and demanding intertext, in that crossing the boundaries from one territory to the other both confirms and complicates our understanding of how mind formulates the real ... to respond to the erotics of form, that is, to an engagement with the psychic investments of the rhetoric, the dramas of desire played out in tropes. (Brooks, 1987: 348)

Bennett, Murray and Lebeau (2006: 23) also consider different opinions on psychoanalysis and, to them, psychoanalysis

does raise difficult issues and arguably causes as many problems as it addresses. This is not just because it unsettles characters and texts. It also brings conflicts to the fore, both in individuals and in groups. It does so in a questionable as well as questioning way.

Taking the above as a cue to reading the texts, my approach is to locate the traces of the abject in Van Niekerk's novels and demonstrate to what extent the three texts under discussion reflect Kristeva's viewpoints on abjection, the relationship with the maternal body and related themes within Kristeva's critical project. Regarding the use of Kristeva's theory for my analysis, I concur with what Barnard (2004: 283-284) writes:

[O]ne also brings the oppressive discursive structures within which such ideas [i.e. European critical ideas] might originally have been framed into play. My response to such a charge is that literary theories are just as capable as any other cultural artefacts of being refashioned in new contexts ...

In the next chapter I will delineate the main themes in Kristeva's theoretical project and relate it to her views on abjection, and the third chapter will focus exclusively on what is meant by abjection and how it could inform a theoretical reading of the novels under discussion.

Chapter 2: An Exposition of Kristeva's Theories

Julia Kristeva changes the place of things: she always destroys the last prejudice, the one you thought you could be reassured by, could be take pride in; what she displaces is the already-said, the déjà-dit, i.e., the instance of the signified, i.e., stupidity; what she subverts is authority -the authority of monologic science, of filiation. – Roland Barthes

In this chapter, I outline the main concepts important to the textual analysis and argument in this thesis. I provide an overview of the critical themes forming the basis of Kristeva's oeuvre and finally undertake a close reading of *Powers of Horror – An Essay on Abjection* (1982), which forms the basis of my reading of Marlene van Niekerk's novels. Cognisant of the following remark by Fotheringham (1990: 1), I will engage in an extensive exposition of Kristeva's theories:

One of the chief difficulties confronting the reader of Kristeva's work is its highly intellectual nature and its demand for familiarity with a variety of schools of philosophy, psychoanalysis and linguistics. ... Kristeva's self-reflexive semiotics, in which theory and practice are inseparable, adds to her reader's confusion. Often Kristeva *seems* to adopt the terminology of the critical procedures of another theorist, when in fact she *re-writes* them with her own psychoanalytical slant. Kristeva's remarks often seem to emerge from nowhere ...

Because of the intellectual nature of Kristeva's writing, this chapter provides the reader with the context of her writing and aims to orientate the reader to the theoretical basis of my analysis. It is somewhat discomfiting to read a theory-centred approach to a literary text and discover that the critical text is merely interspersed with phrases from well-chosen quotes by a particular theorist – or the concepts are all relegated to mere footnotes at the bottom of the page, without the reader being familiar with the complex nuances of the critical project at

hand. This reading of Marlene van Niekerk's novels, I believe, employs a definite theoretical framework and readers thereof need to be familiar with the theoretical terms used in the subsequent chapters.

2.1 Who is Julia Kristeva?

Julia Kristeva was born in Bulgaria in 1941 and in 1965 went to Paris on a scholarship to study for her doctorate. She became involved with the "Tel Quel group"¹⁶ and later married the author Phillippe Sollers, who was the head of the group. Kristeva arrived in Paris just before the 1968 student protests and studied under Lucien Goldmann and later attended Roland Barthes' seminars. The French intellectual climate at the time was dominated by the publication of Lacan's *Ecrits* as well as Foucault's *Les Mots et les Choses (The Order of Things)* in 1966.¹⁷ Kristeva's interest in linguistics led to the completion of her doctorate in 1973, which was published in 1974 as *La Révolution du Langage Poétique*. Apart from an

¹⁶ Tel Quel was launched in 1960 by a group of French writers and their primary aim was "to disengage literature from the reigning ideologies of the post-war years" and to try to develop a critical theory that transcended disciplinary boundaries (French, 1995).

¹⁷ In her autobiographical essay, "My Memory's Hyperbole" (Oliver, 2002: 3-20), Kristeva describes the intellectual climate in France at the time as follows: "The particular climate of France at that time can be understood in sociological terms. The chasm between social archaism and intellectual advances gave the latter an autonomy that helped them grow. Furthermore, the independence of Gaullist nationalism gave freedom of thought a power unequalled elsewhere: outside of France, there was nowhere else in the world where one could, in the heart of the most official institutions and in the spotlight of the media, draw simultaneously on Marx, Saint Augustine, Hegel, Saussure and Freud." She goes on to call this "a universalistic cosmopolitan climate" but does point out that it had an "intrapsychic, sexual basis." Kristeva (2002a: 18) expresses her misgivings about the "ideology of pleasure" that ensued from the 1968 uprisings, calling it a belief in an "idyllic panacea."

interest in linguistics, Kristeva eventually studied psychoanalysis¹⁸ and later qualified as a psychoanalyst. In 1990, her first novel, *Les Samourais (The Samurai)*, was published.

2.2 Critical themes explored in Kristeva's writing¹⁹

Six critical themes form the basis of Kristeva's criticism, namely femininity and feminism, linguistics, motherhood and the maternal, Kristeva's non-Freudian version of psychoanalysis and nationhood, the individual and, importantly, identity. In the following sections, I briefly explicate and clarify each of these critical themes and show how they are interrelated and can be interpreted in the context of Kristeva's entire critical project. First, I will explore Kristeva's theme of femininity and feminism.

2.2.1 Femininity and feminism

Kristeva is often grouped together with Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig as the so-called "French Feminists", despite the fact that Kristeva does not call herself a feminist theorist *per se*. A common feature of French theories of feminism is their response

¹⁸ Psychoanalysis, according to Kristeva (in Oliver, 2002: 10), is "the locus of extreme abjection, the refuge of private horror that can be lifted only by an infinite-indefinite displacement in speech" and as a result she expanded her semiotic mode of thinking with a psychological approach.

¹⁹ I will focus on the broad themes delineated by Oliver (1993b). Kristeva (2002: 446-449) discusses the four themes that seem to have dominated the critical debate about her in the United States as intertextuality, the distinction between the symbolic and semiotic, the abject and abjection, as well as the theme of forgiveness.

to Derrida's deconstruction and Lacan's revision of Freudian theory.²⁰ There has always been somewhat of a precarious relationship between psychoanalysis and feminism, especially since feminist theorists such as Mary Ellmann and Kate Millett called Freudian psychoanalysis, "phallic criticism". Eventually, under the influence of the so-called French Feminists,

we have seen a way of thinking that appears to be at once feminist and psychoanalytic, and also highly literary. ... Psychoanalytic feminist criticism provides the vehicle which allows two heretofore unlikely couples to meet. (Gallop, 1987: 316)

Yet, despite this, it is particularly Kristeva's references to the maternal body and her emphasis on motherhood (see 2.2.3 below) that resulted in her work being described as reductionist and anti-feminist because it attempts to define women merely as mothers.²¹ The latter links to her preoccupation with the pre-oedipal body (that is, the body in its libidinal stage preceding the oedipal stage) and the mother's body as the site of the so-called semiotic *chora*, a term, derived from Plato's *Timaeus*, which refers not to a sign or a position but that which "precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularisation, and is analogous only to vocal and kinetic rhythm" (Kristeva, 1984: 26). Her emphasis on the role of the maternal

²⁰ See Ann Rosalind Jones (1985: 81). For an extensive discussion of French feminist theory see Marks and De Courtivron (1980). See Oliver (1993b: 165-68) for a discussion that engages with why both "French" and "feminist" are problematic terms. Smith (1998: 86) emphasises the importance of "singularity" and "individual identity and fulfilment" that characterises Kristeva's feminism. Spivak (1988: 134-153) criticises Kristeva's "masculinist ideology" and her anti-feminist stance.

²¹ See Doane and Hodges (1992: 6). Nancy Fraser (cited in McAfee, 2004: 78) criticises what she calls Kristeva's "quasi-biologicistic essentializing identification of women" and points out that Kristeva believes men touch base with their pre-oedipal residue "by writing avant-garde poetry; women do it by having babies." For a summary of the main points of criticism expressed by feminist critics see Oliver (1993b: 1-3).

body, especially during the pre-oedipal developmental stage of the child, challenges existing phallogocentric notions of development. Furthermore, Kristeva's writings about the body can be seen as an attempt to bring the body into critical discourse.

When discussing Kristeva's position regarding feminism, it is important to take note of the following distinction pointed out by Oliver (1993a: 111n1):

When American theorists and practitioners talk about feminism, they refer to a multifaceted conglomerate of different views and strategies that cannot be easily reduced to a single element. When French theorists and practitioners talk about feminism, however, they are referring to a specific political movement in France. So when Kristeva refuses to be identified as a feminist, this does not necessarily mean that she would not identify with some of the goals and strategies of feminism in the American context. Kristeva is critical of the French feminist movement that merely "replicates oppressive bourgeois logics and strategies for gaining power" (Oliver, 1993a: 111).

Essays pertaining to femininity in Kristeva's oeuvre include "Women's Time" in *New Maladies of the Soul* (1995)²² and "Illustrations of Feminine Depression" in *Black Sun* (Kristeva, 1989c).

In "Women's Time" Kristeva comments on tendencies within European feminist movements and identifies three phases of feminism: The first is associated with women up to May 1968; the second is since May 1968; and the third phase of feminists applies to those who challenge issues about identity and gender differences:

²² "Women's Time" was originally published in 1977 and a slightly updated version was reprinted in *New Maladies of the Soul*. The last paragraph was added to comment on a "post-feminist future" (Oliver, 2002: 299). McAfee (2004: 93) refers to it as one of the key essays by Kristeva in which she addresses the relationship between feminism and femininity.

The first generation is particularly linked to national concerns, and the second, which tends to be determined by the “symbolic denominator,” is European and trans-European ... against the backdrop of what has become a global generality, a European stance (or at least a stance taken by a European woman) has emerged (Kristeva, 1995: 204).

The emergence of these three phases of feminism are suggested by the title of the essay, namely that now it is women’s time to act, but the title is also ambiguous. Kristeva (1995: 205) associates the growth in feminism with women’s perceptions of “temporality” and distinguishes between cyclical and monumental temporality. On the basis of Joyce’s expression, “Father’s time, mother’s species”, Kristeva alleges that time is associated with the masculine, whereas the female is associated with “the space that generates the human species” (Kristeva, 1995: 204). Fundamental concepts relating to time are *repetition* and *eternity*, and Kristeva analyses female subjectivity as manifestations thereof.

The first generation of the women’s movement, consisting of the suffragists and existential feminists, disrupted the linear and chronological progress of time, whereas the second generation is characterised by “a quasi-universal rejection of linear temporality and by a highly pronounced mistrust of political life” (Kristeva, 1995: 208). The so-called “second phase” women are the psychologists and the artists who are interested in “the specificity of feminine psychology” and explore the “dynamic of signs.” The third generation of feminism is characterised by a questioning of “identity” and “sexual identity” (Kristeva, 1995: 222), resulting in destabilising the equilibrium underpinning gender difference. Kristeva uses the word *generation* to refer not so much to a group that follows chronologically on the previous

two but rather to a “signifying space, a mental space that is at once corporeal and desirous” (Kristeva, 1995: 222).

The first generation of feminists had to free themselves from the constraints of the house and enter the socio-political domain. Concomitant to that is a lack of desire for motherhood, whereas the second generation re-embraced it:

The desire to be a mother, which the previous generation of feminists held to be alienating or reactionary, has not become a standard for the current generation. Nevertheless, there is a growing number of women who find maternity to be compatible with their professional careers. ... women are finding that maternity is vital to the richness of female experience, with its many joys and sorrows. (Kristeva, 1995: 218)

This veneration of motherhood eventually results in what Kristeva (1995: 219) describes as “a return to religion”, a feminist religion centring around the Woman, Her Power and Her support, something which prompts Kristeva to remark: “In the Name of the Father, the Son – and the Woman?” (Kristeva, 1995: 221). On the one hand, one could appreciate this idea of a sisterhood and a reinterpretation of conventional religious structures, but on the other hand, it replaces a male-centred authoritarian order with a female-centred equivalent. One fascinating result of this essentialist approach to femininity is the prevalence of women terrorists, according to Kristeva (1995: 214). These women form part of a counter society and wish to replace existing democracies with a society founded on the principles of the archaic veneration of the Goddess. It could be interpreted as an example of reversed sexism in action.

Ideally, the third generation of feminists should not reject their male counterparts (Kristeva, 1995: 222) but try and establish some common ground from which to address their differences. Furthermore, the notion of “Woman” with a capital W no longer exists.²³ Whereas the more militant second generation grouped women together, the third generation emphasises “the specificity of each woman” (Kristeva, 1995: 210). Feminism no longer relegates men to the position of the evil Other but rather attempts to analyse “the fundamental separation of [one’s] own untenable identity” (Kristeva, 1995: 223).²⁴

Kristeva’s theory of the third generation of feminism moves away from the traditional approach of attacking patriarchy and singling out men as the culprits and reason behind all that is sexist and oppressive in society, particularly for women. Instead, both men and women are seen as human beings living together in what Kristeva describes as the sociosymbolic order. Elsewhere in *Powers of Horror* she describes feminism as “the last of the power-seeking ideologies” (Kristeva, 1982: 208) because of the preoccupation with obtaining phallic power. In several interviews Kristeva has commented on her position with regard to feminism, and in 1988, when asked what her relationship to the feminist movement was, she pointed out that her unease with the feminist movement is based on her discomfort with any “militant movements” (in Guberman, 1996: 7). The French feminist movement’s

²³ Kristeva (1995: 218) quotes Lacan’s “scandalous pronouncement” that “There is no such thing as Woman.” In an interview with *Psyche et Po* in 1974, Kristeva remarks that “one is a woman” is as meaningless as “one is a man” and “woman” should be seen as something “that cannot be represented or verbalized” (In Guberman, 1996: 98).

²⁴ According to Oliver (1993b: 156) both Kristeva and Butler share the idea that there “are not two types of sexed bodies” and that the representations of sexed bodies “do not limit us to be masculine or feminine.”

ideology alienated her and was according to her “simply another form of dogmatism.” Despite not being involved directly in the feminist movement, Kristeva was interested in the basic questions posed by feminism and, interestingly enough, these questions occupy her theoretical writings throughout her oeuvre:

The specificity of the feminine, the mother’s influence on her child’s development into an independent being, language acquisition, the child’s dependency on the mother, the mother’s role in language and symbolic processing, the nature of women’s writing and women’s art. (Kristeva, cited in Guberman, 1996: 7)

Another point of critique aimed against the feminist movement, according to Kristeva, is the way in which power is addressed. Is power merely transferred from men to women or is there a need for a new ideology to address this transference of power? Kristeva even regards identification with power as one of the reasons for the failure of the feminist agenda:

Such attempts make women into a counter power – filling gaps in official power – or into a promised land consisting of an ultimately harmonious society believed to consist only of women who know the truth about the mysteries of an imaginary society lacking any internal contradiction. (cited in Guberman, 1996: 105-6)

The above is a common theme in Kristeva’s writings on feminism, namely that women should guard against othering men because by doing so it results in merely copying and repeating the workings of patriarchal society. She appeals for recognition of women’s specificity and creativity.

The appeal to women’s creativity is repeated in the last paragraph of “Women’s Time”. It has also been rewritten and expanded in *New Maladies of the Soul*, with the following passage added:

And what is the meaning of the current 'politically correct' movement that has swept across the United States? European consciousness has surpassed such concerns, thanks, in some respects, to the dissatisfaction and creativity of its women. (Kristeva, 1995: 224)

The key element here is "creativity" because having explained the three generations of feminism, Kristeva comments on "the role of aesthetic practices" and the role of creative experiences to "highlight the diversity of our identifications" and the "relativity of our symbolic and biological existence" (Kristeva, 1995: 223). By tapping into the creative imaginary and reliving the experiences in the semiotic *chora*, not only do we undermine the strictures of man-made language but we also try to work out a new ethical way of thinking in order to overcome differences in society.

The second broad theme in Kristeva's work is that of linguistics, and since Kristeva is a practising psychoanalyst, we need to consider her views on linguistics against the background of her remark that "psychoanalysis considers every symptom as language" (1989: 266) and what is expressed by the subject during analysis forms the basis of therapy.

2.2.2 Linguistics

The titles of Kristeva's first books published in English already suggest the central role played by language in her work, namely *Revolution in Poetic Language*, and *Desire in Language*. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) Kristeva examines the semiotic and the symbolic and the influence of the semiotic *chora* on the psychosexual development of the subject. In the Introduction, Leon Roudiez (the translator) points out that Kristeva examines poetic language as a "signifying practice" (1984: 1) which emphasises the fact that language

is a “semiotic system generated by a speaking subject within a social, historical field.” Kristeva’s speaking subject is “the split subject of psychoanalytic theory, a subject divided between psychosomatic processes and social constraints” (Leland, 1989: 93), whereby the biodynamic processes refer to Freud’s view on oedipalisation, whereas in Lacan’s case, the Oedipus complex is a condition of culture.

Kristeva’s speaking subject is “the split subject of psychoanalytic theory, a subject divided between psychosomatic processes and social constraints” (Leland, 1989: 93), whereby the biodynamic processes refer to Freud’s view on oedipalisation, whereas in Lacan’s case, the Oedipus complex is a condition of culture.

The Oedipus complex is one of the cornerstones of psychoanalysis and according to Rycroft (1988: 105) refers to

[a] group of largely unconscious ideas and feelings centring round the wish to possess the parent of the opposite sex and eliminate that of the same sex. The complex emerges during the oedipal phase of libidinal and ego development, i.e. between the ages of three and five though manifestations may be present earlier. ... The complex is named after the mythical Oedipus, who killed his father and married his mother without knowing that they were his parents.

For example, the boy child will identify with his father and renounce his mother, which will eventually lead to a rediscovery of the mother in his adult sexual object. The rivalry between the boy and his father for the attention of the mother is also the cause of what Freud termed “castration anxiety”, which does not refer to castration in its anatomical, surgical sense (removal of the testes) but more frequently to either (a) loss of the penis – as in castration

threats used to deter little boys caught masturbating; (b) loss of capacity for erotic pleasure; or (c) demoralisation in respect of the masculine role (Rycroft, 1988: 15).

Lacan subscribes to Freud's views on the Oedipus complex, but one instance where he differs from Freud is his belief that "the subject always desires the mother, and the father is always the rival, irrespective of whether the subject is male or female" (Evans, 1996: 127).

For Kristeva (1984: 13), it is important to develop a new way of viewing the philosophy of language which, according to her, is "nothing more than the thoughts of archivists, archaeologists, and necrophiliacs." For this purpose she wants to "[explode] the subject and his ideological limits" (1984: 15) and focus on the relation between the subject and the body. Two modalities that play a vital role in the signifying process and that highlight the relation between the subject and the body are the semiotic and the symbolic (Kristeva, 1984: 24). We should note that for Kristeva, the subject is divided and always *en procès*, which could be interpreted as being-in-process or being constrained by the Law (*Der Prozeß*) imposed by social structures or the family. In order for the subject to express its needs and desires it requires language, yet language is associated with the symbolic, the realm of the patriarchal. In her revisionary approach to the psychosexual development of the subject, Kristeva includes the term *chora*, to refer to "a theoretical womb" or the "unrepresentable maternal Thing" (Oliver, 1993b: 144).

The mother's body plays an important role in this regard because it becomes the "ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*" (Kristeva, 1984: 27). The mother's body therefore becomes

significant because it contains this space where the infant is able to experience feelings and instincts and is able to communicate with the mother through rhythmic movements and pulsations. The subject-in-process does not have the linguistic capacity to name things or to use words and so this is its way of communicating.

Once the infant is separated from the body of the mother and as soon as the infant starts to learn language, he/she breaks with the semiotic *chora* (Kristeva, 1984: 47). The result of this break is that the subject now “confines his jouissance to the genital, and transfers semiotic motility onto the symbolic order” (Kristeva, 1984: 47). The subject finds him/herself now in the realm of language, of the signifier and of the impositions and preconditions of patriarchy.

Kristeva expresses admiration for the linguist Emile Benveniste, particularly because he is one of the few linguists who “incorporated Freud’s discoveries into his work” (cited in Guberman, 1996: 8). In an interview discussing her intellectual roots, Kristeva (cited in Guberman, 1996: 15-6) comments on the influence of Benveniste on her approach to linguistics:

Benveniste’s work is important because it shows the necessity of introducing the notion of the “subject” into linguistics. Chomskyan linguistics, even though it recognises the place of the speaking subject (although in its Cartesian form), has still remained very far behind the great semantic and intersubjective field within discourse that Benveniste’s perspective has opened up. What Benveniste wanted to found was not a grammar that generates normative sentences in limited situations. He wanted to institute a linguistics of discourse, and that is

what is happening now. In other words, the object, language, has completely changed. Language is no longer a system of signs, as Saussure thought of it, nor is language an object in the sense of generative grammar, that is, sentences generated by a subject presupposed to be Cartesian.²⁵

Benveniste's preoccupation with subjectivity in language has influenced the reasoning behind Kristeva's positing of the concepts of the speaking and the writing subject.²⁶

Kristeva initially developed her theory on the subject in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) and her several later essays could be read as further engagement with the theory on subjectivity.²⁷

Kristeva's interest in the position of the speaking subject started in reaction to the way in which it was treated by French structuralism. Her criticism is also aimed at Saussure, who

²⁵ The notion of the Cartesian subject alludes to Descartes' famous logical supposition, "Cogito ergo sum" and refers to the subject as unified and aware of the self. Man's existence is determined by his rationality (Klein, 1999). See Clarkson (2009) for an application of Benveniste's theory in her reading of J M Coetzee's novels.

²⁶ Compare Benveniste's remark that "in and through language man constitutes himself as a subject" and that the speaker has the capacity to position himself as a subject (Benveniste, 1971: 224). The linguistic status of the speaker determines his subjectivity and constitutes his ego. Important here is his remark about the splitting of the "I", which is a predominant feature of postmodern subjectivity: "There is no concept 'I' that incorporates all the I's that are uttered at every moment in the mouths of all speakers" (1971: 226). The use of pronominal words to refer to ourselves are always, according to Benveniste, "dialogical, relational and shifting" (Garman, 2009:183).

²⁷ See for instance Kristeva (1980: 124-147; 1986: 24-34). Oliver (1993b) examines the subject position in Kristeva's work extensively throughout her book.

ignored the speaking subject in his writings on linguistics.²⁸ Whereas the Cartesian subject is a unified ego, Kristeva's subject is one in process. In line with Benveniste's thinking, Kristeva (1984: 22) posits a so-called *subject of enunciation*, which she explains as follows:

This *subject of enunciation*, which comes directly from Husserl and Benveniste, ... introduces, through categorical intuition, both *semantic fields* and *logical* – but also *intersubjective – relations*, which prove to be both intra- and trans-linguistic.

Regarding the subject of enunciation, Kristeva alludes here to Lacan's distinction between the subject of enunciation and the subject of utterance, which, according to Homer (2005: 45), refers to the subject who speaks and the subject who is spoken, respectively. The "I" in speech does not refer to anything stable, and the "I" can be represented by the subject, the ego or the unconscious. For Lacan, the subject is a speaking being but he/she is also "divided, castrated, split" and is something represented by a signifier. Consequently, Evans (1999: 196) explains the different meanings of "subject" in the Lacanian context:

In philosophical discourse it denotes an individual self-consciousness, whereas in legal discourse, it denotes a person who is under the power of another (e.g. a person who is *subject to* the sovereign).

For Lacan, the philosophical connotations of the term *subject* are suggested by the Cartesian subject, "who appears at the moment when doubt is recognised as certainty" (Evans, 1999: 196).

²⁸ See Oliver (1993b: 91-92) for a discussion of the differences in opinion between Kristeva, Saussure and the French Structuralists. For Kristeva there is no unified subject and "there is more to the subject than the judging transcendental ego" (Oliver, 1993b: 92).

Kristeva's subject of enunciation or speaking subject is always a "phenomenological subject"²⁹ and associated with the transcendental ego (Kristeva, 1984: 23) but is also a divided subject. On the one hand, the speaking subject has to adhere to the principles of linguistics and societal prescriptions associated with the symbolic order, but on the other hand, s/he is also ruled by bodily desires and drives. Whereas the latter is generally overlooked by most linguists (other than psycholinguists),³⁰ Kristeva problematises the relationship between language and the body and in particular the relationship between the subject and the pre-oedipal raptures and pulsations in the *chora*. As a result, she prefers to talk about the subject-in-process because the subject is never homogenous and unified. The subject is disruptive because his/her use of "rhythmic, lexical, even syntactic changes" (Kristeva, 1984: 101) disturbs the "transparency of the signifying chain."

This shifting of subjectivity from a position of authority and ego-driven control to one that takes cognisance of pre-oedipal communication implies that when a reader interprets poetic language, for instance, there should be a consideration not only of meaning and signification but also of what "in the poetic function departs from the signified and the transcendental ego

²⁹ Phenomenology is "the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning (which represents the object) together with appropriate enabling conditions." (Smith, 2011)

³⁰ Kristeva (1980: 127) believes that traditionally linguists opened up "the gap between the signifier and the signified" and claimed a "logical, mathematical formalization" as the basis of language. Furthermore, she points out that structural linguists tend to eliminate the speaking subject. The subject should be regarded as "an operating consciousness" (Kristeva, 1980:131) and not only be associated with linguistic logic but also with "interlocutory relationships" – again a call for inclusion of the body and the subconscious mind in linguistic analysis.

and makes of what is known as ‘literature’ something other than knowledge.” (Kristeva, 1980: 132)

In contrast to the speaking subject, Kristeva also addresses the writing subject, through which the “forces” (1984: 7) that brought about a work are being channelled. The writing subject includes both the consciousness and the subconscious of the writer, as well as the non-conscious, referring to the ideologies and myths according to which we live. Based on her reading of Bakhtin, in particular his collaborative project with Medvedev on “sociological poetics”, Kristeva (1980: 68) observes that the “person-subject of writing” becomes problematic when taking into consideration that writing is “both communication and subjectivity.” Bakhtin regards any literary text as “a mosaic of quotations” and “any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva, 1980: 66), a notion which forms the basis of Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality.³¹

Kristeva is also indebted to Bakhtin for the ideas developed in her essay on abjection. Kristeva has always affirmed her indebtedness to Bakhtin and, in an autobiographical essay, she explains his influence as follows:

A post-formalist, he had introduced, through the carnival, Rabelais, Dostoevsky, and the polyphonics of the modern novel, the notion of alterity and dialogism into the arsenal of studies of formalism. (Kristeva, 2002: 9)

³¹ For an overview on the different perspectives on intertextuality as exemplified in the work of Bakhtin, Barthes and Kristeva, see Allen (2000).

When trying to establish a link between the two theorists, Bakhtin and Rabelais, Kristeva's references to the carnival and Rabelais are the most significant. In his *Rabelais and his World*, first published in Russian in 1965 and translated into English in 1968, Bakhtin examines the work of Rabelais and shows to what extent it can be described as carnivalesque writing. Holquist, in his prologue to *Rabelais and his World*, explains that the concept *carnival*

[i]s not only an impediment to revolutionary change, it is revolution itself. Carnival must not be confused with mere holiday or, least of all, with self-serving festivals fostered by governments, secular or theocratic. The sanction for carnival derives ultimately not from a calendar prescribed by the church or state, but from a force that pre-exists priests and kings and to whose superior power they are actually deferring when they appear to be licensing carnival. (Bakhtin, 1984: xviii)

Examining the typical features of the carnival, Bakhtin (1984: 5) delineates three distinct features, namely "ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions and various genres of Billingsgate". The latter is associated with what he describes as "the language of the marketplace" (1984: 145). Within the context of the carnival, cursing and swearing is permitted and there is no longer a distinction between the so-called high and low cultures.

Another feature of the carnivalesque is the emphasis on the so-called *grotesque* body, which according to Bakhtin (1984: 319), "copulates, defecates, overeats", and in which "men's speech is flooded with genitals, bellies, defecations, urine, disease, noses, mouths, and dismembered parts." The so-called "lower stratum" of the body is exaggerated during the carnival, because as Bakhtin (1984: 401) points out, hierarchies of top and bottom and higher and lower (as associated with Heaven and Hell or Good and Evil) played important roles in

medieval art and culture. Bakhtin has shown that there is a fundamental dialogism, a basic bivalence in any speech, word, or utterance in novels stemming from the carnivalesque tradition (Dostoevsky's novels, for instance.)

When reading Bakhtin, it is noteworthy how most of the ideas expressed in *Rabelais and his World* resonate in Kristeva's study on abjection. She does refer to Bakhtin's views in *Powers of Horror* when discussing the work of Céline but her study of abjection does not necessarily engage with his work but more with Mary Douglas's (2002 [1966]) anthropological studies:

In my opinion most of the characteristics of the carnival described by Bakhtin underpin Kristeva's essay on abjection because she also focuses on the grotesque and the irreverent. Bakhtin emphasises the effect of laughter and humour during the carnival and believes that during the spectacle of carnival, "the universal character of laughter was most clearly and consistently brought out in the carnival rituals" (Bakhtin, 1984: 88). Kristeva also comments on laughter and its association with the abject, but in her discussion of Céline, she calls it "apocalyptic laughter" (Kristeva, 1982: 204). Even the fear of the apocalypse is repressed during carnival because, according to Kristeva,

Carnival ... does not keep to the rigid, that is, moral position of the apocalyptic inspiration; it transgresses it, sets its repressed against it – the lower things, sexual matters, what is blasphemous and to which it holds while mocking the law.(1982: 205)

2.2.3 Motherhood and the maternal

In the preceding section, I discussed the role of the maternal body in relation to language, and in this section, I wish to focus on other aspects of Kristeva's preoccupation with motherhood.³² Two central essays in this regard are "Motherhood according to Bellini" (*Desire in Language*, 1980: 237-270) and "Stabat Mater" (Moi, 1986: 160-186; also in *Tales of Love*, 1987).

In "Motherhood according to Bellini" Kristeva examines a series of paintings of the Virgin and Child by Bellini. Her focus falls primarily on the relationship between the infant and the maternal body. Motherhood and "becoming-a-mother" in Kristeva's epistemology is dominated by two discourses, namely, a scientific discourse that turns the maternal body into an object of study and a Christian theological discourse (predominantly Roman Catholic) where the mother is depicted, in the case of Bellini, as a "vessel of divinity" (Kristeva, 1980: 237). Within the Christian discourse, the maternal body is associated with virginity, and the veneration of Mary is based on the model of her giving birth as a virgin. The maternal body, according to Kristeva, is also "the place of a splitting" (Kristeva, 1980: 238). In her discussion of Bellini's Madonna and Child paintings, Kristeva distinguishes between the mother as an object of desire and the role played by the so-called maternal function.³³

³² Pakin-Gounelas (2001: 172) describes this preoccupation with the maternal as "matricentric". In her essay on female genius, Kristeva (2002b: 402) regards motherhood as "the most essential of the female vocations and in future mothers will be "our only safeguard against the wholesale automation of human beings."

³³ Wiseman (1993) comments extensively on Kristeva's theory on interpreting Bellini's work from an aesthetic point of view, whilst Kaplan (1992 :41) points out that Kristeva's reading of Bellini's imagery supports the

The maternal function is best explained by the difference in the depiction of the Madonna by Leonardo da Vinci and Giovanni Bellini respectively. Kristeva provides a short biographical summary of both artists and points out that in the case of Leonardo da Vinci, one finds evidence of him experiencing “double motherhood” (Kristeva, 1980: 244): he was taken from his mother and raised by a stepmother. Furthermore, Da Vinci also had a very authoritarian father, and the latter played a major role in his decision to turn from art to science later in life. Rather than exploring the maternal in his work, Da Vinci opted for scientific experimentation. In contrast, Bellini’s paintings reveal a maternal function that “unlike the mother’s solicitude in Leonardo’s paintings toward the baby-object of all desire, was merely ineffable *jouissance*” (Kristeva, 1980: 247). Bellini’s Madonnas always look away from the infant and are absent, dead and mute. According to Kristeva, Bellini’s father was overbearing and overpowering and this explains why the maternal body is depicted as absent, filled with a sense of unease towards the infant and, as such, distant and cold.

The preoccupation with the maternal body is also the central theme of “Stabat Mater”, the title of which alludes directly to the hymn to the Virgin Mary: “Stood the Mother, full of grief.”³⁴ At the outset of her essay “Stabat Mater”, Kristeva (1986: 161) comments on what

assumption that a male artist such as Bellini can identify with the mother’s *jouissance* and to some extent recreate it in his art work.

³⁴ In her introduction to this essay, Moi (1986: 160) summarises its essence as follows: “[T]his essay on the cult of the Virgin Mary and its implication for the Catholic understanding of motherhood and femininity ... [It] coincides with Kristeva’s own experience of maternity, recorded and reflected in the personal observations which break up the main body of the text.” Kristeva uses the cult of the Virgin Mary to explain how it “allows women to satisfy the needs of feminine paranoia” (Doane & Hodges, 1992: 63) as well as address the issue of the “homosexual identification with the mother.” According to Harrington (1998: 142) the use of the two

she calls the paradox of being a mother, especially since most people believe that the only function of women as the other sex is to bear children. From a Christian viewpoint³⁵, motherhood is associated with the veneration of the maternal body of the Holy Virgin and as such is “a fantasy that is nurtured by the adult, man or woman” (Kristeva, 1986: 161). There is an envisaged idealised relationship between people and this goddess-like mother figure and the Mother Mary has become what Kristeva (1986: 165) calls “a prototype of love relationships”, which fits the entire range “from sublimation to asceticism and masochism.” Through a close analysis of the representation of the Virgin through the ages, Kristeva concludes that Mary is both mother and daughter of Christ, and in her position as *Maria Regina*, wearing a crown, she is a source of power and authority. As the so-called *fons amoris*, she represents both divine and earthly love. The body of the Virgin is always swathed in a full blue dress but often one breast is visible and as such links her body with nutrition and mother’s milk. In her role as *Mater Dolorosa*, Mary is allowed to shed tears over the dead body of her son and both milk and tears are “privileged signs’ (Kristeva, 1986: 173) associated with the cult of the Virgin Mary.

Kristeva uses the different symbolic associations with Mother Mary as the basis for her discussion of the desire for motherhood. Freud states that the desire for motherhood is “a

columns by Kristeva in this essay suggests “ a birth: between the one voice and the other emerges the child who perhaps always is *not* or *not yet*, and whose story, like the abject, can only be told in the scar that is an empty space on the page. Kristeva’s subject grows out of that scar and speaks only in mute configurations.”

³⁵ Perhaps one should clarify that this refers to the Roman Catholic and Orthodox religious traditions, because in the Protestant tradition there is no veneration of Mary, which has resulted, as Kristeva (1986: 168) observes, in “a lack with respect to the Maternal.”

transformation of either penis envy or anal drive” and Kristeva (1986: 178) links her analysis of the various representations of Mary to his theory.³⁶ Based on this, Kristeva (1986: 180-181) shows the association between the virginal maternal and how to deal with feminine paranoia, but she does caution that a woman who wants to emulate the feminine ideal embodied by the Virgin “could only be a nun, a martyr or, if she is married, one who leads a life that would remove her from the earthly condition and dedicate her to the highest sublimation alien to her body.”

A central issue that she wants to clarify, having studied the representation of Mary, however, is:

What are the aspects of the feminine psyche for which that representation of motherhood does not provide a solution or else provides one that is felt as too coercive by twentieth-century women? (Kristeva, 1986: 182)

Aspects such as “the unspoken”, “feminine perversion” and the “war between mother and daughter” are not solved by the representation of Mary’s idealised motherhood. The female child has to break the ties with the maternal body because only by doing so will she be assured of a position in the male-dominated symbolic order. The mother plays an important role in this regard because she is the one who has to prepare the daughter for this and as such she could be seen as being “in the service of male dominating power” (Kristeva, 1986: 183).

³⁶ In his lecture on femininity Freud (1973: 158-63) posits the theory of penis envy as a counterpart for the male castration complex theory. Girls, when faced with the genitals of the opposite sex “feel wronged” and also want to possess “something like that.” Kristeva (1995: 211-212) describes penis envy as an imaginary construct, a hypothesis and a necessary *a priori* in order to explain “the origin” in neurotic discourse. It forms part of the primal scene necessary to start somewhere when undertaking an analysis of a neurotic patient.

The fact that mothers are seen as being in the service of the patriarchal machinations in society probably explains why feminists view the desire to be a mother as reactionary. Yet, as Kristeva (1986: 205) observes, women are now able to be both career women and mothers, and fathers have become more and more involved in taking care of their children. Women who do not experience motherhood, according to Kristeva, opt for a return to religion to satisfy “the anguish, the suffering and the hopes of mothers” (1986: 206). Another way of coming to terms with a childless existence is to explore the imaginary aesthetic world of the arts and literature in particular. In Kristeva’s analysis of women’s writing in this essay, one detects a sense of scepticism because she blames the “feminist label” for several works of “naïve whining or market-place romanticism”, characterised by a constant writing against “Language and Sign as the ultimate supporters of phallographic power” (1986: 207) – only to serve a particular anti-patriarchal women-centred ideology.

Motherhood (and the portrayal of the mother figure) plays an essential role in the three novels under discussion in this thesis. Van Niekerk’s mothers are not Kristeva’s mothers, who celebrate their roles as mothers and for whom maternal *jouissance* is indeed a mixture of pleasure and pain. In the case of Mol, the mother figure in *Triomf*, her pregnancy is the result of an incestuous relationship with her two brothers. The baby borne out of this union is a monstrous and abject child who, when older, uses his mother to fulfil his sexual desires. Milla, the mother figure in *Agaat*, continues her own mother’s phallic regime when she inherits the farm, and when she gives birth to her son, it provides her with the opportunity to estrange herself from her husband. The mother figure in *Memorandum* cannot accept the fact

that one of her twin sons has died. The living son is constantly reminded of her loss and feels as if she wants him to fulfil her desire for the lost child-object through him.

2.2.4 Kristeva's non-Freudian psychoanalysis

Kristeva's interest in psychoanalysis is evident throughout her oeuvre. Not only does it inform most of her theoretical approaches but her analyses are juxtaposed with case studies from her work as a trained psychoanalyst. Psychoanalysis is to her "the discourse of the intellectual life" (Guberman, 1996: 197) because intellectuals experience "existential uneasiness" and "intellectual discomfort" and psychoanalysis is a response to that.

Throughout her writing Kristeva, pays tribute to Freud and eventually starts to develop his points further. These range from his views on female sexuality, melancholia and narcissism to psychosexual development of the child. There is also a revision of Lacan (and Melanie Klein to a lesser extent) and one could even go as far as calling her writing a battle with the patriarchs of psychoanalysis! In the case of Freud, she takes him to task for his views on motherhood, and in the case of Lacan, his model of psychosexual development and his views on the subject are criticised – as I explain below.³⁷

Freud

The major differences between Kristeva and Freud are as follow:

³⁷ According to Ives (2010: 105), Kristeva's abject has "a Lacanian subtext". The abject relates to "Lacan's lack and *objet petit a*."

- a) Kristeva considers that pregnancy and childbirth reunite a woman and her mother whereas Freud maintains that childbirth is motivated by penis envy.
- b) Kristeva claims that the maternal body locates its jouissance in femininity and maternity itself, whereas Freud insists that the maternal body is always defined in relation to masculine sexuality (www. Eng.fju.edu.tw).
- c) Kristeva believes that a woman wants a baby as an antidote to feminine fatigue, whereas Freud implies that a woman wants to give birth to a male child to satisfy her penis envy (Oliver, 1993b:1).

Smith (1999: 7-8) argues that Kristeva is “a committed Freudian in the French sense of the term and that Freud is certainly in a more comfortable position in France” because in the USA and Britain he is often the target of those who regard psychoanalysis as “non-scientific” and lacking empiricism.

Central essays that show Kristeva’s critical encounters with Freud include “Freud and love: Treatment and its discontents” (*Tales of Love*) and two essays from *Black Sun*, namely, “Psychoanalysis: A counterdepressant” and “Illustrations of feminine depression.” As is evident from the titles of these two essays from *Black Sun* (Kristeva, 1989c), the emphasis is on depression and melancholy. The essays also show the use of psychoanalysis as a “counterdepressant” in the treatment of depression.³⁸ Antidepressants only treat the

³⁸ See Beardsworth (2004:107-8) for a discussion of Kristeva’s view on psychoanalytic therapy as counterdepressant. Beardsworth is also one of the first to discuss Kristeva’s psychoanalytic writings. In the

symptoms of depression but psychoanalysis can treat the causes (Kristeva, 1989c: 10). The basis of her inquiry is to examine depression and melancholy “from a Freudian point of view” (Kristeva, 1989c: 10) and how psychoanalysis can assist the analysand to deal with the loss of the maternal body (see also 7.3.3. below).

The discussion of psychoanalysis as a counterdepressant starts on a personal note with Kristeva writing “out of that very melancholia” (Kristeva, 1989c: 3) she has experienced and explaining what could have triggered her feeling of depression. She does, however, acknowledge that often the events that trigger such feelings are “out of proportion to the disaster that suddenly overwhelms [her]” (Kristeva, 1989c: 4). The child experiences his/her earliest form of depression when s/he is separated from his mother in order for him/her to start using language. All throughout life, s/he is playing and replaying what I would call a type of *fort-da* game with the maternal body, because s/he constantly wants to return to the maternal closeness, only to feel sickened by it and abjecting it. The child develops what is described in Freudian terms as an “impossible mourning for the maternal object” (Kristeva, 1989c:9) but underneath the experiencing of mourning and depression, there is also concealed aggression towards the lost object. The ambivalence experienced by the depressed person is explained by Kristeva (1989c: 11) as follows:

‘I love the object,’ is what that person seems to say about the lost object, ‘but even more so I hate it; because I love it, and in order not to lose it, I imbibed it in myself; but

second part of her study on thresholds as metaphors in Kristeva’s work, Keltner (2011) also focuses on her work as psychoanalyst.

because I hate it, that other within myself is a bad self, I am bad, I am non-existent, I shall kill myself’.

In order to distinguish between the object and this so-called lost object, Kristeva (1989c: 13) calls the latter “the Thing” because it does not “lend itself to signification” and because it is not the real object of desire. Here Kristeva alludes to Lacan’s so-called *objet petit a*, which according to Lacan refers to the “leftover, the remainder (Fr. *reste*), the remnant left behind by the introduction of the symbolic in the real. *Objet petit a* is any object which sets desire in motion, especially the partial objects which define the drives” (Evans, 1996: 124-125).

When depressed, the sufferer experiments for example with love relationships to ward off such despair, only to realise that it does not provide a solution to the problem, resulting in a retreat ‘with the unnamed Thing’.(Kristeva, 1989c: 13)

The unnamed Thing can, however, also be turned into an “object of desire” (Kristeva, 1989c: 14) because during the presymbolic stage, when the child is closely associated with the language of the *chora*, it tries to make sense of the Thing. The imagination of the child plays a major role in turning the Thing into an object to be loved. Depression occurs when the child cannot disassociate itself from the Thing and, according to Kristeva (1989c: 27), committing matricide “is our vital necessity”, to experience both a biological and psychic loss of the mother.

The inability of women to commit matricide is one reason why Kristeva (1989c: 29) describes female sexuality as a depressive sexuality.³⁹ It is very difficult for women to commit matricide because it would imply “putting to death of the self.” The maternal object will always be part of the female psyche, and in a metaphor that verges on necrophilia, Kristeva describes it as a death-bearing image locked into the “crypt” of the psyche (Kristeva, 1989c: 30).

The female obsession with the maternal Thing as lost object also affects her experience of *jouissance*. *Jouissance*, according to Roudiez, in his introduction to *Desire in Language*, was first used in English by William Dodd in a poem in 1767 and one of the definitions of the word is “enjoyment”. In French the word has retained its sexual connotations (*jouir* means “to come”) and is to be distinguished from *plaisir*. Lacan (1979: 183-5) uses the term not only to denote pleasure and enjoyment but he also associates it with what is “beyond the pleasure principle”. It verges on something like unbearable pleasure. Ragland (1995: 11) explains it as conveying “the dual meaning of orgasm as pleasure in union, as well as the loss experienced in coming to the end of the moment of bliss.” Kristeva (1980: 16) also relates *jouissance* to the presence of meaning: *J’ouïs sens* – I hear meaning.

Kristeva (1989c: 78) distinguishes two types of *jouissance* possible for a woman:

³⁹ Oliver (1993b: 64) explains this as follows: “[Kristeva] suggests that part of the reason why feminine sexuality is melancholy is because within our heterosexist culture a woman cannot have a mother-substitute as an object of desire in the way that a man can. In other words, feminine sexuality is melancholy because it is fundamentally homosexual and must be kept a secret within a heterosexist culture.”

On the one hand there is phallic *jouissance* – competing or identifying with the partner’s symbolic power – which mobilizes the clitoris. On the other hand, there is an *other jouissance* that fantasy imagines and carries out by aiming more deeply at psychic space, and the space of the body as well. That other *jouissance* requires that the melancholy object blocking the psychic and bodily interior literally be liquefied.

The loving partner has to undertake the function of killing the mother and playing the role of the life-giver (Kristeva, 1989c: 79). The partner has the power to limit the maternal hold over the female subject. Should the partner, for instance, desert his lover or be unfaithful it is deemed “an assault on her genitality” by women, amounting to female castration (Kristeva, 1989: 81). In discussing this facet of women’s experience, Kristeva finds it necessary to distinguish between the penis and the phallus. Whereas the former refers to the biological male sex organ – “even though a woman has no penis to lose” (Kristeva, 1989c: 82) – the latter refers to a symbolic construct, the signifier of male power. In the case of women, the psyche is associated with the female phallus and any castration threatens to “empty her whole psychic life” (Kristeva, 1989c: 82). One way of preventing this hollowing out of the psyche is to find a way in which to reunite the subject with the lost object, the Thing, and one way of doing that is to undergo analysis to restore “desire within the patient’s psychic territory” (Kristeva, 1989: 83) and accept the unconscious desire for the mother.

However, the task of finding the correct partner who has to commit matricide on behalf of the female subject proves to be quite an endeavour. Consider Kristeva’s comment in this regard:

One cannot overemphasize the tremendous psychic, intellectual, and affective effort a woman must make in order to find the other sex as erotic object. In his philogenetic musings, Freud often admires the intellectual accomplishment of the man who has been

(or when he is) deprived of women (through glaciation or tyranny on the part of the father of the primal horde. ... If the discovery of her invisible vagina already imposes upon woman a tremendous sensory, speculative, and intellectual effort, shifting to the symbolic order *at the same time* as to a sexual object of a sex other than that of the primary maternal object represents a gigantic elaboration in which a woman cathezes a psychic potential greater than what is demanded of the male sex. (Kristeva, 1989c: 30)

From this we deduce that a woman has to make a sacrifice when choosing a partner of the opposite sex because she has to let go of “the primary maternal object” that she desires. Freud does not share Kristeva’s admiration for women’s efforts in trying to establish herself as an independent and intellectual equal and is more in favour of a man who can survive without a woman. Other than the man who is bearer of the visible penis/phallus, she has to discover her “invisible vagina” and experience “the other *jouissance*” associated with her body and its sensations.

Lacan

In discussing the role of psychoanalysis and women’s rights with Boucquey in 1975, Kristeva, who constantly reiterates the role of the mother in the psychosexual development of the child, remarks as follows about Lacan:

Lacan claimed that the decline of the father’s image and the increased role of the mother create a crisis because they encourage the return of the repressed⁴⁰ to take on some dangerous and totalitarian forms. The psychoanalytic response to this crisis in the monotheistic regulation of the Western family has been to specify and to reinterpret the authority of the law – not ‘dad’s’ authority but the Name of the Father, since the

⁴⁰ “The return of the repressed” is a Freudian term referring to those instinctual desires that we repress but which continually return or threaten to return in our dreams, thoughts or language.

returned repressed was obviously repressed, it is obliged to disobey the paternal law. (cited in Guberman, 1996: 108)

Lacan's reference to "the increased role of the mother" illustrates the main point of difference between him and Kristeva.⁴¹ Kristeva rereads Lacan's theory on the "Symbolic Order" and posits the semiotic *chora* (as explained under 3.2.1 above) and emphasises the pre-oedipal stage. In his re-interpretation of Freud, Lacan identifies the mirror stage during the development of the child. During this stage, the child develops a sense of "I" when it is confronted by its image in a mirror, which is not necessarily a literal mirror, but any reflective structure such as its mother's face (Homer, 2005: 24). As a result the child subject becomes dependent on external objects such as the mother and the image that it has of himself is seen as his Ideal-I (Lacan, 2006: 75-81). Taylor (2006: 57) observes that for Lacan the mirror stage "remains a repression of pulsions, drives and maternal identification."

According to McAfee (2004: 35), Kristeva differs from Lacan about when the infant begins to differentiate itself from its mother. She places the break before the mirror stage, when the infant begins to expel (abject) that which it finds "unpalatable".⁴²

The end of the mirror stage indicates for Lacan (2006: 79) the beginning of "the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations." Kristeva is in agreement with

⁴¹ Schmitz (2005: 70) believes that "quite a lot in Kristeva reminds us of Lacan" and that Kristeva has modified some of his terms. The main difference between the two is their difference in opinion on the development of language.

⁴² See also Barzilai (1991) for a discussion of Kristeva's critique of Lacan.

Lacan regarding the theories of the mirror stage, castration, the oedipal situation and sexual difference but differs from him when she examines the logic of signification before the onset of the mirror stage. She is also critical of Lacan's insistence on a structured language that is only associated with the symbolic order as well as his negation of the type of language associated with the maternal *chora*. The break with the semiotic occurs during what Kristeva describes as the *thetic* moment (Kristeva, 1984: 43).

The term *thetic* is borrowed from Husserl (1859-1938), who was the founder of phenomenology, which “has us focus on the essential structures that allow the objects naively taken for granted in the ‘natural attitude’ (which is characteristic of both our everyday life and ordinary science) to ‘constitute themselves’ in consciousness” (Smith, 2008). Kristeva (1984: 43) explains *thetic* as follows:

We shall distinguish the semiotic (drives and their articulations) from the realm of signification, which is always that of a proposition or judgment, in other words, a realm of *positions*. This positionality, which Husserlian phenomenology orchestrates through the concepts *doxa*, *position* and *thesis*, is structured as a break in the signifying process, establishing the *identification* of the subject and its object as preconditions of propositionality. We shall call this break, which produces the positing of signification, a *thetic* phase. All enunciation, whether of a word or a sentence, is thetic. It requires an identification; in other words, the subject must separate from and through his image, from and through his objects. This image and objects must first be posited in a space that becomes symbolic because it connects the two separated positions, recording them or redistributing them in an open combinatorial system.

The child starts to communicate through gestures and phrases – but not in full sentences.

These utterances are thetic because they “separate an object from the subject and attribute it to a semiotic fragment” (Kristeva, 1984: 43). When the child says *woof-woof* for a dog and subsequently to all animals, it shows that the child attributes certain sounds to animals and

realises that it is in a position of difference to the maternal object and the animals that it is trying to “name”. The thetic phase is also “the threshold” between the semiotic and the symbolic (Kristeva, 1984: 49).

In the social order there are two types of “events” that one could see as counterparts of the thetic moment, namely, sacrifice and art (Kristeva, 1984: 75). Sacrifice is associated with the thetic break because it suggests a violent end to something: In the case of the child’s acquisition of language, it underpins the “structural violence of language’s irruption” to end the rhythmic and somatic communication between the maternal object and the child.⁴³ This process is also associated with “a violent and unmotivated leap” (Kristeva, 1984: 78) in order to enter the realm of language.

Referring to the Dionysian festivals in ancient Greece, Kristeva (1984: 79) maintains that they serve as a good example of the “dissolution” of the symbolic order because by expressing themselves through dancing and singing and poetry, they “[crack] the socio-symbolic order, splitting it open, changing vocabulary, syntax, the word itself.” One could draw a parallel here with the Mediaeval west-European “carnival”, which also disrupted the symbolic order with ribald fun and mockery.

⁴³ Oliver (1993b: 40) argues that sacrifice is violent in this case because “the victim’s body is sacrificed for the sake of the Symbolic.”

The thetic, as expressed through art, does not always demand sacrifice and in the case of the Greek festivals show to what extent *jouissance* can infiltrate and disrupt the symbolic. This is in contrast to religion, in which language is used to prohibit *jouissance* (Kristeva, 1984: 80).

For example, in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*, the interaction between Milla de Wet and her young servant girl Agaat is an illustration of the child as a subject-in-process trying to communicate with the maternal object. At first, Agaat is mute and refuses to speak, but then Milla starts to sing to her, familiarise her with nursery rhymes, and eventually the child begins to speak. This learning process is described by Milla as follows: "We sing, we talk, rhymes, songs. Not real sentences yet, but better than nothing" (A, 523). According to Milla, the reason for teaching Agaat is because "[w]e are getting you ready for life" (A, 480)

The teaching of Agaat starts out in a pre-linguistic space because the subject-in-process refuses to speak and the maternal object relies on rhymes (A, 475) to teach her. The rhythm of the rhyme is also tapped out on the table but the child does not respond. Eventually, the subject is alerted to visual stimuli, but when she does not respond in words, the maternal object reprimands her: "She must simply learn to speak now. You can't live by looking alone" (A, 484).

In order to force the child to use language, she resorts to punishment with the feather duster – and to add to its phallic symbolism, it is given a male name, Japie. If the child refuses to respond to the mother in any way, she is "rap[ped] with the stick of the feather duster" (A, 484).

The child's entry into the symbolic realm of the Father and language is aptly demonstrated in the passage where Ds Van der Lught commends Milla for taking care of Agaat (A, 487). However, what makes this interaction even more significant is the fact that he is the one who decides on a name for Agaat:

The nicknames with which she grew up in her own home, he just shook his head, was immediately helpful, took thick reference books off his shelf. 'Agaat', he suggested then. Odd name, didn't know it at all, but then he explained, it's Dutch for Agatha, it's close to the sound of Agaat with the guttural 'g', it's a semi-precious stone, I say, quite, he says, you only see the value of it if it's correctly polished, but that's not all, look with me in the book here, it's from the Greek 'agathos' which means 'good'. And if your name is good, he says, it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. Like a holy brand it will be, like an immanent destiny, the name on the brow, to do good, to want to be good, goodness itself. (A, 487)

Ds Van der Lught (whose name literally translated means, "from the air" or "from above") represents the Name-of-the-Father, the fundamental signifier who is naming the subject-in-process and in doing so allows her entry into the symbolic order. By having the Dominee name her, she enters into a subject position determined by the church and its ideology. Incidentally, the church at the time (the 1950s in South Africa) was racially divided but always felt that it had a missionary task towards the black Other. Within this context, Milla's actions are interpreted as fulfilling her missionary obligations towards the church and God. The subject is forced to accept the conditions of the symbolic and break with the pre-linguistic, semiotic space associated with rhymes, rhythms and looking at things, without naming them. This process is described by Jameson (cited in Dovey, 1988: 164-165) as follows:

That a name, no matter how confused, designates a particular person – this is precisely what the passage to the human state consists in. If we must define that moment in which man [*sic*] becomes human, we would say that it is at that instant when, as minimally as you like, he enters into a symbolic relationship. It would seem fair to observe that Lacan’s attention to the components of language has centred on those kinds of words, primarily names and pronouns, on those slots which, like the shifters generally, anchor a free-floating syntax to a particular subject, those verbal joints, therefore, at which the intersection of the subject into the Symbolic is particularly detectable.

The named subject Agaat is closely observed by the mother to establish whether she is talking and using language. The first attempts are repetitions of the rhymes taught to her but the major breakthrough comes when she repeats her newly given name:

Then it came into my ear, like the rushing of my own blood, against the deep end of the roof of her mouth, a gentle guttural-fricative, the sound of a shell against my ear, the g-g-g of Agaat. ... Then we said her name at the same time. Sweet, full in my mouth, like a mouthful of something heavenly. Lord my God, the child You have given me. (A, 520-521)

In the light of the above discussion, this is the so-called *thetic phase* in the life of the subject, who has reached the threshold between the semiotic and the realm of language. The emerging subject is separated from the semiotic *chora* with its rhymes and rhythms and has to establish a link with the realm of language and signification.

Agaat, the character, is a fictional construction of the so-called “inexpressible child”, who according to Kristeva (1995: 103-112), has problems expressing himself or herself in language and who has to be exposed to language through music or by listening to stories and fairy tales told by the mother. By listening to these stories, the “necessary preconditions for linguistic categories” (Kristeva, 1995: 103) are created by the child in the presence of the analyst.

2.2.5 Nationhood, the individual and identity

The issues of nationhood and identity form the basis of Kristeva's later books, in particular *Stranger to Ourselves* (1989), *Nations without Nationalism* (1993) and *Crisis of the European Subject* (2000). In the essay "Toccatà and fugue for the foreigner", Kristeva (2002) writes about the foreigner who longs for the motherland and the use of the mother-tongue. The title alludes to Bach's compositions because, in the words of Kristeva,

[his] compositions evoke to my ears the meaning of an acknowledged and harrowing otherness that I should like to be contemporary, *because* it has been brought up, relieved, disseminated, inscribed in an original play being developed, without goal, without boundary, without end. An otherness barely touched upon and that already moves away. (Kristeva, 2002: 265-6)⁴⁴

The central tenet of Kristeva's (2002: 264) essay is that "the foreigner lives with us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks abode", which implies that we carry the foreigner within ourselves. What is a foreigner? To a certain extent, in poetic terms, Kristeva (2002: 264) opens her essay with three possible "definitions": "a choked up rage

⁴⁴ Sedgley (2007) examines the history of the toccata and maintains that the link between the toccata and being foreign in Kristeva's essay is as follows: "As we trace the evolution of the new musical form we can see a parallel with the situation of foreigners entering the scene and their discordances putting pressure on society to be accommodated. In the music these discordances are overcome and creatively assimilated; they develop into a richer and more complex musical scheme which many would agree has come to represent a pinnacle of achievement in Western music. The strands that weave their way through the music express their potential but without conflict between them. But just as the purity of the plainsong is maintained by the discipline of the singers, so has the integrity of the unconflicting complex interaction between the instrumentalists been maintained by the composer. The participants have achieved an equality to express their differences repetitively without conflict; and this in turn has enhanced the potential of what the composer could achieve with his musicians as a group of performers." (www.sofia.org.)

deep down in my throat, a black angel clouding transparency, opaque, unfathomable spur.” Addressing the position of the foreigner as Other, Kristeva comments on whether the foreigner is happy (266), what he has lost (267), his betrayal of strangeness by hiding behind a mask (268), acting as indifferent and aloof (269) and experiencing a sense of melancholia (271) because he does not belong. Other themes that she covers include the foreigner’s attempt to make friends (272), experiencing hatred (273) and being unable to use his own mother tongue and express himself in a language that has “no past and will have no power over the future of the group” (Kristeva, 2002: 279).⁴⁵

An important aspect of the foreigner’s existence is self-silencing since the foreigner lives between two languages and experiences a sense of awkwardness when pronouncing new words and using words in the second language. One could claim that the subject Johannes Wiid in *Memorandum* represents the stranger, especially when he finds himself in hospital with Mr X and Mr Y, who speak an incomprehensible language filled with allusions to art, music and architecture, and he is unable to communicate with them. Once he has written down the key words in their speech and asked the librarian Joop Buytendacht to explain them to him, he will be able to understand the gist of their intellectual dialogue. Although he speaks the same language as Mr X and Mr Y, he is unable to communicate with them and he is thus relegated to the position of Other:

⁴⁵ The foreigner befriends either “bleeding hearts who feel obliged to do good” or “those who feel foreign to themselves” (Kristeva, 2002: 281). The three Ps befriend the foreigner: paternalists, paranoid persons feeling excluded themselves and perverse people who might entice the foreigner into “sexual or moral slavery.”

I welcomed them to the ward and introduced myself, by surname and profession, and withdrew my hand just in time when I noticed that neither of them was interested in shaking it. Instead I informed them in a single phrase of the reason why I had been admitted.

To this friendly, though unobtrusively-offered information, they replied in the shortest possible manner, one with a little nod downwards, the other with a little nod upwards. Without offering name or reason, they unpacked their personal items, medicines, toiletries, slippers, magnifying glass, reading glasses. (*M*, 11)

As stranger and Other, Johannes Wiid is somewhat “disconcerted by such discourtesy” (*M*, 11) and experiences a sense of relief after their dismissal. Although their conversations fascinate him, he pretends not to exist (*M*, 22) and uses this as “camouflage for [his] curiosity”.

Kristeva explores the position of the foreigner as “a stranger to ourselves” by using Freud’s theory of “*das Unheimliche*” or “uncanny strangeness” (1919). The German word *heimlich* has connotations of friendliness and comfort but could also mean “secretive and behind someone’s back” (Kristeva, 2002: 283). The word *heimlich* thus bears a trace of its contrary meaning – on the one hand, it means hospitality, but on the other, it also means scary or creepy. Mr X and Mr Y are the uncanny strangers who refuse to communicate with the subject or to co-operate with the nursing staff. Although Johannes Wiid has shown initial courtesy towards them by extending the hand of friendship, he positions himself as stranger when he decides not to make any contact with them and to merely become an eavesdropper and observer.

In the original discussion of the concept of the “uncanny”, Freud discusses it in terms of aesthetics and offers a reading of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s story “The Sandman”.⁴⁶ Kristeva maintains that aspects of Freud’s reading of this tale, such as the re-occurrence of something we experienced during earlier stages of our psychic development, our compulsion to repeat and create “an alien double” out of the archaic self, are some of the features that could be applied to a reading of what it entails to be foreign in a strange, new land:

The foreigner is within us. And when we flee from or struggle against the foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious – that ‘improper’ facet of our impossible ‘own and proper.’ Delicately, analytically, Freud does not speak of foreigners: he teaches us how to detect foreignness in ourselves. That is perhaps the only way not to hound it outside of us. ... Freud brings us the courage to call ourselves disintegrated in order not to integrate foreigners and even less so to hunt them down, but rather to welcome them to that uncanny strangeness, which is as much theirs as it is ours. (Kristeva, 2002: 290)⁴⁷

By acknowledging one’s own “otherness” or “strangeness”, one is able to accept the foreigner as part of the state and this acts as “a genuine rampart against xenophobia” (Kristeva, 2002: 265). However, not all inhabitants of Europe, for instance, share this viewpoint expressed by Kristeva. In *Crisis of the European Subject* (2000:13), Kristeva

⁴⁶ For a summary of the story line of Hoffmann's "The Sandman", see <http://courses.washington.edu/freudlit/Uncanny.Notes.html>

⁴⁷ In a note to this essay the translator (Kristeva, 2002: 291n1) points out that the French for this Freudian term is *l'inquiétante étrangeté*, which matches Kristeva’s notion of “uncanny strangeness.”

detects that there is no unifying narrative in Europe to encompass the diversity of the new continent with its open borders and economic collaboration.⁴⁸

It is particularly in her unpublished play, *Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W* [The Short Shelf-Life of Anastasia W] and her more recent poems about the violence in South African society that Marlene van Niekerk addresses the issue of nationhood and identity, as well as the xenophobia experienced by African strangers or Others in South African society. In the play, in particular, we encounter a speaking subject who is torn between loyalty towards her own country and the desperate need to emigrate and live a safer life in the Netherlands. The speaker reiterates the fact that she has to leave the country regularly and go to Europe because back here at home she is unsafe and constantly living in fear for her own life. The excessive abuse of political power and the inability to provide for the needs of the poor are the central themes of Van Niekerk's writings on being a stranger in her own country. The idealistic optimism of her earlier writings is now characterised by a pessimistic and defeatist tone.

⁴⁸ For a critical discussion of Kristeva's rejection of her Bulgarian identity see Bjelic (2004). In "What of tomorrow's nation?" in *Nations without Nationalism* Kristeva (1993: 14) describes herself as a "cosmopolitan", a term which, according to her, denies national determinations.

Chapter 3: What is Abjection?

In this chapter, I undertake a close reading of Kristeva's *Powers of Horror – An Essay on Abjection* (1982) since it forms the basis of my reading of Marlene van Niekerk's first three novels. The questions that need to be answered at the end of my reading of Van Niekerk's texts are: Why does the writing subject prefer to set her texts within abject spaces or present the reader with subject positions constituting Kristeva's theory on abjection?

When asked by Baruch what Kristeva implied with the use of a subtitle "*Essai sur l'abjection*" she observes:

It may be impossible. *L'abjection* is something that disgusts you, for example, you see something rotting and you want to vomit – it is an extremely strong feeling that is at once somatic and symbolic, which is above all a revolt against an external menace from which one wants to distance oneself, but of which one has the impression that it may menace us from the inside. The relation to abjection is finally rooted in that combat that every human being carries on with the mother. For in order to become autonomous, it is necessary that one cut the instinctual dyad of the mother and the child and that one become something other. (cited in Guberman, 1996: 118)

Central to this explanation are the following: the subject is disgusted by "something" and there is a revolt against it but the real revolt is aimed at the mother. For the subject-in-process to become an accepted and autonomous speaking being within the symbolic order dominated by the Father's law, he has to break the ties with the mother and the maternal body. And one way of doing that is to ab-ject the mother, to turn her into the repulsive Other against whom he has to rebel. This conflict is, as Kristeva shows, not only "somatic" but also "symbolic" – as is evident from the different ways in which the feelings of repulsion towards the maternal are manifested. Two key words associated with abjection are thus

“fascination and repulsion” (Kristeva, 2002: 448) to describe the relation between subject and object – fascination with the mother but also feelings of repulsion towards her.

Writing about the mother-child relationship, Van Niekerk explores both fascination and repulsion in her texts. On the one hand, the child subject is fascinated by the maternal body – to such an extent in *Triomf* that she is also represented as the sexual object desired by the male child. Later, the child expresses his repulsion through humiliation and even through his violent sexual abuse of the mother. She is the bearer of the desired *objet petit a*, but because she is unable to fulfil the child’s sexual needs, she is associated with the abject and her body becomes a rancid-smelling object to be derided. Ives (2010: 105) is of the opinion that Kristeva’s theory of the abject has a Lacanian subtext:

It relates to Lacan’s lack and *objet petit a*: ‘the abject is the violence of mourning for an object’ that has already been lost.

Fascination and repulsion are two central codes in Van Niekerk’s writing and place her work within the realm of the abject. It is for this reason that it is useful to pay close attention to Kristeva’s essay on abjection because it contains the codes necessary to decipher the abject in Van Niekerk’s work.

In the densely written opening chapter of *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva explains the key concepts which will underpin her reading of the biblical book of *Leviticus*, Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger* (first published in 1966) and in particular the works of Louis-Ferdinand

Céline (1894-1961), known for writings characterised by Knapp (1974) as filled with “despair, negativism and nihilism”.⁴⁹

3.1 Key elements associated with abjection

For the purpose of my discussion of *Powers of Horror*, I use the key elements identified by Kristeva herself in the passage quoted above, namely, inside/outside and abjection; disgust and revulsion as well as the revolt against the mother.

3.1.1 Inside/Outside and Abjection

The first key element with regard to abjection refers to the definite line of demarcation between what is inside and what is outside, not only inside the body but also inside a particular ordered system or society. Abjection is the outside element that threatens the harmony of the inside. Any in-between position or liminal position is regarded as a representation of the abject.

According to Kristeva (1982: 2), abjection is a reaction to “a threat” and this threat can either be from the outside or the inside. Since the abject is an indefinable object or a thing, it has

⁴⁹ Oliver (1993b: 102) discusses Kristeva’s fascination with Céline and maintains that her fascination with his writing has led to severe criticism. By association, Kristeva is called a fascist and anti-Semitic by her fiercest critics. Oliver is of the opinion that Céline’s writing “lays bare a horror that underlies all of culture” and his abject language is both aesthetic and therapeutic. Kristeva (2002: 448) describes the criticism against her for analyzing Céline’s work as “a sort of excommunication.”

one quality, namely, that is it “opposed to I” (Kristeva, 1982: 2). The abject is that which disturbs the existing system and order (Kristeva, 1982: 5) and also transgresses boundaries:

The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them.

The disruption of order comes not only from outside the subject but often there is also an “interiorisation of abjection” (Kristeva, 1982: 113). In the Christian context, it is associated with the concept of sin, which implies an “unquenchable desire” (Kristeva, 1982: 123) within the body to give in to the pleasures of excess.

When confronted with abject language, such as in the writings of Céline, we find that our subjectivity and our boundaries are put to the test: “neither inside nor outside, the wounding exterior turning into an abominable interior” (Kristeva, 1982: 135). We are no longer certain of our boundaries and we lose our “prohibiting judging agency” (Kristeva, 1982: 135). The reader experiences Céline’s narrative of suffering and horror in order to familiarise himself with “the necessity of going through abjection, whose intimate side is suffering and horror its public feature” (Kristeva, 1982: 140).

The boundaries are indeed tested in the following passage from *Triomf*:

‘Go get yourself ready, Ma, I want to see you in the back room as soon as I’m finished here.’ ... His mother’s already in the back room. She knows her place. Now he’ll first have to throw out that stinking dog of hers, ’cause she always sit there and looks. He doesn’t like dogs looking at him when he’s busy. And his mother better keep her mouth shut. Nowadays, she screams like someone’s slitting her throat or something. Well, she’d better watch out or he’ll squash her fucken voice-box to a pulp. They mustn’t come here and treat him like he’s a fucken idiot. (T, 67)

The order is disrupted by the child subject's demand for sexual gratification, and the only way in which he can try to satisfy himself is to use his mother as his object of sexual gratification. Not only does this deed violate the incest taboo but it disrupts the order within the household. The two paternal figures in the text are also fascinated by the body of the female because she is their object of sexual gratification too, but when the violent child subject rapes the mother, they both refrain from intervening and the one literally "sat there with his fingers in his ears" (*T*, 67). This passage illustrates the silencing of the female, suggested by the thought of "squash[ing] her fucken voice-box". Moreover, the voice-box is also symbolic of the violated sexual organs of the maternal body: just as the subject is violating her sexually, he also wants to violate her orally by hurting her and silencing her in the process. This echoes the ancient Greek tale of Philomela, used by Shakespeare as the basis for Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* and for Lucrece in *The Rape of Lucrece*. Philomela has her tongue ripped out after she is raped but tells of her rape by embroidering a tapestry. Lucrece is raped and she contemplates a tapestry wall hanging depicting the fall of Troy, an event which was also prompted by a rape, then stabs herself to death. After Lavinia is raped by Demetrius and Chirion, in *Titus Andronicus*, they cut out her tongue and cut off her hands to prevent her communicating.

3.1.2 Disgust and Revulsion

The second key element associated with abjection is the emotional reaction that it evokes within the subject. The subject, when confronted by the impure, the rotten or the smelly

threat to his or her existence is disgusted and reacts accordingly, either by throwing up or being repulsed by it.

One of the most archaic forms of abjection according to Kristeva (1982: 2) is food loathing and she uses the example of the skin on the surface of boiled milk as a metaphor for the abject. The somatic responses to the abject come in the form of spitting or vomiting and can be seen as an attempt by the body to expel the abject. The ultimate abject object is the corpse since, according to Kristeva (1982: 4), it is regarded as “without God and outside of science.” The dead body with its seeping fluids and its rot disrupts the biological order of life and fills us with a sense of terror.⁵⁰

In contrast to the dead body, some biological attributes of the living body are also associated with abjection. For this reason, Kristeva (1982: 71) distinguishes two types of polluting objects associated with the body, namely excremental and menstrual.⁵¹ In the pre-Aids era in which she wrote *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva does not associate semen with any “polluting value” but menstrual blood is associated with the abject because it is from “within the body” and is seen to be a threat to the relationship between the sexes (Kristeva, 1982: 71).

⁵⁰ Kristeva (1989c: 105-138) examines the corpse of Christ as depicted in Holbein’s *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*. The realisation that even Christ can become the ultimate abject object causes severe depression in viewers and confronts them with their own mortality.

⁵¹ Grosz (1994: 197) takes Kristeva to task for this remark and points out that in contemporary Aids discourse the notion of the purity of male sexual fluids needs to be revisited. Men are the carriers of the virus and transmit it through their semen. She is also critical of Kristeva’s association of menstrual blood with dirt. Excrement and menstrual blood are associated with the mother and sperm attributed to the father. Grosz then asks: “Is it that paternity is less threatening, less dangerous, less vulnerable, than maternity? Or rather, is it less dangerous and threatening for men?”

Anything that is a “secretion or discharge, anything that leaks out of the body” is also seen as defiling.

In the case of food, food only becomes abject when it is “a border between two distinct entities or territories” (Kristeva, 1982: 75), for example between nature and culture or between the human and non-human. She refers to the preference for uncooked food in India because the cooking of food on a fire is seen as polluting it. Owing to certain dietary prohibitions, food may also be associated with defilement. In the case of a woman who has given birth and is confined to her bed, food becomes defiled:

Dietary abomination has thus a parallel – unless it be a foundation – in the abomination provoked by the fertilizable or fertile feminine body (menses, childbirth). (Kristeva, 1982: 100)

What goes into the body through the mouth is regarded as nourishing or beneficial but what goes out of the body is associated with the impure and resorts under the rubric of the abject. For the body to remain pure and clean, it has to get rid of waste products. According to Kristeva (1982: 108), when the body expels faecal matter, it suggests the “first material separation that is controllable by the human being” which calls to mind Freud’s anal stage of psychosexual development. The child learns to control his or her bowel movements and sees

the presentation of excrement as some sort of gift for which it deserves to be rewarded by the parent.⁵²

The ultimate object of bodily waste, however, is the corpse:

A decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic, a transitional swarming, inseparable lining of a human nature whose life is undistinguishable from the symbolic – the corpse represents fundamental pollution. A body without soul, a non-body, disquieting matter, it is to be excluded from God's *territory* as is from his *speech*. Without always being impure, the corpse is "accursed of God." (Kristeva, 1982: 109)

The corpse as the ultimate representation of the abject has connotations of abomination and prohibition and is the opposite of the spiritual and vital living body. To purify the body, it is either buried or burnt. From a religious perspective, the dead body is seen as having no soul.⁵³ In both *Triomf* and *Agaat*, the reader is confronted with descriptions of the dead body, as analysed below.

In a religious context, abjection can also be inside the body, especially if the subject ingests foods that are seen as impure by the religious community. Wiid, the main character in *Memorandum*, imposes upon himself a very strict Stoic regime. He prepares himself a meal of food of which he is "the fondest" (*M*, 30), but once it is cooked and a place is set for him

⁵² According to Freud (1973: 133) "feces were the first gift that an infant could make" and later on in life the interest in faeces is transformed into "the high valuation of gold and money." Children often believe that babies are born from the bowel and equate a piece of feces with a baby; in other words, "defecation is the model of the act of birth."

⁵³ Creed (2000: 66) observes that within the genre of the horror movie, one of the best representations of abjection, one tends to find abject bodies without souls such as the vampire, the zombie, the un-dead, or the corpse-eater.

at the table, he takes the food to the caretaker and drinks “a glass of weak milkless sugarless rooibos tea” (*M*, 30). In his solitary state, he has created his own type of religious ruling regarding the ingestion of food, and in an attempt to punish his diseased body he only ingests medicine and weak tea as a form of bodily control and restraint.

Kristeva (1982: 113) describes this as a type of “interiorisation of abjection” and relates it to her discussion of the Christian notion of sin. From a Christian point of view, sin came into the world as a result of Eve’s disobedience to the patriarchal commands of God and as a result, within the context of Christianity, women became associated with impurity, with evil and the abject: “Sin originated with woman and because of her we all perish.”⁵⁴

Eve, as the primordial female and mother, is associated with the fall of man, with his desire for women and his knowledge of sexuality. Eve’s knowledge of the tree of life and the eating of the forbidden fruit suggests that “woman’s knowledge is corporal, aspiring to pleasure” (Kristeva, 1986: 140). In discussing the myth of the relation between Eve and the serpent, Kristeva (1986: 143) writes as follows:

The serpent stands for the opposite of God, since he tempts Eve to transgress, that which he dares not carry out, and which is his shame. The sexual symbolism helps us understand that the serpent is that which, in God or Adam, remains beyond or outside the sublimation of the Word. Eve has no relationship other than with that, and even then because she is its very opposite, the ‘other race.’

⁵⁴ For a discussion of the implications of Kristeva’s theory for the study of theology, see Schnabl-Schweitzer (2010).

The opposite of Eve is Mary, the Mother of Christ, who is associated with life and resurrection. In Van Niekerk's novels, female characters, such as Mary the prostitute, Mol the ever-suffering matriarch of Martha Street, Milla de Wet and Agaat Lourier, as well as Johannes Wiid's mother, are all manifestations of Eve and Mary respectively. An interesting case in point is the character of Mol in *Triomf*: she exemplifies both sinner and saint. She is engaged in an incestuous relationship with both her brothers and her son but she is also the object of disdain to the male characters in the text who not only abuse her sexually, but also verbally. She endures this, because as she puts it, This was the way she'd kept them all together, Pop and Treppie and Lambert and herself.

'Cause they can't do without each other. What would happen if something made them split up and they lost each other? They'd fall to pieces, the whole lot of them, like kaffirdogs on rubbish heaps.

So she'd lain herself down for them. For Pop, but he was good to her. He was gentle. Always had been. And for Treppie, the devil, who's been stuffing her all his life. (*T*, 41)

This link between the female and abjection, with sin and the loss of knowledge and power over immortality brings us to the central role of the maternal body within Kristeva's discussion of abjection.

3.1.3. The revolt against the mother

The revolt against the mother is a basic premise of the theory of abjection because the first "thing" to be abjected is the maternal entity even "before ex-isting outside of her" (Kristeva, 1982: 13). Once the infant has expelled itself from the close surroundings of the maternal body, it has to repel everything that is defiling and impure, including the body of the

mother.⁵⁵ However, as Smith (1998: 29) points out, there can never be a total revolt against the maternal body and this impossibility of revolting becomes the very essence of abjection.

The association of the maternal body with impurity is particularly evident in the writings of the French author Céline. In a chapter entitled “Those females who can wreck the infinite” in *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva examines Céline’s portrayal of the “masochistic mother” (1982: 158) who is “Janus-faced” because she is both life-giving and life-taking; she “married beauty and death.”⁵⁶

The revolt against the mother is easier for males because they fear castration, whereas females do not experience this fear. Castration anxiety occurs during the phallic stage of psychosexual development when the male identifies with the father and represses his desire for his mother. Females, because of their association with the maternal body, do not gain entrance to the symbolic realm of language because they do not experience a fear of castration and as a result find themselves closer to the semiotic and the *chora*. Subsequently, the maternal body has come to be associated with pre-oedipal language and incestuous desire by the child for the mother, which has to be repressed. The mother’s body acts as mediator

⁵⁵ In *New Maladies of the Soul* Kristeva (1995: 118) indicates a parallel between the movements in the biblical texts to struggle “against the maternal cults of previous and current forms of paganism” and that of the struggle between mother and child to separate itself from her, reject her, abject her but also, as in the case of females, to restore the unconscious desire for the mother.

⁵⁶ Kristeva (1982: 134) describes the effect of Céline’s abject language as follows: “It calls upon what, within us, eludes defenses, trainings, and words, or else struggles against them. A nakedness, a forlornness, a sense of having had it; discomfort, a downfall, a wound. ... He believes that death and horror are what being is.” See also Kristeva (1980: 140-7) for an in-depth discussion of Céline’s idiosyncratic style of writing.

between the subject-in-process and the symbolic order and that explains why she is seen as repulsive – only by disassociating from her, the subject is able to enter language.⁵⁷

Kristeva is not only preoccupied with the maternal body but also attempts to focus on the role of the father, and in one of the essays in her book *Tales of Love* (1987) – regarded as the counterpart of *Powers of Horror* – she poses the following question:

It is obvious from the behaviour of young children that the first love object of boys and girls is the mother. Then where does one fit in [Freud's] "father of individual prehistory?" (Kristeva, 1987: 33)⁵⁸

The beloved mother object is rejected in favour of the idealised Imaginary Father figure representing both parents. Whereas maternal affection is associated with being possessive, passionate and destructive, the love expressed by the benevolent father figure is more ideal. The father as the third party in the relationship between child and parents will provide the child with "a robust supply of drive energy" (Kristeva, 1982: 13) to ward off the abject.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Smith (1998: 33) captures the essence of the link between the maternal body and the abject as follows: "As the mother is a threat to boundaries – standing as she does for their effacement – rituals, in reinforcing identities, at the same time reinforce separation: that is, the existence of the subject and object. Religious and cultural rituals enact symbolic separation from the maternal body. The abject is not a product of separation, rather a product of the organic drive for separation". Keltner (2011: 46) describes abjection as "a process of rejection by which a fragile, tenuous border that can become mommy-and-me is demarcated".

⁵⁸ Freud's use of the "father of individual prehistory" refers to an identification which is "anterior to all objectal relations of desire, is not directed at the oedipal father but at a loving father who would have "the attributes of both parents." The oedipal father, object of a love-hate projection, will only intervene later to prompt revolt and murder as a condition for becoming an autonomous and thinking subject." (Kristeva, <http://www.kristeva.fr/believe.html>)

⁵⁹ One could infer from the preoccupation with father figures in her life and her characterisation of the father as a benevolent and caring being that there are hints of a father complex on Kristeva's part. Compare for instance

On more than one occasion, Marlene van Niekerk has expressed the influence of her father on her writing and, in particular, the way in which he taught her the mesmerising effect of words and rhythms. In an online profile (2007), she comments as follows:

[S]y onthou haar pa het vir haar sulke sinnetjies geleer soos: ‘Die voëltjies kwinkelier vroeg in die daglumier.’ So was daar daardie soort invloed van ’n pa wat verkneukeld was oor woorde. Sy word dus aan die voete van storievertellers groot met haar pa wat lang “stories” uit die koerant voorlees. [She recalled some of the sentences taught to her by her father: ‘Early, at first light, the birds are twittering’. So there was that kind of influence from a father who revelled in wordplay. She grew up at the feet of storytellers with her father reading long ‘stories’ from the newspaper to her.]

Van Niekerk’s father was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, and in the following poem, written about him in 2010, the intimate father-daughter relationship is explored (Van Niekerk, 2010b):

*ek berei ‘n slaai voor die oë van my vader
ek berei ‘n slaai voor die oë van my vader watse blare
vra hy watse gras watse klein groen kiewiete
krakeel daar onder in die vlei van lig en van genade
hy blaai deur die jare ‘n wit servet om sy nek en tree met adel kuite
deur die toppe van wilde mosterd waarin die blou kieriekoppe
van tarentale roer en die someravond bruin en soet*

her description of her father’s death in “A father is beaten to death” (2006) : “My own personal experience of this was especially strong when I lost my father in dramatic circumstances in September 1989, in my native country of Bulgaria, two months before the fall of the Berlin Wall. He was murdered in a supposedly socialist hospital where experiments were performed on elderly patients; family members were not allowed to visit for “fear of germs”. The bodies of practicing Christians who had died were cremated to prevent religious gatherings. While mourning, I could only talk about this through writing a novel.”

*op die stellasië sit en die horlosiegras afdraai in die stof
in hierdie kuil van skadu sê my pa en hef die skaal op in sy hande
sit die klein goue blaarvouer in die geul van die palmiet
te pierewiet vou my ook so o heer in u alsontsiende kroes,
maak my soet en hoor my lied laat hierdie groen kos
geseënd wees aan ons gees
my pa eet blare my pa eet gras en praat in tale[.]*

[I prepare a salad before my father's eyes what kind of leaves / he asks what grass and which small green plovers / quarrel down there in the vlei of light and mercy / he pages through the years white napkin around his neck and strides with noble calves / through the tips of wild mustard in which the blue kiere-knobs / of guinea fowls move and the summer evening brown and sweet / perches quietly with the grass unwinding like a clock in the dust / in this well of shadow says my father and lifts the scales in his hands / puts the small golden bird in the narrow gully of the bulrush / to tweet fold me also like that oh god in thy forgiving crucible / make me obedient and hear my song let this green food / be blessed unto our soul / my father eats leaves my father eats grass and speak in tongues.]

In this poem, the mother object is silenced, whereas the father is depicted as someone who is close to nature but who is now, because of his failing mental abilities, reduced to a Nebuchadnezzar-like figure, who eats grass. The paternal object is also associated with the intellect and with the ability to use language ("speaks in tongues") and make associative links between colours, ideas and words. The father represents the "Law of the Father and the Symbolic Order", the realm of language and language use, but in this context, he is a more benevolent guardian of language, particularly because of his dependency on the subject for his food and her ability to elicit meaningful responses from him. The biblical undertone of the poem suggests "a covenant with the one who absolves" (Kristeva, 1982: 131) and an

evocation of the Other Father in an attempt to console the self when confronted by the disease of the earthly father.

The closeness towards the father object and the separation from the mother is also an attempt to avoid an incestuous relationship with the mother and to show respect for the Law of the Father. In order for the subject-in-process to acquire language, it has to view the mother as representative of the pre-linguistic *chora* as a possible threat and as a result she has to be seen as representing the abject. Oliver (1993a: 104) points out that what the child is actually rejecting is the “maternal container” upon which it has been dependent since birth.

Following this introduction to *Powers of Horror*, I wish to focus on each chapter individually, delineate the main points and show how each chapter relates to the theme of abjection in general. I have already referred to the opening chapter, “Approaching Abjection” (1-31) and will focus on the subsequent chapters.

3.2 Dissecting Powers of Horror

This part of the thesis is a close reading of *Powers of Horror* so as to indicate how the different aspects of the text relate to the theoretical approach followed in the subsequent chapters when analysing the three novels by Marlene van Niekerk.

3.2.1 “Something to be Scared of”

In this chapter in *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva’s point of departure is the oedipal triangle between father, mother and child and focuses in particular on the role of the maternal figure

as an object of desire. In the classical Freudian view of oedipalisation, the male child realises that the only way in which to conform to societal norms is to reject the desired maternal object. This is mainly from fear of castration by the paternal object. The result of this is, as Leland (1989: 82) observes, that the subject realises that “internalised oppression” is determined culturally. In contrast to Freud, Lacan rejects the assumption that the Oedipus complex is limited to the nuclear family. Lacan also associates the Oedipus complex with social and cultural conditioning, which, according to Leland (1989: 91), implies a rejection of biological determinism and an emphasis on the social construction of a gender. Kristeva’s views are closer to Lacan’s but she challenges Lacan’s notion of the phallogocentric symbolic order by emphasising the semiotic modality of signification.

In Kristeva’s view, the mother becomes the first object of desire to the subject-in-process and the subject wants her to provide all its basic needs. The maternal breast is also the primary love object of the child, and when the child is deprived of the breast, it develops anger and a sense of frustration towards the maternal object.⁶⁰

Arguably, in all three novels under discussion, one finds this triangular relationship of conflict associated with the Oedipus complex. In the case of *Triomf*, Mol (the maternal object in the text) is desired sexually by her son (Lambert) and her two brothers (Treppie and

⁶⁰ In an insightful article on the maternal metaphor, Caputi (1993: 310) observes that whereas Anglo-American critics refer to the “literal person or mother”, the so-called Lacanian feminists use the maternal as a metaphor: “[They] articulate no concern over parenting arrangements; they focus little on the maternal as an institution but – given their attention to language and to meaning – insist on this term’s metaphorical connotations (335).

Pop). She is no longer a source of fascination to them since all three male subjects are repulsed by her body: “she’s stretched beyond repair” (*T*, 41). The son’s frustration at his inability to find a female object to satisfy his needs, as well as Treppie’s disgust, are manifested in their anger towards her. One way of expressing this anger is through verbal abuse.

In the case of *Agaat*, the relationships are more intricate. One has the oedipal relationship between the character of Milla, her overbearing and powerful mother and her more docile father, but there is also the relationship between Milla, her husband Jak, and Agaat as a surrogate child of some sort. After the birth of Jakkie, he becomes the third party in the oedipal triangle, but at the end of the novel, we see that Agaat believes herself to be his surrogate mother, which complicates matters even more.

The maternal breast as object of desire plays an important role in the triangular relations in *Agaat*. The mother discovers that the servant girl, as Other, transgresses the boundaries between what is deemed proper and respectable by breastfeeding the young child secretly in her outside room. Milla, as the maternal object, also uses her husband’s desire for the breast to try and seduce him:

You let the straps of your petticoat slip down your shoulders and pressed your breasts against him.

‘No!’ he said, ‘no, Milla!’ And pushed you away, stood away from you, glared at you until you covered yourself with your hands. At last you could no longer bear his stare. (*A*, 347)

Such incidents illustrate two key concepts within psychoanalytic thought that are alluded to by Kristeva, namely “desire” and “demand”. These two concepts, together with “need” occur in the works of two of Kristeva’s precursors, namely Freud and Lacan. According to Evans (1996: 35-39), Freud uses the term *wunsch*, which is literally translated as *wish*, whereas Lacan uses the term *désir*. The English equivalent of the latter, preferred by most psychoanalysts, is *desire*, suggesting an on-going force. Lacan is critical of the confusion caused by theorists when using *desire*, *demand* and *need* interchangeably. Whereas *need* refers to the biological instinct or appetite which the subject wants satisfied, *demand* implies the articulation of the need in the form of a demand. In order for the infant to draw the attention of the mother, as the Other, to its needs, it screams so as to draw her attention to its demands. Desire, according to Lacan, “begins to take shape in the margin in which demand becomes separated from need” (1979: 311). The need of the subject can be satisfied but desire can never be satisfied. The only object of desire is the *objet petit a*, and this object is also the cause of desire. Lacan also sees desire in relation to a lack rather than an object *per se* but points out that the “fundamental desire is the incestuous desire for the mother, the primordial Other” (1979: 311).

Malcolm Bowie (1991: 1) starts his introduction to his study of Lacanian psychoanalysis with reference to the importance of desire:

‘It is precisely because desire is articulated that it is not articulable’. Lacan is a theorist of the human passions who maintains a steady hostility to the language of theory. Desire is the subject-matter of psychoanalysis, but something is always left out when the analyst writes about it. ... However hard he tries to ‘articulate desire’ – by constructing a theory of it, say – desire will always spill out from his sentences,

diagrams or equations. But theories should not be silent on that which eludes them, Lacan insists.

During his theoretical exploration of the Oedipus complex, Freud also paid attention to the “infantile, polymorphous perverse sexuality” (Kristeva, 1982: 38) of the subject and linked it to “desire and death”. According to Freud (1986: 330-31), children are, by nature, “polymorphous perverse” and it is “innately present in their disposition”. Before the child is conditioned by society how to behave in a civilised manner, the child will use various parts of the body for sexual gratification. Education eventually teaches the child to suppress such desires but according to Freud some adults, like prostitutes, for instance, “exploit the same polymorphous, that is, infantile, disposition for the purposes of their profession” (Freud, 1986: 331).

Whereas Freud approached the issue of desire predominantly from a biological point of departure, focusing more on the wishes and the needs of the subject, Lacan is anti-biological and prefers resistance to Freud’s “retrospective longings and phantasized returns to Eden” (Bowie, 1999: 6). For Lacan, desire is “a social product” (Evans, 1996: 39) and is always “constituted in a dialectical relationship with the perceived desires of other subjects.”

For Kristeva, the mother, as object of desire to the subject, sets “the entire Freudian Structure in motion” (Kristeva, 1982: 33) and two major Freudian concepts, namely narcissism and repression are already established:

Narcissism –beginning with what, or when, does it allow itself to be exceeded by sexual drive, which is drive toward the other? Repression – what type of repression yields symbolization, hence a signifiable object, and what other type, on the contrary, blocks

the way towards symbolization and topples drive back into the lack-of-object of asymbolia or the auto-object of somatization? (Kristeva, 1982: 33)

The relation between the unconscious and language is also activated during the object-relations phase between mother and child. Kristeva uses the story of Little Hans⁶¹ to explain the relationship between the mother object and the fear that she invokes in the child. Central to Little Hans's case history is fear and in particular the fear experienced by the child that the people around him are unable to really understand him. Kristeva praises Hans's verbal ability (1982: 34) despite the fact that he is unable to express the unnameable things around him. His use of the image of a horse acts as the "hieroglyph that condenses all fears" (34) and has connotations of "fear, deprivation, and nameless frustration" (35). Eventually Hans goes as far as putting the image of his own father in the place of the horses, which serves as a metaphor for his phobia.

During his theoretical exploration of the Oedipus complex, Freud also paid attention to the "infantile, perverse, polymorphic sexuality" (Kristeva, 1982: 38) of the subject and linked it to "desire and death". As a result of the mother's absence and the paternal prohibitions that set in during the oedipal phase, the subject constantly experiences aggression, which calls to mind his primary aggression towards the maternal object. The child then tries to verbalise such aggression but in the process, the mother also becomes associated with fear.

⁶¹ The case history of Little Hans or "Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year Old Boy" (Freud, 1977: 167-304) tells the story of the little boy who was obsessed with his "widdler" and whose mother threatened him that she was going to cut it off if she found him with his hand on his penis again. He then started focusing on horses with large widders but the horses also frightened him. According to Freud (1977: 190) "the horse was merely a substitute for the mother."

Representative of infantile sexuality, the character of Lambert in *Triomf* reacts only to his mother's rubbing of "his thing" (T, 41) to pacify him. The only way in which he expresses his anger is by "squealing like a pig" and then the mother calls him into her bedroom and rubs "his little thingy" (T, 41):

She would rub his thing until he was finished and then everything would be fine again. But after a while that was also not good enough anymore. He wanted to put it in. He wanted to do it himself. What could she do? She lay down for him. She went and lay herself down. Housecoat and all.

Eventually, as an adult, he continues to abuse his mother as his sexual object, confirming his phallic power over the maternal body. Unlike other maternal figures who are associated with the breast as the primary object of desire, in her case she is associated with providing phallic pleasure to the subject-in-process.

In the ongoing battle with the object, there is a radical phase in the constitution of subjectivity when the subject is able to see himself in the place of the object. Kristeva alleges that the result of this is "syntactical passivation" (1982: 39), which serves as an indication that the subject is now entering that phase. Should the subject use the word "horse" as a metaphor for his phobia and say, for example, "I fear horses", that serves as an illustration of passivation, which "displaces by inverting the sign (the active becomes passive) before metaphorizing" (Kristeva, 1982: 39).

A good example of the phobic subject in Van Niekerk's novels is the character of Johannes Wiid in *Memorandum*. As a municipal administrator involved with city planning he has always been very meticulous and structured. However, when he visits the Parow Public

Library he is confronted with disarray, disorder and is particularly shocked by “the unkempt person of the chief librarian” (*M*, 139):

Barefoot and clad in a faded T-shirt and low-slung jeans, with a ragged beard, unwashed hair in a ponytail, three shark’s teeth on a thong around his neck, a match between his teeth, a collection of silver rings around his ankles, and not overtly fresh as regards personal hygiene.

What upsets him most, however, is the disorder in the public library which resorts under the municipality, which he associates with structure, discipline and order. His overall impression is that there is “a total lack of administrative systems” (*M*, 139) in the library.

Significant is that this subject space entered by the phobic subject eventually plays a major role in his decision to make some life-altering changes. The subject has eavesdropped on his fellow patients in the hospital and has compiled several lists of words (in the novel, they form part of Addendum 2 (*M*, 132)) which, in accordance with Kristeva’s theory, can be associated with orality – and the mouth in particular as organ of speech – which now begins to play a major part in the subjectivation process. The subject imitates the phrases overheard in the hospital (e.g. “yew-roo-pigeom”, “passer-cal-yer”, “Goo-gun-hime”) which suggests that he is not yet familiar with the language of the symbolic order and the librarian has to assist him by acting as a sort of guide or father-like figure. The father-like figure is able to provide the subject with the correct pronunciation, supply information on the concepts overheard in the conversation, and refer the subject to other sources for further elucidation. The latter is mostly relegated to the 36 footnotes included in the novel.

Discussing the connection between phobia and language, describing the case of a young girl, Kristeva (1982: 41) points out that the more phobic the child, the more verbal she became:

Through the mouth that I fill with words instead of my mother I miss from now on more than ever, I elaborate that want, and the aggressivity that accompanies it, by saying. It turns out that, under the circumstances, oral activity, which produces the linguistic signifier, coincides with the theme of devouring. (Kristeva, 1982: 41)

Whereas Wiid, as the phobic subject, is initially very critical of the appearance of the librarian as other, he is forced to use language to express his desire for knowledge and in the process the librarian becomes his “obsessive father” (Kristeva, 1982: 43) who has to guide him on entering the world of language. Just as Kristeva had theorised, the subject only recalls lexical items and not complete sentences because syntax and the formation of complex sentences are associated with the symbolic order (see note 66).

The phobic has to find another object on which to project his desires and not simply continue to yearn for the maternal breast. The result of this intervention is described by Kristeva:

A representative of the paternal function takes the place of the good maternal object that is wanting. There is language instead of the good breast. (Kristeva, 1982: 45)

By turning his back on the maternal object, the subject now enters the realm of the abject, and in particular abjection that relates closely to phobia, obsession and perversion (Kristeva, 1982: 45). When the body is confronted with a so-called “bad object”, the object is rejected and it is vomited out:

In abjection, revolt is completely within being. Within the being of language. Contrary to hysteria, which brings about, ignores or seduces the symbolic but does not produce it,

the subject of abjection is eminently productive of culture. Its symptom is the rejection and reconstruction of languages. (Kristeva, 1982: 45)

The male child (subject), confronted with his fears, subsequently tries to visualise such fears and horrors and I believe one could summarise Kristeva's reasoning as follows: I fear "it", I visualise "it", I hide from "it" and later on, I vomit "it" out. It is vital to the phobic to visualise that which he fears in order to give meaning to it, a process described by Kristeva as "burst[ing] into a symbolicity" (Kristeva, 1982: 46). Once he starts to visualise his phobia, the subject tends to retreat behind an "insurmountable wall" (Kristeva, 1982: 47) and attempts to protect his ego by relying on so-called "false cards" or "spurious egos" to detract attention from himself. Once the subject opens up towards desire, he realises that such desire is merely a substitute for adapting to societal norms. Abjection occurs when the subject feels that he has to break down the walls that restrict him and feels obliged to reject the maternal object as Other.

The reclusive Wiid benefits from reaching out to the object as Other to such an extent that he has a complete change of heart and even decides to "invite him over one evening this week" (*M*, 122). The benevolence towards the object not only assists the phobic subject to overcome his preconceived ideas but is life-affirming, as he decides not to go for his operation (*M*, 121).

When the subject retreats into the self, one finds that there is a definite collapse of the border between inside and outside. The phobic subject believes that his skin is no longer able to guarantee "the integrity of one's own and clean self" and he believes there is "a dejection of

its contents” (Kristeva, 1982: 53). The only “object” of sexual desire left for the subject is his emitted bodily fluids such as urine, blood or sperm:

... a true ab-ject where man, frightened, crosses over the horrors of the maternal bowels and, in an immersion that enables him to avoid coming face to face with an other, spares himself the risk of castration. (Kristeva, 1982: 53)

The task of the analyst is to divert the subject’s desire towards “the good object” (Kristeva, 1982: 48), which, according to the heterosexist “normal criteria of the Oedipus complex”, is the desire for someone of the opposite sex. In the case of Wiid in *Memorandum*, there is no desire for someone of the opposite sex but he finds fulfilment of his desire for knowledge and acceptance in his intellectual pursuits, namely his daily routine of visiting the library and talking to the librarian and writing his memorandum, which will be discovered posthumously. The fear associated with desire no longer preoccupies the subject’s existence and is replaced by a recognition of needs and pleasures, such as drinking wine or eating “green-fig preserve” (*M*, 122).

The question arising from this is: What about the subject who finds himself in an “undecidable space” before he is able to exercise his choice with regard to a sexual object? The religious prohibitions associated with defilement, taboo and sin now enter the abjection debate – as is evident from the next chapter in *Powers of Horror*.

3.2.2 “From Filth to Defilement”

The second chapter of *Powers of Horror* focuses on religious prohibitions and in this chapter, Kristeva engages with Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1998 [1913]) as well as with Moses and

Monotheism. Freud bases his discussion in *Totem and Taboo* on the myth that the archaic father as leader of the horde is murdered by his conspiring sons and links this to two major taboos when looking at the morality of man, namely, fratricide/matricide and incest (Kristeva, 1982: 57). According to Kristeva, Freud's fear of incest is overshadowed by "the woman- or mother-image", which incidentally also forms the background of Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* too. I will return to the issue of incest.

Freud posits that the sacred is always associated with some or other form of sacrifice and Kristeva elaborates on this when she discusses the so-called "two-sided sacred". The sacred is associated, on the one side, with a defensive and socialising attitude and on the other side, it "shows fear and indifferentiation" (Kristeva, 1982: 58). These two aspects have to be read in conjunction with Freud equating religion to obsessional neurosis.⁶² The "fear and indifferentiation" aspect of religion can also be associated with the incest taboo and concomitantly linked to "confrontation with the feminine" and how societies assist the speaking subject in his battle with the feminine. For the purpose of her analysis, Kristeva associates "the feminine" with "an other without a name" (1982: 58). This order without a

⁶² *This Incredible Need to Believe* (2009), Kristeva's most "religious" book to date, starts with a quote from a letter from Freud to Jung, namely that there is no substitute for religion and the need for that has to be sublimated. Yet in the essay "From Jesus to Mozart" Kristeva comments on Freud's view on religion as follows: 'But unlike Freud, I don't say that religion is merely an illusion and source of neurosis ... the history of Christianity is a preparation for humanism. Of course, humanism is in a state of rupture with Christianity, but it starts from it: a "rupture" that Christianity heralded in being the only religion that comes within a hair's breadth of exiting from the domain of the religious, notably – but not only – when it makes God himself to suffer to death' (2009: 83) Kristeva does observe that she supports the idea that "all religion is a purification of the object" (cited in Oliver, 2002: 448).

name plays an important role in the incest taboo and, as Freud points out, there is an idyllic relationship between mother and child which is then disrupted by the father, resulting in “an ulterior aversion to incest” (Kristeva, 1982: 59)⁶³

The incest taboo is related to the danger that religion has to ward off and, according to Freud, the paranoid side of religion is always aimed at exorcising danger and evil through certain rituals. Several anthropologists have studied the field of prohibition and defilement amongst different religious groupings, but Kristeva is more interested in “the weakness of prohibition” (65) as well as the role played by a matrilineal order in primitive societies.

It is suggested in *Triomf*, for instance, that the transgression of the incest taboo in the relationship between Lambert and Mol is a continuation of the incestuous relation between the female child and her two male siblings:

Little Pop’s dick could already stand up nicely by then. He showed Treppie and Mol how to rub it. They killed time on those mornings by rubbing Little Pop’s dick. It took away the hunger. (*T*, 127)

A critical engagement with Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger*⁶⁴ serves as departure for Kristeva’s analysis of taboo, defilement and the incest prohibition within a religious context. Douglas asserts that “the human body [is] the prototype of that translucent being constituted

⁶³ For a discussion of the link between the feminine and the sacred see Clément and Kristeva (1996).

⁶⁴ *Purity and Danger* was published in 1966 and reissued in 2002. In the preface, Douglas describes this anthropological study as “a treatise on the idea of dirt and contagion. It started to come together in my head in the 1950s when I had caught one of the contagious diseases, measles.” (2002: x)

by society as symbolic system” (cited in Kristeva, 1982: 66) and as such serves as a metaphor for the socio-symbolic. True to her enigmatic way of reasoning, Kristeva describes Douglas’s analysis in terms of linguistic phenomena:

The anthropological analysis ... is essentially syntactic at first: defilement is an element connected with the boundary, the margin, etc., of an order. Henceforth she finds herself led to semantic problems: what is the meaning that such a border-element assumes in other psychological, economic, etc., systems? (Kristeva, 1982: 66)⁶⁵

This syntactic-anthropological analysis undertaken by Kristeva is aimed at “evinc[ing] a specific economy of the speaking subject, no matter what its historical manifestations may be” (1982: 68) and explores Douglas’s view on defilement. The fluids emitted by the body “have traversed the boundary of the body” and only where structures are clearly defined would there be no such pollution. Exposure to filth is a risk to the subject, which prompts Kristeva to ask:

Why does corporeal waste, menstrual blood and excrement, or everything that is assimilated to them, from nail-parings to decay, represent –like a metaphor that would have become incarnate – the objective frailty of symbolic order?” (Kristeva, 1982: 70)

Obviously one would find an answer to such a question in societies associated with filth and dirt but her focus shifts to women and particularly the role of the mother when it comes to the issue of defilement. Patriarchal societies are characterised by the male having rights over the female and in doing so reducing the female into a passive object. The male phallic power,

⁶⁵ Kristeva often uses the word *syntax* or *syntactical*, yet she berates linguists for doing so in her study on linguistics: “Modern linguistics tends to reduce morphology, lexicography and even semantics, to syntax, the study of constructions, and tends to formulate every linguistic utterance as a syntactic formalism.” (1989: 32)

however, is constantly under threat from the power of the other sex and thus women are associated with evil and danger. Later on in the chapter, Kristeva refers to the fear caused by women as a manifestation of the “fear of procreation” (Kristeva, 1982: 77). In this regard, the archaic mother figure is feared because of her generative power and one way of protecting oneself against the power of women is to impose certain pollution rites.

From pollution rites to the terrain of bodily fluids, Kristeva maintains that there are two types of polluting objects associated with the body’s orifices, namely “excremental and menstrual” (1982: 71). Even though tears and semen also belong to the borders of the body, she does not regard them as pollutants, a statement that has led to severe criticism from feminist critics. Menstrual blood, coming from inside the body of the threatening feminine body, is seen as a threat to the relation between the two sexes. The two defilements, according to Kristeva, both stem from the maternal and/or the feminine and one tends to ask, But why is the maternal associated with excrement? She explains this by referring to the developmental stages of the child: Once the child becomes aware of his sphincter and learns to control it, he associates it with maternal authority, especially since he sees excrement as a gift to the mother.

However, it is not only bodily fluids that are associated with the abject. In the case of food, it becomes abject when it forms a boundary between two entities or territories, for instance, between raw and cooked, nature and culture, or human and non-human (75). To illustrate this, Kristeva refers to the association made in some cultures between cooked food and purification by fire. Impure food is equated with excremental abjection and may not be eaten

since it will pollute the clean and pure body. Even remaining residues of food left over after a meal could be seen as abject on account of their incompleteness (1982: 76).

In all three novels under discussion, the body serves as metaphor for the socio-symbolic ills of racial segregation, of oppression and of repression. In the case of *Memorandum*, the subject, Wiid, suffers from an incurable form of cancer, which could be viewed as a manifestation of the repressed life he has led. Throughout his life, he has repressed any pleasurable activities and focused only on his structured and ordered job as an administrator. Similarly, in *Agaat*, Milla's diseased body serves as a metaphor for the suffering endured by the white female subject who has oppressed her servant Other and who, in the end, has to relinquish all power to her servant.

In the case of *Triomf*, the monstrous body of Lambert is an overt indictment of the old regime's obsession with racial purity and forms part of Van Niekerk's "implicit critique of the family's racial isolation" (Botha, 2011: 209). Similarly, Rob Nixon (2004) believes that the novelist is "pulling us inside their racist minds, each distinctive in its own way".

Being racist and acting out such racism is not regarded as a taboo by the Benade family, yet the most flagrant taboo, namely that of incest, is acceptable to them. In her analysis of *Triomf*, Viljoen (1994) points out to what extent the text is a reflection of the Oedipal relationship between parents and child, set against the background of the incestuous desire for the female object by her brothers and her son. At the end of the novel, when Lambert

learns the truth about his real father, he fulfils the oedipal desire to kill the father when he beats Pop to death.

This leads one to ask the question: Why, if we are all part of an Oedipal triangle during our development as subjects, do we not blind ourselves then, to fight against our feelings of maternal incest? Kristeva maintains we have to acknowledge that, “like Oedipus: I am abject, that is, mortal and speaking.” We do not have to gouge out our eyes but we need to acknowledge to ourselves that we are subjected to language and through language we can comprehend Oedipus’s lament. Or, we could suppress our feelings and accept our perversity. However, as the next chapter suggests, we now enter the domain of religion and religious prohibition.

3.2.3 “Semiotics of biblical abomination”

Immediately after Kristeva’s discussion of the maternal body in *Leviticus*, the focus shifts towards the decaying body and the prohibitions when dealing with lepers. This prompts Kristeva to ask: “By what turnabout is the mother’s interior associated with decay?” (1982: 101).

According to her, the biblical text follows “an analogous fantasy”. Giving birth is expressed as a violent act of expulsion with the foetus tearing itself loose from the woman’s insides. A case in point is the birth scene, where the young Agaat is being prepared to assist with the birth of Jakkie and she is given detailed instructions on how to go about it:

If the little head can't get out, she has to take the scissors and cut, you said, to the back, do you understand? Towards the shitter, she had to cut through the meat of the arse, so that he can get out. Saw if necessary, she mustn't spare you. If he's blue, she has to clean his nose and wipe out his drool, out from the back of his throat and from his tongue and blow breath into him over his nose and mouth until he makes a sound. (A, 176-177)

Following birth, the maternal body's placenta is no longer seen as being nourishing but as pieces of material that the body has to expunge. By association, this supports the biblical prohibition that anything "leak[ing] out of the feminine or masculine body" is associated with defilement.⁶⁶ This process is described as follows in *Agaat*:

You felt a slipping, you tore, you were open, you screamed, you called, bitterly, you listened to, held your ears like. Like tarns, like eddies, like echo-bearing chasms, like wind-winnowed waterfall, you held them till you heard what was neither of you nor of Agaat. (A, 182)

The description of the after-birth places this scene in the sphere of the abject, in particular the references to the "strings dangling, slime and threads of blood out of you" (A, 182).

Whereas the emphasis up until this point in *Powers of Horror* has been on food, the reader is now confronted with faecal matter and the corpse. In psychoanalysis, faecal matter has always played a vital role as "the first material separation that is controllable by the human being" (108).⁶⁷ The excreting of faeces implies that the body is not as proper and clean on the inside as is usually believed, and this results in abjection. The body can never rid itself

⁶⁶ Seet (2009: 149) discusses the maternal abject and observes that in some instances being pregnant is likened to possession. The female body is taken over by this "unknown or hostile stranger."

⁶⁷ See also Norman O Brown's classic text on scatological matter in the works of Swift, *The Excremental Vision* (1959). Brown engages in particular with psychoanalysis and its views on anality.

completely from faeces and will always be a carrier of waste. In the case of a corpse, it is regarded as representing “fundamental pollution” (109). The corpse has no soul. The corpse is a non-body. It is impure, which explains why it is forbidden in most cultures to touch a dead body. To bury a corpse equals sacrifice and purification but to worship a corpse or even partake of forbidden flesh (not carrion, but pork, in Judaism and Islam) are two sacrilegious ceremonies which would incur the wrath of God. As an object of abomination, the corpse has to be treated accordingly.

3.2.4 “Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi”

The title of this chapter alludes to the *Agnus Dei*, part of the Catholic Mass: *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi*. Directly translated, it means “Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world”. As suggested by this title, we find ourselves now within the realm of the Christian religion and the contemplation of sin and guilt. The “interiori[s]ation of abjection” (Kristeva, 1982: 113) forms the basis of Kristeva’s discussion of the New Testament viewpoints on prohibition. Confessing one’s sins, or putting one’s sins into words, is an opportunity for the subject to speak about the abject in a therapeutic manner.

One such an attempt to “speak sin” is Treppie’s elaborate speeches entitled “Sermons on the Mount”. The title refers to Christ addressing his followers on the Mount of Olives, which in Treppie’s case is the Brixton koppie in Johannesburg (*T*, 375). Intoxicated from drinking too much Klipdrift brandy, Treppie starts his sermon by responding to Pop’s question about death and the afterlife. He describes life on earth as living in a “furnace-pit” already, but true

to his nature, he starts using words associated with excrement to describe life on earth as, “arse-end deep-end, furnace-pit, hell-hole, long drop” (T, 379). When questioned about the reasons for this abhorrent state of existence, Treppie retorts:

It had everything to do with it, 'cause if *their* mother and father hadn't been so backward, and if *they* had been raised better, and Old Pop hadn't shouted at him, Treppie, so terribly before he even knew what went for what, and if Old Pop hadn't beaten him to a pulp when he found out what went for what, then everything would've been different. (T, 381)

The speaking subject blames his parents for depriving him of leading a more significant life in which he would have had the right to make better choices. His words are seen as “terrible Satan-words” by his siblings, especially when he expresses the hope that their father would be banished to “the outermost darkness for ever and ever” (T, 381). The subject's attempt to express his abjection is viewed as being almost caricature-like:

There he stood beating his breast like Charlton Heston in a Bible movie. He shouted, forgiveness be damned, no one was going to get forgiveness out of him. He was angry and he'd stay angry until his last breath and he was going to shove their noses in it so they would be forced to partake of his legacy of anger. And why, he shouted, should he be the only one who felt haunted? From now on he was going to do the haunting. (T, 384)

Whereas the subject shows he is embittered by his existence and his suffering and blames his parents for being the cause of his miserable life, his brother has a different perspective on life and emphasises the co-dependency in their relationship. His analysis of the father-son conflict in their childhood, however, is quite startling:

If Old Pop hadn't beaten Treppie to a pulp, he said, then Treppie wouldn't have been the man he was today. Then he'd have been just like anyone else and he would have been at peace, not giving a damn. So in fact, Treppie should be grateful to Old Pop, 'cause without him Treppie would have been nothing ... if Treppie made peace in his

heart with Old Pop, he might stop shorting out all the time. If they didn't mind, Pop said, he wanted to use the language of electricity again. His theory was that Treppie was scared of making peace with himself, 'cause if he did he might unplug himself and lose the spark completely. (*T*, 389)

Pop acts as the father confessor in this passage, as the voice of absolution. He has to restore the subject's shattered self-image by emphasising the vital role that he has played within the family.

To Kristeva, the emphasis in the New Testament is no longer on the exterior but more on what is happening inside the subject. The so-called inside/outside boundary becomes more important, especially when discussing sin and guilt. Within the Christian context, Christ is revered as being the only "body without sin" (Kristeva, 1982: 120) and for one to become like Christ, one has to confess one's sins, particularly the part within oneself "that is innerly impure" (120). To confess one's sins implies that sins are seen as being "inherent in speech" (120) and can be put into the words.⁶⁸ Confessing one's sins also implies that the speaking subject is adopting "a [behaviour] and speech of conformity, obedience, and self-control" (122) and willingly places him/herself under the critical gaze of the Other, be it God or the good.⁶⁹ What becomes paradoxical in this case is that the impression is created that sin is a

⁶⁸ Confession is a central theme in the work of Michel Foucault, particularly in his studies on the history of sexuality (1978). He concentrates on the specific linguistic nature and the structure of the confession and describes modern society as "a singularly confessing society" with the confessional playing a central role in "justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life" (Foucault, 1978: 59).

⁶⁹ Lemaire (cited in Dovey, 1988: 146n38) explains the meaning of "the Other" within the psychoanalytic context of Lacan and Kristeva. The Other refers to "language, the site of the signifier, the symbolic"; "the site of intersubjectivity of patient and analyst, and hence analytic dialogue"; "the unconscious in that it is

prerequisite for the “Beautiful”; in other words, when the subject lives in sin and remains under the influence of the dark forces of evil, s/he feels obliged to go to confession and therefore living a life of evil has forced him/her to repent. Or, as Kristeva remarks, “the Christian conception of sin also includes a recognition of an evil whose power is in direct ratio to the holiness that identifies it as such, and into which it can convert” (Kristeva, 1982: 123). When Pop, for instance, acknowledges Treppie’s evil nature, yet emphasises that he is an integral and much-needed part of their family, he gives recognition to the subject’s dual nature (*T*: 387). Duality is also a key aspect in Derrida’s theory of deconstruction and supports his notion of *différance* and the plurality of meaning. He uses the term *trace* (Derrida, 1976: 61) to refer to “a presence that has never been present, an origin by means of which nothing has begun.” Even though Treppie is associated with evil, within him is a trace of the good.

In *Ecclesiastics*, it is written that sin originated with woman and therefore we shall all perish. This is based on the story in *Genesis* when Eve is tempted by the devil in the guise of a snake, resulting in her enticement of Adam (Kristeva, 1982: 126). Sin is now placed directly as part of the so-called “femininity-desire-food-abjection series.” Furthermore, Adam, who would have been immortal, is lured into sin by his desire for a woman and has to struggle against his overpowering lust for her. The descendants of Adam have become bearers of his original sin and are constantly struggling against the temptations of the flesh. This is another

constituted by signifying elements and that it is the subject’s other”; “the third party witness invoked in analysis as soon as it is a question of formulating a truth” and it is “the Father or the Mother”.

example of the interiorisation of the abject, with abjection regarded as “the most propitious place for communication” (Kristeva, 1982: 127). In the case of the Catholic mystics (and of Gandhi), one could even speak of a masochistic clinging to the abject because by constantly focusing on the temptations of the flesh, they feel a need to confess. The result of this is that abjection serves as “the requisite for a reconciliation, in the mind, between the flesh and the law” (Kristeva, 1982: 128).

Lambert in *Triomf* is the obvious example of such a subject, who is controlled by the temptations of the flesh. In *Agaat*, Milla uses her sexuality to entice Jak into marrying her, and it is only once he realises that she no longer needs him to provide her with an heir that he voices his “masochistic clinging to the abject”. Another instance in the novel wherein Milla is presented as the temptress is at the New Year’s party (A, 109):

You noticed that evening how other men looked at you. You looked back, nodded, smiled, felt that you had the right to enjoy yourself.

You look breathtaking, Beatrice came and whispered in your ear, is there something I don’t know?

When she contradicts everything that Jak says, he calls her “[his] dear tarted-up wife” (A, 110), but the assumption of the others at the party is mostly that she has him “under her thumb” (A, 111). By association, he views her in the same light as her mother, when he replies:

What must they think of me? You and your mother, you’re tarts of one crust; you think you know it all. How am I supposed to show my face ever again at the fertiliser company? (A, 115)

The speaking subject's reaction suggests his fear of the feminine and, in particular, that he would be humiliated by it in public. He verbalises his fear in the privacy of their own home because in the public space ("at the fertiliser company") he has to present a masculine façade. What he does not realise is that the female is playing a sexual game just before announcing to him that she is pregnant and that he has become obsolete in her life. The climax of their verbal tussling is when he calls her a "whore" (A, 116) and reduces her to a sex object, a derided prostitute who uses her body to entrap men. Recalling his previous remark, it appears as if from his point of view, both mother and daughter are manifestations of the abject, impure and seductive and are abusing their sexuality to gain control over the males in their lives.

3.2.5 "Céline: Neither Actor nor Martyr"

This sixth chapter serves as an introduction to Kristeva's interest in the unique abject elements in Céline's work. In our times, she alleges, religion has to make way for our dreams and ideas about politics and science and because people are no longer able to find solace in religion; they have but two options at their disposal: boredom (because of a fear of depleting all natural resources) or abjection and piercing laughter (Kristeva, 1982: 133). Céline's writings, and in particular his style of writing, are characterised by what Kristeva describes as revealing "what lies hidden by God" (Kristeva, 1982: 133). Having contextualised his work within the French literary tradition, she describes the effect that his work has on the reader:

It calls upon what, within us, eludes defences, trainings, and words, or else struggles against them. A nakedness, a forlornness, a sense of having had it; discomfort, a downfall, a wound. What people do not acknowledge but know they have in common; a base, mass or, anthropological commonality, the secret abode for which all marks are intended. (Kristeva, 1982: 134)

It is mostly his description of death and the horror of being and the opening up of old wounds as a result of suffering that makes him an important author to her. He also confronts subjectivity in his work, leading to a revelation of our defences and the “putrescence” that is taking place under our skins.

In Céline’s exploration of the abject, the characters that he depicts in his work are usually ones that he finds to be abhorrent. Even though his ‘fascist’ style of writing is open to criticism, his narrative style is praised for its “probing” into the human condition. He uses language to express the abject and links it to themes such as horror, death, madness, orgies, outlaws, war, the feminine threat, and the horrendous delight of love, disgust and fright.⁷⁰

In my opinion, the character of Treppie in *Triomphe* is an embodiment of the Célinean ideology. He is overtly racist (despite the fact that he works for a Chinese shopkeeper), he is obsessed with horror and madness because he is constantly entertaining the rest of his family with stories from the newspapers, and he tends to overemphasise the disgusting aspects of the human existence. Treppie is also obsessed with death and makes fun of dying and mourning:

⁷⁰ Compare also Kristeva’s remark (2009: 38): “I have tried to come to terms with a major difficulty, still far from being resolved: how to speak of a dazzling stylistic achievement, ‘a work of genius’ if you will, when it is permeated with delirium to the point of being imbued with Nazi ideology? Such is the dilemma posed in particular by the work of L F Céline.” The “psychic cleavages of the author” and the effects thereof on the reader need to be examined as she does in *Powers of Horror*.

Then Treppie tells one of his stories about corpses. Like when the Germans put dead babies into their BMWs so they could crash-test them to see if they were sufficiently roadworthy and people-friendly. Some things never change, Treppie says, but after the BMW-story, 'post-mortem' is a completely new concept to him. Then he kills himself laughing and his mother says she never really doesn't see what's so funny. (T, 458)

3.2.6 "Suffering and Horror"

The themes delineated in the previous chapter as being typical of Céline's work, resulting in Kristeva calling his narrative "a cache for suffering" (Kristeva, 1982:140), form the gist of the seventh chapter. True to her revisionist nature, Kristeva adapts the definition of a narrative as follows:

[It] is, all in all, the most elaborate attempt, next to syntactic competence, to situate a speaking being between his desires and their prohibitions, in short, within the Oedipal triangle. (Kristeva, 1982: 140)

The fears that the author has sublimated, and which he is only able to express in words, are evident from his narrative, seen as an almost chain-like concatenation of his suffering and his horrors (Kristeva, 1982: 145). Céline has no scruples about using scatology in his description of the ultimate abject, namely the corpse. In relation to the rest of *Powers of Horror*, one may assume that Céline is openly tempting fate with his writings about defilement, abomination and sin. His fascination with the corpse is one of the most important manifestations of the abject in his work, for example, when in his text *Death on the Instalment Plan*, the Catholic priest pokes his fingers into the open wounds on the body of a deceased parishioner.

However, lurking at the back of my self-reflexive and sceptical mind, I formulate the question: And the maternal? Is there no battle with the mother in Céline's work? The mother does appear in Céline's work when he locates the ultimate of abjection in a birth-giving scene. It fills him with horror because he is now standing "at the impossible doors of the invisible – the mother's body" (Kristeva, 1982: 155) and is confronted with binary oppositions such as life/death, horror/beauty, and inside/outside. This, however, has to be read against the background context: Céline wrote his doctoral dissertation in 1924 on puerperal fever or the infection during childbirth, and because of such experiences, he had always been fascinated by birth, infection, death and the decay of the female body.

3.2.7 "Those Females who can Wreck the Infinite"

This chapter in *Powers of Horror* focuses on the role of the female body in Céline's work and the central position played by the mother figure. The mother object, in the case of Céline's women, is a Janus-like figure: on the one hand she is tender, affectionate and praiseworthy but on the other she is represented as someone causing suffering in her capacity as a repulsive and masochistic figure. He has an ambivalent view on birth, probably as a result of his study of post-natal fever, and the feminine ideal to him is the sublime body of the ballerina, whereas prostitutes and nymphomaniacs due to their "wild, obscene and threatening femininity" (Kristeva, 1982: 167) are seen as manifestations of abject power and ready to plot the downfall of men. For Céline, the woman who sells her body for sex is far more dangerous than the mother or the career woman, because she possesses "a dark, abominable, and degraded power." (Kristeva, 1982: 168)

Both *Triomf* and *Agaat* by Van Niekerk also contain female characters that could be categorised as possessing this “dark power”. In the case of *Triomf*, the character of the prostitute, Mary, is an example of what Céline feared: a threatening femininity. From Lambert’s perspective, she is described as follows:

Jissis. Now she’s on the bed, legs and all. Loosening buttons. Yes, that’s what she’s doing, she’s unbuttoning her blouse. Lots of buttons. What’s that underneath? A bow, a fucken little red bow. In the middle. Between the tits. The tits are in a see-through bra. Black net-stuff with holes in it. Sit, she motions to him, he must come and sit here next to her on the bed. Jirre, please! Those long red nails! (*T*, 398)

The male subject is presented here as a voyeuristic observer fascinated by the object he desires. Throughout the novel, Lambert is associated with voyeurism. Not only does he spy on the neighbours when they are having a braai (chapter 6 of the novel) but is also fascinated by the two lesbian women across the road.

In the scene with Mary, he is preoccupied with her body hidden under her clothes and the reader is given a very specific description of her clothing. He is over-anxious to see her naked body which is veiled under the layers of clothing, acting here as the signifiers of his concealed and repressed desire. The red bow (in the middle of her bra “between the tits”) acts as a deterrent because the subject has to untie that first, before he can fulfil his desire for the sexualised female

The character of *Agaat* also represents this Janus-like feminine figure. On the one hand, she is the caring and subservient nanny to Jakkie, but on the other she is a devious almost shamanic witch-like figure who comes between mother and son and is inscribed into the role

of the surrogate mother. One realises right from the outset that she is quite a manipulator, but it is only when reading the nursery tale type of story at the end (A, 684- 691) that all of this is confirmed. Consider the following excerpt from this tale:

And Good takes a knife and she takes forceps and scissors and she takes a deep breath and she cuts open the woman's stomach from top to bottom. And when noon struck in the church towers on both sides of the mountain, then she took the child out of the blood and the slime and she cut the string and she cleaned him and she covered him in cloth and she gave him the name that only she knew about.

You-are-mine she called him.

And he grew up on her breast and she washed him when he was dirty and gave him milk when he was thirsty and rubbed his tummy when he had winds and cooled his forehead when he had fever, and cradled him and comforted him when he cried ...

I am a slave but You-are-mine, she always whispered in his ear before she handed him over to his mother. (A, 690-691)

The speaking subject refers to herself as "Good" and "I am a slave" in this passage, which not only emphasises her Otherness. She also associates herself with being good (Ds Van der Lugt named her *Agaat* and tells Milla *Agathos* means Good), which is ironic in the context of the novel at large, because, despite her performing the role of the carer and the slave, she is manipulative and cunning and devious. The subject's ego-ideal is that she represents everything that is good. From her perspective, she claims the child object for herself and envisages a future for herself as the real mother to the child, thus replacing the biological mother as the child's object of desire. By breastfeeding the child and whispering into his ear that she is its real mother, she assists with the child's revolt against and abjection of the mother.

Not only women are depicted as grotesque in Céline's fictional world and one example of Céline's abjection is what Kristeva calls the representation of the "bankruptcy of the fathers" (Kristeva, 1982: 172). The father figure is associated with disease, nightmares, exhaustion, delirious states and, right from the start, he depicts the father as "a mixture of childishness and ridiculous manhood" (172). Pop in *Triomf*, Jak in *Agaat* and Wiid Senior in *Memorandum* are the three examples of such ridiculous manhood in Van Niekerk's novels. They are depicted as either spineless laggards with no real opinion or, as in the case of Jak, as an egocentric narcissist who is merely preoccupied with improving his own physique and body image.

3.2.8. "Ours to Jew or Die"

Céline's openly anti-Semitic sentiments are analysed in Chapter 9 of Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, and his aggressive attack is aimed at an object, an object of hatred and desire, an object to be feared and, according to Kristeva, "the Jew" is that object in his work. Céline's discourse is also characterised by a "rage against the Symbolic" and an attempt to substitute another Law for the constraining one. Céline's attack aimed at religious institutions is actually aimed at Jewish monotheism, which, according to Kristeva, formed the foundation and precursor of such institutions.

Céline's anti-Semitic ideas read like something from a Nazi textbook.⁷¹ Despite this derision, he sometimes fantasises over the Jew as a heroic figure and even views him with envy. Yet he does resort to the old stereotypes of the greedy money-hungry Jew who is constantly scheming and dealing to increase his power within society. The power that he attributes to Jewish people fills him with suspicion and fear, and when comparing them to the Aryans, he finds them to be weaklings. In one instance, Céline even sees the Jewish people as being sodomites who are out to rape the Aryans. Treppie, in *Triomphe*, is the spokesperson for Céline in this regard. Consider, for example, the following:

When he gets pissed, he tells the story of how Hitler used to wash the Jews in the Kneffs before sending them to the camps. Whole laundries full of Kneffs, full of Jews. Clothes and all. They had to go through the whole cycle, from pre-wash to spin-dry. Treppie says Jews are dirty. Even a spotless Jew is good for one thing only, Treppie says, and that's the gas chamber. (*T*, 30)

Céline is also critical of Jewish intellectualism, because, to his mind, the Jew cannot make a quick decision without first having to reason it out. The Jew represents the derided abject figure, which is associated with the Father, and since he is such a dreadful being, his wife is equally repulsive. For Céline, being a Jew implies “a conjunction of waste and object of desire, of corpse and life, fecality and pleasure, murderous aggressivity and the most neutralizing power” (Kristeva, 1982: 185). This hatred of the Jews is in reality a form of

⁷¹ Discussing Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* Jacqueline Rose (1993: 43) is of the opinion that this text could be read as Kristeva's “book about fascism”. She also observes that Kristeva focuses mostly on poets such as Lautréamont and Mallarmé “because of the sexual and linguistic scandal which they represent for bourgeois moral and literary forms” (Rose, 1993: 45). Yet Kristeva has been severely criticized for focusing only on men (often seen as either conservative or fascist) in her analyses. Some feminist critics have even alleged that her choice of authors suggests “the melancholy theorist's mourning the loss of her motherland and mother-tongue” (Oliver, 1993b: 176).

anger aimed directly at the obedience to the rules and prohibitions of Jewish monotheism, a religion characterised, according to Kristeva (1982: 186), by “the mark of maternal, feminine, or pagan substance.”

3.2.9 “Powers of Horror”

The final chapter of *Powers of Horror* bears the same title as the book and serves as a type of conclusion. The emphasis in this chapter is on writing in general and Kristeva’s discussion opens with the words:

[A]ll literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its socio-historical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases), where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so – double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject.” (Kristeva, 1982: 207)

This statement is questionable and open to interpretation – we should also note the use of “probably” in the first line. Kristeva is known to be very selective when it comes to the choice of textualities to substantiate her arguments. The mad Céline, with his obsession with St John and the Apocalypse, is but one example and not all literature is aimed at representing a nihilistic apocalyptic end. She does concur with the notion that Céline is “a privileged example and hence a convenient one.”

Writing and the process of developing a text is linked to the notions of abjection and catharsis and presupposes that all writing is a product of the obsession with the abject and the horror of being, particularly since the latter forms part of a resistance against the moral ideological codes dominating our lives. More so than in her novels, Van Niekerk has opted

in her more recent work, and in particular in her play, *Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W* [The Short Shelf-Life of Anastasia W] to challenge the lack of morality in contemporary South African society. The focus of this play is the rape of innocent women and children in South Africa and her attack is predominantly against the lack of moral leadership on the part of the South African government. Following this play, Van Niekerk has written several poems aimed at criticising the government for maladministration, corruption and for a lack of moral focus. These poems deal with the attack on the mineworkers at Marikana, the unwillingness of the ANC-government to act against dictators like Mugabe and King Mswati of Swaziland, as well as a the superficialisation of contemporary culture.

Van Niekerk does not refuse to come face-to-face with the abject, and she sees it as her task as writer to confront this sublimated sense of horror and to write about it. The therapist plays an integral and essential part in Kristeva's work, as is evident from the importance that she attributes to therapy. Whilst in therapy, the speaking subject is able to confront his/her deep-seated anguish and allow his/her hatred to burst out. The writer guides the reader to the edge of the abyss and if the reader is unable to deal with the horror of the abject, then there is always the possibility of therapy. The therapist plays an integral and essential part in Kristeva's work, as is evident from the importance that she attributes to therapy. Whilst in

therapy, the speaking subject is able to confront his/her deep-seated anguish and allow his/her hatred to burst out.⁷²

Kristeva (1982: 208) explains the rationale behind the writing of *Powers of Horror* as follows:

I have sought in this book to demonstrate on what mechanism or subjectivity (which I believe to be universal) such horror, and its meaning as well as its power, is based.

Furthermore, literature, she believes, represents “the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and most serious apocalypses.”

The latter description fits in with Marlene van Niekerk’s writing project. Her writing is an exploration of how to survive the apocalypses of contemporary life in South Africa, particularly as a white woman living in a violent male-dominated society. When contemplating the reason for writing her novels, she observes:

Het gekke is dat ik er achterkwam, toen een kritisch stuk over mijn eigen werk schreef. Ik ontdekte dat er altijd een “achterkamerkind” bestond. Het heeft een gebrek en het houdt zich schuil in een achterkamer met geheimzinnig gedoe. Zo’n ontdekking is een onluisterende ervaring, maar daarna moet je jezelf heroriënteren. Als ik nu begin te schrijven, zie ik het binnen de kortste keren. Oh! Daar heb je hem weer. De zwerver. De boemelaar. De marginale. En o jee, en hij praat niet en hij doet geheimzinnig. ...

⁷² One of the so-called “simple things” that Kristeva (2000: 182) suggests to overcome the crisis of the divided European subject is to “undergo a psychoanalysis or psychotherapy.” In *New Maladies of the Soul* (1995) she includes examples of therapeutic cases that she dealt with as a therapist. Moi (1986:18) explains Kristeva’s views on psychoanalysis as follows: “The ethics of psychoanalysis, then, is to be found in the cure. ... This means producing subjects who are free to construct imaginary fantasies (or works of art), to produce a new language, precisely because they are able to situate themselves in a relation to the Law.”

Winterslaap, In een land met zoveel verschrikkelijke vormen van ellende zijn er nuttiger dingen dan kunst bedrijven. Iedereen die dat toch doet, weet dat het een luxe is. Als kunstenaar werk je in de schaduw van je eigen bevoorrechting. Je bent medeplichtig aan het systeem. [I realised whilst writing a piece of criticism on my own work. I discovered that there is always some or other child in the backroom in my writing. The child has some defect and hides in the backroom where he or she keeps themselves occupied. Such a discovery is a debunking experience but afterwards one has to re-orientate oneself. Now when I start writing, I recognise that figure immediately. The drifter. The bum. The marginalised. He does not speak yet he acts very mysteriously.

Hibernation, in a country with so many different terrible forms of suffering, there are more useful things to do than being creative. Everyone involved in it knows that it is a mere luxury. As an artist, one labours in the shadow of one's own privileged existence. You are an accomplice to the system.] (Provost, 2009)

By giving preference to writing about the marginalised characters of society, the deformed and the silenced Others, Van Niekerk positions her writing within the realm of the abject. Furthermore, she is self-reflexive and critical of the viability of writing in a society characterised by the divide between rich and poor. Her focus on the marginalised could also be interpreted as an attempt to give a voice to these silenced outsiders. Perhaps this approach to writing also mimics the conflict between the written subjects as characters in the different texts and herself as the author, the maternal figure.

Thus, to return to Kristeva, apart from addressing our “most serious apocalypses”, the chorus of “something maternal” (Kristeva, 1982: 208) also enters the discourse. The writer (and in this case she refers to writers of both sexes) is compelled to wrestle with his or her demon and accept that it forms part of his or her being. It is the “inseparable obverse of his very being” and the demon is associated with a member of the opposite sex who is tormenting him and trying to possess him. This comment leads us back to the opening remark in *Powers of Horror*:

The abject confronts us, on the other hand, and this time within our personal archaeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy, breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling. (Kristeva, 1982: 13)

3.3. Kristeva in the English Department

This heading is taken from Becker-Leckrone (2005: 3) and it alludes to a valid point. Having examined Kristeva's work in general and her writing on abjection specifically, how relevant is it for the study of literature? Becker-Leckrone (2005:4) is critical of readers who "invoke Kristeva [applying] her formulations without giving rigorous attention to what is at stake in doing so."⁷³

Kristeva mostly uses literary examples to explore her theoretical position and analyses a wide range of texts, starting from the earliest philosophers and mystics to the work of Borges, Joyce and the French *avant garde*. Despite her thinking being grounded in literary examples, one has to remember that she is a trained and practising psychoanalyst too, and as a result, most of her reflections on literature are tested on assumptions based on her reading of Freud and Lacan. Shoshana Felman's remark about the exchange between psychoanalysis and literature is thus apposite:

The notion of application would be replaced by the radically different notion of implication: ... the interpreter's role would here be, not to apply to the text an acquired

⁷³ Nye (1987: 678) describes Kristeva's scholarship (*sic*) as "[tending] to theoretical complexity rather than intelligibility" and with an emphasis on "formalizations rather than exposure of ways in which language is implicated in particular practices of avoidance or discrimination."

science, a preconceived knowledge, but to act as a go-between, to generate implications between literature and psychoanalysis – to explore, bring to light and articulate the various (indirect) ways in which the two domains do indeed implicate each other, each one finding itself, enlightened, informed, but also affected, displaced, by the other. (1977:8)

What, one may ask, is the implication of the application of Kristeva's theory on abjection for this reading of Marlene van Niekerk's novels?⁷⁴ Will the reader look at the texts from a different point of view than do most non-Kristevan critics? Kristeva's interdisciplinary theories will indeed assist the reader of the novels under discussion since, in her writing, the author explores most of the themes that interest Kristeva. Van Niekerk relies on the abject to protest against a patriarchal society, an erstwhile racist society and a society in which religious prohibition has indeed played a major role. Take, for example, her novel *Triomf*: it is written in the language of the abject,⁷⁵ it deals with topics such as mother-child incest, it comments on the issues of nationhood in a postcolonial society⁷⁶ and it focuses on the writing of the body into the prevalent discourse, be it the body of the mother, the sick, the servant – all abject figures, usually Othered by society. Van Niekerk's use of language fluctuates between the demotic and obscene and the poetic and expressive. She creates her

⁷⁴ Moore-Barnes (2010) uses some aspects of Kristeva's theory of abjection in her reading of *Agaat* and in particular when discussing "a denial of desire" in the novel. Another psychoanalytical approach to the work of Marlene van Niekerk is that of Brophy (2006), who analyses *Triomf* from a Jungian perspective and allocates a corresponding Jungian archetype to each of the characters in the text.

⁷⁵ See for example Burger (2000), Devarenne (2006), Gräbe (1996) and John (1994) on the language of *Triomf*.

⁷⁶ Viljoen (1996a) discusses the place of *Triomf* in postcolonial women's writing in Afrikaans, whereas Prinsloo (2006) examines *Agaat* as an example of a postcolonial novel. Fourie (2011) explores the link between postcolonial and ecological theory in *Agaat*. Du Plooy (2007) compares *Agaat* to *Sleuteloo* by the Dutch author Hella Haase, and the complex structure of *Agaat* is examined by Viljoen (2008) and Henn (2010).

own revolution in poetic language with her exploration of both patriarchal and semiotic language, as will be indicated below.⁷⁷

Returning to the abject, the central idea behind this investigation is: Which abject elements, as explored by Kristeva, do we encounter in Van Niekerk's unusual prose? What is the relationship between the respective speaking subjects and elements of the abject in the three novels under discussion? As I will show in my analysis of the novels, the writing subject 'slaughters a few holy cows' and becomes a spokesperson for the abject. Perhaps the predilection for the abject in Van Niekerk's writing is based on her assumption that writing is a solitary act and the writer herself needs to be surprised by the text she produces (Van Niekerk, 2009: 152). Possibly the reason for this fascination with the abject lies in the fact that Van Niekerk feels that, while writing, she has to be entertained and amused, as is evident from the following remark to Colleen Higgs (2011):

'My problem is I always feel I must still achieve the thing I am after. A vain writer inside oneself is a difficult fish to harbour; it always yearns to swim behind the waterfalls. The thing I am after is to write something that confounds me, that I have not thought up or planned ... if I am not laughing, crying or shuddering with excitement or grimacing with perverse sadistic imaginings, or shocked beyond belief by what I come up with, while I am writing, I know that I have lost the reader. Writing like this, behind the waterfalls of rational considerations, one must forge into the deep, there where the old fears and desires and fantasies are playing'. She explains that 'it takes many hours

⁷⁷ Commenting on her use of language, Marlene van Niekerk (2009: 154) points out that the main reason for using archaic or unfamiliar words from the lexicon is an attempt to foreground the medium of expression; an exposure of language as being overtly constructed.

of patient effort before the wall of ordinary language and boring assumption gives, and one is out in the open and running in the bounteous milks of surprise.⁷⁸

In a short piece on “Literature as interpretation: the text”, the last section of the essay “Women, Psychoanalysis, Politics”, Kristeva (1985: 314) observes that

The fate of interpretation has allowed it to leave behind the protective enclosure of a metalanguage and to approach the imaginary, without necessarily confusing the two. ... I consider all fiction (poetic language or narrative) already an interpretation in the broad sense of the speaking subject’s implication in a transposition (connection) of a presupposed object. If it is impossible to assign to a literary text a pre-existing ‘objective reality’, the critic (the interpreter) can nevertheless find the mark of the interpretive function of writing in the transformation which that writing inflicts on the language of everyday communication.

3.4. To Kristeva or not to Kristeva

The existing studies on Marlene van Niekerk’s novels are characterised by the following broad themes: the portrayal of the Afrikaner in the new South African context, the role of women in society, the foregrounding of language, and, in the case of *Agaat*, the deconstruction of the traditional *plaasroman* or farm novel.⁷⁹

In the case of *Memorandum*, there is a definite attempt to write a non-linear text based on the example set by W G Sebald, with the inclusion of non-literary material such as memorandums and paintings. It is also my hypothesis that throughout Van Niekerk’s novels

⁷⁸ “The abject is the locus of needs, of attraction and repulsion, from which an object of forbidden desire arises. ... It becomes what culture, the *sacred* must purge, separate and banish so that it may establish itself as such in the universal logic of catharsis.” (Kristeva, 1985: 317)

⁷⁹ See for example J M Coetzee (1988), Ampie Coetzee (2000), Postel (2006) and Van Coller (2009) for a discussion of the farm novel.

there is a deliberate engagement with the abject in the use of expletives, obscenities and vulgar expressions, the depiction of sordid details and the setting of the texts in dilapidated houses, sick rooms and hospitals, and by placing the focus on the marginalised, as represented by the Benade family from *Triomf*, the sick and manipulative Milla and her servant with a deformed hand, and Mr Wiid, Mr X and Mr Y, who are all on the verge of dying. Kristeva's essay on abjection thus provides a useful critical tool by which to examine and describe Van Niekerk's "finely calibrated reportage of the intimately experienced local realities of South Africa" (Van Niekerk, 2009: 156).

The central hypothesis (informing my reading of three novels under discussion from a Kristevan point of view) will assist me to uncover further elements in the texts which would serve as supplements to the existing readings from different theoretical perspectives:

As an Afrikaans-speaking author, Marlene van Niekerk challenges and subverts the existing norms and values in patriarchal Afrikaner society by writing explicitly in a language that is underpinned by elements of the abject. These abject elements include the use of vulgar language, descriptions of disease, death and decay, as well as an incisive analysis of the role of the maternal.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ In the interview with Morrison and Appiah (PEN, 2010), Van Niekerk describes herself as "an Afrikaner lesbian" who is always "on the outside of the main arena". This gender positioning by the author does not fall within the scope of my investigation.

When Kristeva (cited in Lechte and Margaroni, 2004: 155) describes what she associates with abjection, she captures the essence of what Marlene van Niekerk does in her writing:

I think that this need to make ugliness and horror evident in contemporary art resides profoundly in the modern crisis of subjectivity where we lose our limits: the difference between man and woman, inside and outside, pure and impure, etc. disappears and this corresponds to a certain spread of a psychotic tendency in human beings which often includes what is called the 'normal', and which is in fact neurosis. We are all normal, that is gripped by psychotic anxieties.

These psychotic anxieties play a major role in Van Niekerk's writing, in which she is trying to come to terms with her position as an author within post-apartheid South Africa. In an interview with Frank Provost (2009), Van Niekerk describes living in fear in the new South Africa as part of her everyday existence:

Iedereen in Zuid-Afrika is bang. De angst is ziekmakend. Onze adrenalinespiegels zijn te hoog. Het wordt een way of life. Altijd als ik in Nederland ben, duurt het minstens drie weken voordat ik mijn hypervigilante, alerte mensdiergedrag kan afschudden en gewoon op mijn gemak kan rondstruinen. En andersom? Zodra ik hier ben geland, slaat de angst weer toe. [Everyone in South Africa is scared. The fear is sickening. Our adrenaline levels are high. It has become a way of life. When I am in the Netherlands, it usually takes three weeks before I can shake off my hypervigilant, alert animal behaviour and start walking around peacefully. And vice versa? As soon as I land here, the fear is there.]

One way of dealing with such anxieties and fears is to sublimate them by practising religious rituals to waive off threats to the symbolic order or, in the case a writer such as Van Niekerk, to write about them in an almost carnivalesque manner. In the subsequent chapters, the issues pertaining to Kristeva's notion of abjection (as summarised by Lechte, 1990) will form the basis of my reading of the three novels:

As the mother is a threat to boundaries – standing as she does for their effacement – rituals, in reinforcing identities, at the same time reinforce separation: that is, the existence of subject and object. Religious and cultural rituals enact symbolic separation from the maternal body. The abject is not a product of separation but rather a product of the organic drive for separation which will be experienced against the background of fusion and non-differentiation. In effect, the abject is not controlled by the (symbolic) law but by the energy drives that, in the end, are the condition of its impossibility.

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Chapter 4: The Abject Mother

It was all his mother's fucken fault. His mother, who let his spanners get lost in the long grass. She fucks everything up. But he's not going to think about her now. (*T*, 212)

That's the way it was. As always. More questions than answers.

Her voice! Muted, from somewhere. Some things don't have reasons, Jakkie, some things just are the way they are. (*A*, 678)

Have I always been nothing but my brother's still-life? (*M*, 67)

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will argue that a central concept of Kristeva's theory of abjection is the notion of the abject mother who is instrumental in preserving the pre-oedipal relation between the body of the mother and that of the child.⁸¹ The child can only enter the symbolic when he rejects the mother, leaves the private space associated with the maternal body, and enters the public domain of the symbolic, characterised by the system of language and the law. In the three novels under discussion, one finds examples of such abject mother figures, and in my discussion, I will focus on the "hold of the maternal entity" (Kristeva, 1982: 113) over the respective subjects in each of the texts.⁸²

⁸¹ Oliver (1993b: 56) writes in this regard, "The child cannot tell if the abject is itself (the alter ego deceives) or its other (the mother's body is still immediate). ... The mother cannot tell whether this other in her is her or not; and either alternative seems equally impossible. The child in this abject relation to its mother is not yet separated from her but is no longer identical to her."

⁸² In a discussion in which she links her own pregnancy and her experiences of abjection, Astore (2001) observes that the cycle of abjection (and its association with motherhood) begins "at the onset of pregnancy with the woman's 'nausea'" and the abject that "resides within the lining of the womb for the duration of the pregnancy". The abject surfaces again "during the birthing drive with the painful convulsions of the womb

The three mother figures in the novels under discussion are Mol (*Triomf* – henceforth *T*), Ma (*Agaat* – henceforth *A*) and Mother (*Memorandum* – henceforth *M*), but as will be pointed out below, the character of Milla in *Agaat* is also an abject mother figure in the life of her son Jakkie, and in the Prologue to the novel, he describes Milla as his “[m]elancholy over-sensitive Ma” (*A*, 2). The central role played by the abject mother in Kristeva’s theory of abjection will inform my reading of the three novels under discussion, and in particular the portrayal of the three mother figures in the novels.

4.2 Mol as the abject mother in *Triomf*⁸³

The character Mol, mother to Lambert and sister to both Pop and Treppie, represents the abject mother in the text. Within the close-knit family circle, Mol believes that she is the one who holds the group together, in more ways than one. She is not only the mother figure in Lambert’s life but she is also the sexual object for all of the male characters in the novel (“all three of them rode her in any case” – *T*, 27). Mol sees her role as the one who has “kept them all together” (*T*, 41) through the years, and one way of doing so is to allow them to turn

known as contractions, the rupture of the membranes and the gushing of the amniotic fluid”. As soon as the baby appears it “tear[s] the woman’s flesh” and later on abjection presents itself in the milk that the infant drinks from the mother’s breast, whereas “the infant’s shit, as separate from the screams, becomes the intimate way the child could communicate with the mother”. The child does not distinguish between his body and that of the mother up until he has managed to form his own identity. While the child sees it as part of the mother’s body it is still in the semiotic order and does not possess the language that would enable it to enter the symbolic order, and as such the presence of the maternal body has to be negated.

⁸³ Hoogbaard (1996) examines Mol’s position within a patriarchal society and shows how the submission of women is perpetuated from one generation to the next. Dogs play an important role in the novel, resulting in Viljoen (1994: 53) describing Mol’s existence as “a dog’s life” [*n hondelewe*]. For Rossmann (2012: 159-168) Mol is an embodiment of “a composite Christ/Mary-figure, a sacrificial and abject mother”, who also plays the role of mystic in the text.

her body into an object of sexual experimentation and gratification. In discussing these actions in the novel, Gräbe (1996: 109) remarks that the novel

clearly questions established codes of behaviour by means of a rediscovery of intrinsic values precisely in that which is normally rejected or despised by society, without an understanding of precisely what it entails to be rejected, unemployed and poor. ... The characters find themselves outside societal norms and values, in order to launch a critique of institutionalized values.

In her reading of the novel, Viljoen (1996b: 246) describes the family living in *Triomf* as “a gross caricature of the nuclear family and all the values it embodies”. Furthermore, the Benades confront the reader with “the symbolic perversion of several religious principles”.

Viljoen (1996b: 248) explains this as follows:

Pop, Treppie and Mol form a perverted trinity that can be related to several creation myths while Lambert is ironically cast in the role of the virginal Lamb because he has never slept with anyone but his mother. ... Treppie also fulfils the role of a perverted Christ and at times his violent harangues ironically resemble Christ’s sermons on the mount. The novel also drives the idea of the Freudian family romance to grotesque extremes, culminating in the Oedipal ‘killing’ of Pop.

The Benades are the only living descendants of Mol’s family, who had to leave their farm and go to the city to find employment. It is as a young girl growing up under these harsh circumstances that Mol begins to use her body not only to feed her brothers’ sexual curiosity but “[to kill] time” (*T*, 127) and also because it “took away the hunger” (*T*, 127). Mol, as representing the abject, is consumed sexually by the men in her life. Her body cannot be eaten literally, yet it remains a visible abject object with its corpulence, its smells, and the way it is exhibited, because she does not wear underwear. The men can neither digest nor excrete what she has given them, which makes her even more repulsive and abject in their

eyes. The emotional and physical abuse suffered by Mol at the hands of the men in her family suggests that they are trying to distance themselves from her. It is also an attempt to show that they do not want to openly show their affection for her. When she provided them with these sexual favours as a young girl, she was given “sweets” (*T*, 151) in exchange. This continued through the years, and even after her so-called marriage to Pop, she had to satisfy both Treppie and Lambert as well. It was particularly when having sex with Lambert that she had to live out his sexual fantasies (*T*, 182) and make up stories about an “Indian [fucking] the cowboy” (*T*, 182).⁸⁴

Despite his participation in this sexual exploitation of Mol, Treppie blames Mol and Pop for thinking that they “were playing the leading roles in *Genesis*” (*T*, 119) and for not wanting to abort Lambert. Pop refuses to get rid of the product of their relationship and thus they are constantly reminded by the presence and embodiment of their incestuous conduct.

The male subject, Lambert, who is the product of the inbreeding between the two brothers and a sister, provides the reader with a misogynist description of the maternal body. He uses pejorative language to refer to his mother, and in particular when talking about her genitals. One has to bear in mind that she always wears a housecoat and does not wear any underwear (*T*, 32) and this is one of the reasons for his discontent with his mother. He acts as if he is

⁸⁴ During the sexually abusive episodes, Mol relies on an imaginative form of escapism by conjuring up images of beaches, and dolphins and fields of flowers next to a waterfall (*T*, 178). The female subject yearns for a romanticised idyllic state of being, a return to the peace and quiet of the *chora* with its “movements and ephemeral states” (Kristeva, 1984:25).

trying to persuade his mother to be more decent in public because he sees the revealing body as transgressing the boundary between the “clean and proper” body (Kristeva, 1982: 108) and that of the abject, defiled body. It could also suggest a fear of the female sexual organ, of the maternal abject as bearer of the vagina *dentata*. The latter term was coined by Freud (1962: 213) to describe the onset of a fear of castration when faced with the female genitals or, as the name suggests, the female genitalia with teeth.

One such description of Mol’s ageing body depicts it as a portent of death and decay:

His father might be old, but his mother’s over the hill. Completely. She sits with her legs wide apart under her housecoat. In-out, in-out, she moves her false tooth ... These days she swallows all the time, and the skin around her throat is beginning to shrivel. (*T*, 23-4)

Despite his disdain for his mother, there is a close and interesting relationship between them. She has always been his primary sexual object. As a child, when he had his epileptic fits, she was the one who would “rub his thing until he was finished” (*T*, 41) and later on, she “lay down for him” (*T*, 41) in order for him to satisfy his oversexed urges. One way in which he asserts his power over her, as representative of the maternal abject in his life, is by humiliating her. He makes her mow the lawn on a Saturday night and threatens to beat her if she does not do so (*T*, 101).

From a Kristevan point of view, this relationship between male subject and female mother object represents the subject’s disdain for the abject mother. She is associated with elements of the abject: her body is deteriorating, she has bad body odour (*T*, 32), she is no longer sexually appealing to him and he regards her as lacking in intelligence. A strong pre-oedipal

bond persists between mother and child in their relationship. Lambert, as the subject-in-process, will never be able to have intimate relations with other female objects as his mother remains his primary love object. Mol says, “he wasn’t born to mess with women” (*T*, 33), but is this because of some inherent fault or because she keeps him ensnared psychologically?

The subject will never be able to progress and become a fully-fledged member of the symbolic order, because he is still caught in the pre-oedipal dyad between mother and son. Pop, as the oedipal father, plays no major role in their relationship. It is only Treppie, who could also possibly be Lambert’s father, who attempts to assist the subject in his sexual development by hiring a prostitute for his birthday (*T*, 392). One of the main reasons for this intervention is because Mol is no longer able to fulfil her role as sexual object: “I’m completely bugged down under. I can’t anymore.” (*T*, 119)

Since Mol’s childhood, her sexual development and her sexual relations have been complex. She is, for instance, the instigator when, as a child, she initiates a sexual game with her two brothers. The product of this transgressive, incestuous relation between the three siblings is the retarded Lambert. He is a monstrous figure and symbolises the result of their breaking of the incest taboo. He is an abject monster who abuses her sexually, and when he eventually finds out the so-called “family secret”, he murders Pop. The latter action is an oedipal-type murder of the father figure, and after the father figure is murdered, Lambert remains fixed in

his pre-oedipal state of development.⁸⁵ He has no father figure who can assist him in liberating himself from the mother and help him to become a subject under the Law.

Lambert is also depicted as the bearer of the phallus and Treppie constantly refers to Lambert's genital prowess. In Lambert's case, the phallus is used as a weapon to subjugate his mother and establish his power over her, but once he has the opportunity to be intimate with another female object, namely the prostitute arranged for his birthday, he is impotent and unable to function sexually. The phallus does not only refer to the biological sexual organ but, as we learn from Lacan (cited in Evans, 1996: 141), it may serve as a representation or an image of male power:

Strictly speaking, the *penis* is an anatomical term referring to the male generative organ, the *phallus* an anthropological and theological term referring to the idea or image of the male reproductive organ, that is, the penis is an organ with biological functions, the phallus is an idea venerated in various religions as a symbol of the power of nature. The psychoanalytical literature uses both "the penis" and "the phallus" to refer to the idea of the penis. (Rycroft, 1978: 113)

⁸⁵ Kristeva (1982: 49), in a rather poetic discourse, comments on the incest taboo as follows: "Constructed on the one hand by the incestuous desire of (for) his mother and on the other by an overtly brutal separation from her, the borderline patient, even though he may be a fortified castle, is nevertheless an empty castle. The absence, or the failure, of paternal function to establish a unitary bent between subject and object, produces this strange configuration: an encompassment that is stifling (the container compressing the ego) and, at the same time, draining (the want of an other, qua object, produces nullity in the place of the subject). The ego then plunges into a pursuit of identifications that could repair narcissism – identifications that the subject will experience as insignificant, "empty", "null", "devitalized", "puppet-like". An empty castle, haunted by unappealing ghosts – "powerless" outside, "impossible" inside."

In the Lacanian sense of the word, the phallus is “an entirely imaginary object invested with an entirely imaginary and undefined power” (Bailly, 2009: 76) and serves as a signifier of the mother’s desire, or “the thing that satisfies Mommy’s desire”. The penis plays an important role in the oedipal triad:

It is precisely via this organ that [the child’s] sexuality makes itself felt in infantile masturbation and it is the intrusion of the real in the imaginary preoedipal triangle what transforms the triangle from something pleasurable to something which provokes anxiety. (Evans, 1996: 142)

As is the case with the mother object, Mol, Lambert also has a warped sense of sexuality. Lambert is said to have a constant erection (*T*, 22, 92) and Treppie remarks at one stage that Lambert has “the largest, thickest dick he’s ever seen” (*T*, 53), “a dick like a dinosaur” (*T*, 92) and even calls him “the Benade with the golden banana” (*T*, 192). The impression is also created that Lambert is easily excited sexually (“this dick of his [that] would not stop playing up like this” (*T*, 34), for example when he looks at the young drum majorettes and one of the spectators refers to Lambert’s excitement, as follows: “*Oe jirre, hie ko sports, kyk hoe staan hierie hillbilly se tril nou vi ônse girls!*” (*T*, 215). [O lord, here comes big troubles. Look at the way the hillbilly’s dick is erect when seeing our girls.]

The mother object also reveals a sense of desire for her son’s phallus. This occurs after Lambert had one of his fits and “his thing is hanging out from his underpants” (*T*, 417). In a remark that emulates Treppie’s constant reference to Lambert’s penis, Mol calls him “a pit bull terrier” (*T*, 417), which is in contrast to her remark that she is unable to fulfil him

sexually anymore. A phallic obsession, particularly in Treppie, is made obvious in all the characters in the text. Consider the following remark Treppie makes about Pop:

‘Ouboet vrotkop!’ he shouted. Shove. ‘Ouboet stywepiel!’ Shove. It was terrible. And then he wanted to know what Pop’s dick was looking like nowadays, ‘cause he thought it must be looking like a five-day-old Russian behind the counter at Ponta do Sol. That dick of Pop’s was the place where all the trouble started, he said. He mos had to suck Pop’s dick like it was a lollipop, remember? And he hadn’t understood anything, he was still too young ... (*T*, 385)

Pop is accused of being the bearer of the phallus that spawned Lambert, but there is also a hint of homoeroticism in Treppie’s accusation. As a young boy, he was forced into performing oral sex on Pop and formed part of the depraved *ménage-a-trois* between the sister and her two brothers. Treppie’s genital obsession might suggest a tendency towards misogyny, especially if one considers his abusive treatment of women. Not only is he verbally abusive of Mol but he also derides the two lesbian women living across the street (*T*, 275).⁸⁶

Lambert, in an attempt to make his influence felt within the symbolic order by becoming an independent adult, obtains a substitute phallus from Sonnyboy in the form of a pistol (*T*, 228).⁸⁷ When in possession of the gun, Lambert feels that he has an obligation to try and protect the neighbourhood and feels like “that little bloke in Urban Angel” (*T*, 273) who

⁸⁶ Treppie’s disdain for lesbianism echoes Kristeva’s own denial of desire in lesbian love. Oliver (1993b: 141) examines this and suggests that for Kristeva lesbian love “remains outside of phallic eroticism.” The only homoerotic fantasy mentioned by Kristeva is the fantasy of a mother-daughter relationship.

⁸⁷ Given Lambert’s overt racist ideology, it is ironic that he is given his phallic power by the Other, the black man living on the garbage dump. See Du Plessis (2009) for a deconstruction of Afrikaner mythology in *Triomf*.

patrols the streets for free at night. Lambert's family only finds out about the revolver the night after Mary's visit, and Pop tries to take it from him:

'Give it here!' It's Pop again, with that shaking hand of his.

'Not a damn will I give it to you', says Lambert. 'It's my gun and only I can touch it.'

'Give it to Pop, he just wants to look at it. It's true, isn't it, Pop, you just want to look, nè?'

She wishes Pop would say 'just want to look', but he says nothing. He keeps that trembling hand of his held out. ...

'I said, give here!'

'Not a fuck am I going to give you my gun, Pop!' says Lambert. 'The AWBs have already recruited me to help them shoot when the, um, when the ...' (*T*, 433)

In this scene, an oedipal family drama can be recognised: The father wants to deprive the son of his substitute phallus and phallic power represented by the pistol. At the same time, the mother tries to intervene on behalf of the father and tries to persuade the son to comply with the father's request. The son, as subject-in-process, refuses to honour either of their wishes and acts out his newly found phallic power within the symbolic order. With the pistol in his possession, he feels he will be an accepted member of the symbolic order. He even believes that he could be recruited by the far-right to fight on their behalf. The AWB agents, acting as representatives of the organisation trying to undermine the state, do not really want to empower Lambert, but merely believe that there is power in numbers. Lambert directs his anger at the AWB agents because they want him to peel potatoes (*T*, 219), to which he responds that he is "not [their] kaffirgirl" (*T*, 219). They want to use him for their own political gain, whereas he wants to join the keepers and protectors of the law; the people who are fighting in the struggle to maintain White dominance in the country. His retort is

typically chauvinistic: certain tasks can only be performed by a black servant girl and not by a white male. In this scene, we have an interesting interplay between power, race and class, as represented by the different characters.

Although he is the bearer of the substitute phallus, it does not really give the subject Lambert any real power outside of the family circle. In an attempt to free Lambert from the grip of the abject mother within the family, both Pop and Treppie act as oedipal fathers by hiring a prostitute for Lambert's birthday (*T*, 376). This sexual encounter with a female object other than the mother will serve as some rite of passage to detach him sexually from his mother. In order to give the encounter an exotic allure, Lambert is told that his date is from an escort agency and that she is "straight from Cleopatra's Classy Creole Queens" (*T*, 392).

Lambert's interaction with Mary from Cleopatra's serves as some form of learning process for him, particularly how to behave towards females. His attitude towards the girl is much more civilised than is usually the case with Mol (*T*, 399). The problem, however, sets in when Lambert remarks that she "can *maar* try for white any time" (*T*, 404). Her retort is to call him "a fucken backward piece of low-class shit" and "fucken white trash" (*T*, 405)⁸⁸ Lambert does not fully comprehend the political system associated with the symbolic order, as practised by the apartheid regime. He takes it for granted that his white skin gives him a

⁸⁸ When the AWB members refer to Lambert, they also call him "rubbish", "worse than a kaffir" (*T*, 220). There is a distinct class hierarchy in the novel with one group always thinking they are better than the other. De Kock (2009a: 31) remarks that the character of Sonnyboy is "cross-hatched and impure in Lambert's ideology" yet Lambert finds common ground with him. This scene gives Lambert "a glimpse of how an alternative South African conversation might shape up."

position of superiority and as part of the so-called superior White family, he labels people as Others, as is evident from the constant reference to “kaffir” and “meid” throughout the text.⁸⁹

Lambert has this idealised image of a woman and when his date is not an exotic foreigner or Creole, the desired object is not what he expected. The result of this disastrous interaction between the male subject and the female object is that he is unable to connect with another female successfully to perhaps have some type of relationship and therefore remains within the sphere of influence of the abject mother, represented by Mol. In Mol’s case, the maternal body is exclusively associated with repulsion, defilement and a lack of what is good and clean. As Kristeva (1982), following Mary Douglas (2002 [1966]), points out, certain societies have set up rituals to protect themselves against the influence of the abject, but Mol, as the incestuous sex object, epitomises that which has to be warded off: she symbolises the incestuous sexualised maternal object. She is also literally associated with the repulsive because she does not wear any underwear; she wears the same housecoat every day and she creates the impression of complete neglect.⁹⁰ A housecoat is usually worn by a domestic servant to protect her clothes whilst working. In the case of Mol, it suggests that she is

⁸⁹ See, for instance, the opening page of the novel. Mol and Lambert are in the backyard and Lambert is busy digging up the garden. Mol then picks up a jam tin and throws it away, saying: “Kaffir jam! Sies, ga!” (T, 1). The reader is also given her perspective on history: “The kaffirs must’ve gotten the hell out of here so fast, that time, they didn’t even take their dogs with them. ... The kaffirs screamed and shouted and ran up and down like mad things. ... And those kaffirdogs cried and yelped as they ran around.” (T, 1) This serves as an example of what Devarenne (2006: 106) describes as “a radical interrogation of the racist and sexist underpinnings of Afrikaner nationalist thought.”

⁹⁰ The maternal body as site of the abject in *Triomf* deconstructs the notion expressed by Kristeva (1982: 72) that, “Maternal authority is the trustee of the mapping of the self’s clean and proper body: it is distinguished from paternal laws within which, with the phallic phase and acquisition of language, the destiny of man will take shape.”

constantly in her “uniform”, being the subservient mother figure in the Benade household, whereas the lack of underwear suggests that she is a sex object, who, almost like an animal, is constantly exhibiting her genitals.⁹¹

4.3 Ma as the abject mother in *Agaat*⁹²

In contrast to Mol, Ma, the mother of the main character, Milla Redelinghuys, in *Agaat*, is a formidable and powerful woman who refuses to relinquish her hold over her daughter. She is the matriarch in a long lineage of strong women who, in contrast to the traditional patrilineal culture on South African farms, acted independently and were self-reliant, their husbands playing a minor role in their lives.

From the outset, it is evident that Ma is “the only one person [who] had a voice in the house” (A, 24) and Milla’s father plays a submissive and subservient role, given her autocratic control over the farm. He is the “cartoon-like father” (Kristeva, 1982: 170) who is portrayed as a “mixture of childishness and ridiculous manhood.” When Jak, Milla’s husband-to-be, meets Ma for the first time, he is eager to “get away from under [her] eyes” (A, 23). Elsewhere in the novel, the narrator describes the maternal object as “the omniscient” (A,

⁹¹ Rossmann (2012: 163) discusses the link between the maternal body and abjection with reference to Mol and Lambert and accordingly describes Lambert as “a devotee of the abject”. According to her, Mol exemplifies “a temporary and partial escape from Afrikaner patriarchy’s *dereliction* of the feminine, but her potential for redemption is far from decided.” For a Bakhtinian perspective on the Mol character, see Buxbaum (2011).

⁹² Gerrit Olivier (2011: 175) alludes to the abject mother in his discussion of *Agaat*. He employs Green’s concept of the dead mother to emphasise the hold of the mother over Milla. Van Niekerk (2009: 142) has no sympathy for the character of Milla and calls her “a vampire” who “sucks the blood off that poor child”.

173). After her mother's death, Milla does not mourn her and sees her death as a liberating experience. However, she admits that now she had no one "to measure [herself] against" (A, 311). Milla's melancholy disposition after the death of her mother, interestingly enough, is not because of the sense of loss that she experiences but because there is no one in whom she can mirror herself and against whom to measure herself.⁹³

Once Milla has established herself as a farmer in her own right, with the help of Agaat, and her marriage to Jak turns out to be in name only and dissatisfactory, she realises that she resembles the maternal abject that she hated: "Just like your father, you thought. And just like your mother" (A, 343). Milla becomes not only a copy of her hateful mother, but in her interaction with her son Jakkie and with Agaat, particularly as a child, she also exemplifies the maternal abject. Believing that she is unable to conceive, Milla decides to save the young Agaat from her precarious circumstances when she literally rescues her from a life in the hearth⁹⁴ like a contemporary Cinderella figure:

You went on your knees in front of the hearth. The child was bitterly thin, the little legs full of scratches and bruises, her bony body visible in patches through the rags in which she was dressed. One foot was turned in and one little arm she kept pushed in behind her back. You found the child's eyes, but only for a moment before she jerked away her

⁹³ Kristeva (1989c: 61) talks of the "projective identification" that occurs between the maternal object and the child. The loss of the maternal object is the beginning of the so-called "depressive phase" (1989: 63). Sadness expressed towards the lost maternal object is a "final filter of aggressiveness" but in the case of the subject Milla, she has to find a new way of acting out her aggression and does so towards her husband, whom she feels is not equipped to be seen as her counterpart.

⁹⁴ The hearth is a central space in the novel, both in Agaat's childhood home and in the new room on Milla's farm. This will be discussed in detail in the chapter on abject spaces.

head and screwed her eyes shut as if expecting a blow. Never mind, I won't do anything to you, I said. The child started trembling. (A, 656)

The child subject experiences this intrusive behaviour by the object (or Other, from the child's point of view) as threatening and traumatic. She is used to being abused and treated violently and expects that it will happen again. Her behaviour suggests what Kristeva (1989c: 176) calls "preobject traumatism ... to which one cannot assign an agent". As a result of her deformity, the child had suffered abuse from everyone at home. Compare in this regard the reaction of the extended family to the deformed arm:

No, Kleinnooi, she was just born like that, she started, her arms folded, regarding the child.

Very small and red, with the little hanging arm, at first, we thought it was a bit of gut hanging out, Jakkie said sis, Hekkie said take away.

And you, Lys? You wanted to ask, but you swallowed your words. (A, 664)

Milla's decision to bring home with her "somebody who needs care" (A, 660) inevitably results in conflict with Ma, because she does not want Milla to interfere in the way in which things are run on the farm. The "affairs of the workers" (A, 659) and the way to deal with them is her domain, and Milla is now encroaching upon her maternal authority. Ma is also portrayed as being heartless and indifferent to the suffering of her workers.

Eventually Milla⁹⁵ educates the young female subject-in-process and teaches her, among other things, about classical music and farming, but her deeds are undermined by her

⁹⁵ A narratological device used in *Agaat* is that despite the fact that Agaat is the main character in the novel, she is never given the opportunity to speak. Does this signify her position as silenced Other or does it suggest, following Spivak, that the author has decided not to speak on behalf of the Other? Agaat, according to Van

decision to dress the young Agaat in black, long-sleeved uniform dresses, with aprons and white caps (A, 51). The surrogate daughter figure now becomes a servant, and the impression is created that Milla is assuming the role of a missionary figure that has to civilise the Other. Carvalho's (2009: 53) comment is apposite:

Agaat is an amazingly resourceful, and a decidedly creative, communicator. Armed as she is with a 'white' Afrikaans upbringing, she is equipped with the cultural goods (among them song, story, rhyme and embroidery) with which to finely symbolise her subject position as rejected child in the de Wet household and Coloured individual in apartheid South Africa.

In her position as maid and servant, Agaat not only assists with Jakkie's birth (A, 152) but also later progresses to the position of nanny.⁹⁶ There is an immediate, close tie between servant and male heir, and from the epilogue of the text, we learn that Agaat saw herself as his surrogate mother (A, 590).⁹⁷ This close-knit relationship between the male subject and the two females in his life causes the father to observe:

What will you say when your heir turns out to be a bloody faggot one day? When I was his age, I'd long since lain with girls, but where does he lie? In the outside room, I bet. What's to come of it? (A, 356)

Niekerk (2005: 2) "is known to the reader only from the perspective of, and therefore in the judgment of, an extremely unreliable narrator, Milla de Wet." Silence, according to Foucault (1978: 309-10), "is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies." Within a discourse we need to determine who "can and those who cannot speak", as well as which "type of discourse is authorized."

⁹⁶ Jansen (2005) examines the representation of the domestic servant in South African literature and includes *Agaat* in her analysis.

⁹⁷ This would explain the conflict between the White subject and her subservient Black object throughout the novel. The boy child forms the centre of their lives and has to fill the sense of lack that both of them experience; Milla, whose husband lacks desire for her, and Agaat, who is the childless servant in the household. Jakkie the young boy is the "symbolic equivalent of what is lacking" (Kristeva, 1989c: 23).

The oedipal father, a member of the symbolic order, as characterised by the Nationalist Government, its apartheid policies, its conscription and its emphasis on masculine strength, loathes the interaction between his white male heir and the black female Other.⁹⁸ One attempt to break the ties with the feminised order of mother and servant is to take his son hiking. It is only during this excursion that Jakkie feels that he is “in his father’s team” (A, 323).⁹⁹ The father relegates the two female objects to the realm of the abject by describing them as “a wonky-legged woman and a one-armed golliwog” (A, 323). He singles out their deformities, which place them in contrast to the two fit and virile men, himself and Jakkie.

The father fears that the dominance of the female objects in the life of the subject-in-process could lead to homosexuality (“faggot”). The father’s view is based on the assumption that the child never has any normal interaction with girls of his own age. The subject-in-process is unable to establish a close relationship with the father object and regresses to a pre-oedipal state. This process of libidinal regression would prevent the subject-in-process from moving from the one stage of psychosexual development to the next. By associating excess contact with the maternal with homosexuality, the father subject is shown to subscribe to one of the basic Freudian tenets regarding homosexuality.

⁹⁸ The father is only able to act out his position in the patriarchal order when he is in surroundings that sustain a patriarchal ideology, such as at the male-dominated air show in Ysterplaat. When he is back on the farm, he finds himself within a female-dominated space, where he feels emasculated and humiliated.

⁹⁹ By isolating the child from the maternal body, the father is trying to prevent “devouring by the abject mother” (Oliver, 1993b: 83). It is also an attempt by the father to bond with the subject, showing that he represents the loving father favoured by Kristeva.

The hiking excursion is an attempt by the father to ensure that the oedipal bond between mother and child is broken, but Milla and Agaat form a formidable unit against the onslaught of the symbolic order. Eventually Agaat becomes Jakkie's confidante and she is the only one who knows that he is about to leave the country for Canada. In doing so, Jakkie has finally rejected the oedipal father and instead of serving his beleaguered country as a fighter pilot, he opts for a profession that will satisfy his mother, namely that of an ethnomusicologist. Jakkie no longer wants to be in "the service of his [father's] pathetic Nationalist Party" (A, 589) but chooses to collect, amongst other ethnic musical items, "Red Indian croakings" (A, 18).

Jak, just like Milla's father, eventually represents "the cartoon-like father" (Kristeva, 1982: 170) who is a victim of the strong female presence in his life. Or, in his own words:

Poor Jak de Wet, look at him, see what his wife has made of him, Jak said, as if addressing the portrait. First the stud bull. Then the obelisk. (A, 347)

As newly-wed husband, Jak's function is that of providing sexual satisfaction (the stud), but subsequently his position shifts to that of only *symbolically* representing the phallus (the obelisk). After the birth of Jakkie, Jak as *pater familias*, is symbolically castrated and relinquishes his power first to Milla, and eventually to Agaat. Jak had to provide the sperm to beget the son and heir for Grootmoedersdrift but is now faced with having the farm (and his scion) taken over by the two females. Initially, just after the marriage, Jak is associated with sexual potency and virility. In one of the first encounters between Milla and him, they are on their way back from visiting her mother, and during this journey, Milla pleasures him orally (A, 29). What is significant about this scene is the dialogue between them:

Slow down, Jak, you said, it's a pass.

What will you give me?

Anything you ask. ...

Well, I am not as clever as you. (A, 29)

Milla plays on Jak's sexual desire to persuade him to give in to her demands. There is a definite imbalance of power here and she, the female has both the sexual and intellectual power over the male. She thus mimics her mother's behaviour, just as she expects Agaat to mimic her language and her way of life as a cultured being.

Unlike Mol, who becomes the object of sexual gratification in the lives of the male objects in her immediate surroundings, Ma represents the independent, autocratic and manipulative female who knows how to deal with men in order to satisfy her demands:

That's the way it is with most things when you're dealing with men, your mother had taught you, you have to dip your demands in a dab of sugar. Remember, the truth is nothing in itself. Package it prettily (A, 69).

In order for the lineage of the de Wets to continue on the farm, Ma demands an heir and is critical of Milla's seeming inability to have children:

Ma was concerned on the one hand, but also critical of your childless condition. You could hear it in her voice on the telephone, sometimes sneering, you thought. Even so you phoned her every evening. With who else could you talk about it? She recommended traditional remedies. (A, 88)

The daughter's supposed infertility brings her closer to her mother, and despite the conflict between the two, there is a mutual sense of dependency. The two women depend on each other for communication and the mother is supportive of the daughter during her dilemma.

However, consequently, the mother also wants to know the intimate details of Milla and Jak's marital life. That explains why Jak derides her and calls her: "a violent tea cosy ... cosy on top and down below she latches her claws into you" (A, 88) which suggests a dichotomy in her personality and echoes Freud's term *vagina dentata*. In his description, Jak uses an ostensibly female-centred metaphor belonging to the kitchen (traditionally a domain of the female) to describe his mother-in-law but then expands on it by pinpointing the fear that she has instilled in him. Underneath the feminine exterior lurks an almost bird of prey-like figure, with claws. She becomes a phallic woman to the male subject, someone who has turned into the phallus for the Other and is both feared and desired by him because of her power.

During the interaction between Ma as mother and Milla as child, it is evident that the female subject perceives the mother (just as Jak does) as someone who is manipulative and dissatisfied and who places severe demands on her child. Significant is the remark made by Milla when she does confront her mother about the fact that she is "never good enough" (A, 93) and that she does not know what her mother expects of her:

'[Y]ou don't know how you want me, Ma? Is that your real problem? Because there is no image on which you can base me? Because there is only a hole there where you are, a silent hole in the ground? Well, I am something, Ma,' you hissed, 'I am not nothing, I am somebody and I know what I want from life and I know what to do to get it. I will provide for myself'.

That was the only time in your life that you'd ever seen her scared. Her pupils dilated and her mouth gaped, but she said nothing. (A, 93)

Two very important metaphors are used in this passage, namely the reference to the image "on which you can base me" and the metaphor used to describe the mother, namely "a silent

hole in the ground". The first metaphor is an allegory of Lacan's 1966 "mirror stage" or the looking glass phase (cited in Evans, 1996: 141). Lacan refers to that stage as one during which the subject is permanently obsessed by its own image:

The mirror stage is a phenomenon to which I assign a twofold value. First, it has historical value as it marks a decisive turning-point in the mental development of the child. Second, it typifies an essential libidinal relationship with the body-image.

The young subject-in-process sees its behaviour reflected in the "imitative gestures of an adult or another child" (Bowie, 1991: 21) and formulates propositions such as "I am that" or "That is me". The subject perceives the adult (usually the mother figure) as the Other. The impression created by Milla's reference is that her mother felt that the subject had to base herself on the image of the maternal Other. The mother wanted her child to imitate her and act according to her wishes. Kristeva differs from Lacan concerning the mirror stage, which he regards as the point of entry into the symbolic order. Oliver (1993b: 22) points out that, for Kristeva, the mirror stage is

a major step toward repressing the primary mother-child symbiosis. Following Lacan, Kristeva maintains that the mirror stage is essential to break up the mother-child dyad. While prior to the mirror stage the "music" produced in the mother-child symbiosis is what Kristeva calls the 'voiced breath' that fastens the child to an undifferentiated maternal body, after the mirror stage the child begins to distinguish its sounds from its mother's.

The fact that the subject describes herself as "something" and "not nothing" suggests that she does not need the image of the mother for her own ego development. It also represents the moment of realisation, namely that the mother is "the object ... being opposed to *I*" (Kristeva, 1982:1) thus typifying her as the abject mother.

The reference to the “hole in the ground” suggests that the daughter perceives the mother to be unable to communicate. A hole in the ground also has connotations with a grave and death and one could deduce that she equates her mother with death and dying.¹⁰⁰ This description also calls to mind Kristeva’s (1987: 311) remark about “silence as artificial mother.” The lack of maternal attention and the fear of the abject mother result in the child wanting to silence the mother. Or, as Kristeva (1987: 311) explains,

Silence eases the pain of such a maternal lack. It reconciles the subject with the sorrow ploughed by that lack; it covers up, tames it quietly; one might say that it heals [*panser*] even though it does not think [*penser*]. Silence is an artificial mother.

The author, Marlene Van Niekerk (2009: 144), when commenting on the relationship between the characters of Ma and Milla, points out that

Milla wanted to get back at her mother as well. I think the whole thing can also be read as a kind of projection. The mother never thought Milla was good enough, and the mother also only had an idea of producing a child that is exactly like she is, and if she couldn’t be exactly like she is, then nothing, and so Milla went and somehow did the same thing, and made this child [i.e. Agaat] into an image of herself, in order to abuse her.

The hold of the maternal abject even continues after Ma’s real (and not imagined) death. Her will stipulated the arrangements for her funeral and these arrangements are seen as “a last trial” (A, 311) by Milla. The burial in the wet weather, however, is associated with several

¹⁰⁰ This image alludes to André Green’s paper (1983) about the dead mother, the dead mother syndrome and the dead mother complex. Modell (1999: 76) explains the dead mother syndrome as denoting “the intensely malignant clinical syndrome that Green described when there is a primary identification with the emotionally dead mother, whereas the term dead mother complex denotes an entire range of an individual’s response to a chronically depressed and emotionally absent mother.” Olivier (2011: 180) points out that during the final scene around Milla’s bed Agaat bemoans the oncoming death of her substitute mother. The psychological death of her mother substitute results in an almost ritualistic mourning process.

mishaps. By relegating the maternal abject to a corpse that is in any way “going to waste away to dust” (A, 312), Milla associates Ma with what Kristeva (1982: 4) calls “the utmost of abjection”. Ma personifies female power and Milla has from the outset tried to mimic her mother and establish her own power base on Grootmoedersdrift. After Ma’s death, Milla assumes the dominant position as representative of the maternal phallic power, but because of her illness, she gradually has to relinquish this power to Agaath, her surrogate child and apparently servile Other. She has to relinquish her subject position in favour of the Other and is thus transformed into an object. Both Ma and Milla have also symbolically castrated their spouses and in so doing established themselves as phallic women.¹⁰¹

The two phallic women blur the boundaries between affection and avarice and as such act as manifestations of the abject. They are obsessive, cannot let go and are “opposed to the I” (Kristeva, 1982: 1). In the case of Mol, she enslaves Lambert sexually, whereas Ma’s control over Milla is sustained by providing her with possessions. In the case of Milla and Agaath, the young child is rescued from a life of poverty and sexual abuse, only to be treated as a maid dressed up in a strange uniform. When commenting on the power of women as a force to be reckoned with, Kristeva (1982: 168) writes as follows:

A dark, abominable, and degraded power when she keeps to using and trading her sex, woman can be far more effective and dangerous when socialized as wife, mother, or career woman.

¹⁰¹ Du Plooy (2006: 111) reads the novel as manifestation of the power struggles between women, as well as how they acquire and use the power at their disposal to survive in a male dominated society.

4.4 The abject mother in *Memorandum*

The character of Johannes Frederikus Wiid's mother is mostly developed through flashbacks and references by the main character to his "late mother", and in this novel, she represents the abject mother from which the male subject is trying to free himself. A central incident in Wiid's life is the death of his twin brother Gerhardus Stephanus and this has affected the interaction between mother and son (*M*, 67). In order to compensate for this major loss in the lives of the parents, Wiid excels at school and thus ends up being a loner. He is, however, constantly reminded of his own mortality, especially since he "nearly didn't make it" (*M*, 67) and, like his twin brother, almost died. In this text, the maternal abject serves almost as an angel of death who feels it is her duty to prepare her son for his own death. This prompts Wiid to ask: "Have I always been nothing but my brother's still-life?" (*M*, 67). This preoccupation with contemplating death and mortality calls to mind Kristeva's remark that

[t]he abject is the violence of mourning for an "object" that has already been lost. The abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgements. It takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away – it assigns it a source in the non-ego, drive, and death. Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). (1982: 15)

Mourning the death of the male object through the living one is an example of misplaced abjection since it equates the body of the living object to that of a corpse – most probably because of a fear of losing the object as well. This would inevitably result in a strong hold over the object and hesitance to allow him to enter the symbolic order or free himself from the pre-oedipal maternal hold over him. The subject has to fill the lack that occurred after the death of his twin and is a substitute for the mother's desire for the lost object. "Lack" or

manque refers to that which causes desire. For Kristeva (1984: 95), the presence of lack in the subject refers to the *objet petit a* that he “covets but never reaches”. She avers that “[d]esire will be seen as an always already accomplished subjugation of the subject to lack” (1984: 131). The mother is always searching for the lost object and projects her desire for it onto the living son.

Wiid shares his mother’s macabre obsession with death and dying, and while in hospital¹⁰², he has a vision of his brother’s “smooth dark headstone under the white angel” (*M*, 87) and even of himself

... lying with [his] twin under the granite cover. Johannes Frederikus and Gerhardus Stephanus. Parrot and Finch. Same age, same height, with the same fly-away ears, dead still hand in hand, in the walled-up hush. (*M*, 87)

Wiid’s father is in possession of several books and mentions early in his life that he, Wiid, will one day inherit his library:

You’ll inherit it all one day, Johannes, he said a few times in the last months; look after it well, this was your father’s life (*M*, 67).

Both father and son are associated with a thirst for knowledge – as is evident throughout the text. Wiid meticulously does research on the garrulous Mr X and Mr Y’s dialogues in the hospital. He includes this research as an addendum to the text (*M*, 132-137).

¹⁰² See Roux (2009: 65) for a discussion of the depiction of the hospital in the novel. His perspective is based, amongst others, on Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*. He shows to what extent the order and structures serve as a metaphor for the lack of proper health care in the fictionalised South Africa in the novel.

The relationship between the male subject in the text and the maternal object is further complicated by the fact that although he has survived, he was a sick child who often had to stay in bed. During his illness, his mother is depicted as benevolent and caring and she affectionately refers to him as “Clever Polly, our little parrot in pyjamas” (*M*, 31). The fact that he is associated with a parrot suggests that he is a mere imitator, as is also evident later from his research on the dialogues between X and Y. He has listened to their conversations, made meticulous notes afterwards, and then looked up everything in the library. In the opening memorandum, he characterises his style as follows:

I lacked conjunctions, that which my mother would have called “style” and my father simply “discourse”. (*M*, 7)

One of the incidents from his childhood that Wiid remembers is the almost paradisiacal portrayal of the intimacy between his parents from which he is excluded:

They didn’t see me, Mother on a chair and Father on a little ladder by the dark plum tree. Their heads were together in the shade, their legs in the sun, I could hear them talking softly.

I would have turned back if it hadn’t been for the fact that I’d never before seen or heard them together like that, an unfamiliar tone, something strange in the way their bodies were leaning forward, their upper bodies in the leaves, half in another world. Only when they started showing signs of getting down did I turn round and crawl back into bed. (*M*, 109)

In this oedipal scene between father, mother and son, Wiid indeed acts as if he is a “jealous eavesdropper” (Sanders, 2009: 15). Wiid experiences jealousy because he is excluded from this intimate scene and he is unfamiliar with such closeness between his two parents. He also wants his parents to talk to him “in the tone that [he] overheard that morning” (*M*, 109). His

parents excluded him from their observations of the Burchell's coucal (the Rain bird) in its nest and only later told him that the chicks had died because of the snail pellets sprinkled by his mother. Associating this intimate scene between the two parents, from which he is excluded, with the death of the young chicks, is a clear example of projection. The child's internal feeling of loss is displaced and focused on the death of the animals. Little Clever Polly – as he is called by his parents – is associated with the dead birds and unconsciously desires his own death, just like his twin brother's.

His bookish father and caring mother have excluded him from their intimate scene and it results in a feeling of extreme jealousy on his side. He is no longer able to win their favour with his witticisms because he does not know what dialogue transpired between the two of them in this intimate surrounding. Nowhere in this text are there any clear indications of the male subject's oedipal hatred for his father because he is depicted as a benevolent father who, for example, reads to him every evening.¹⁰³ His father's soothing voice and the sounds in the house are his only sources of consolation during his illness.

The male subject is portrayed as a hypochondriac, a weak child who is pampered by his parents. They have already seen the death of their other child and, as a result, they are

¹⁰³ Kristeva (1987: 222) observes that “[w]hether heterosexual or homosexual, the couple is the utopic wager that paradise lost can be made lasting – but perhaps it is merely desired and truly never known? – the paradise of loving understanding between the child and its parents. The child, male or female, hallucinates its merging with a nourishing-mother-and-ideal-father.” This is what is transpiring in this paradisiacal scene in the Wiid family's garden with the young child excluded from the intimate interlude between the couple. Kristeva (1989c: 223) describes the mother as “the pedestal of the couple” and indeed in the case of Wiid, he elevates his mother to an object of his desire; just as she projects her loss of another object onto him.

overprotective. His clown-like behaviour acts as an attempt to distract their attention from their sense of mortality and serves to ward off the idea of death.

In this case, the abject mother is an overprotective mother and Wiid gives an example of this overprotective hold over the male subject when he reminisces about his childhood holidays during a visit to Bloubergstrand:

I remembered how I always, when I was well enough, held between my mother and father, could float on my back for short spells with the gulls above me, how I wondered if Stefan could fly there where he was. (*M*, 89)

Even during such an intimate family scene, the male subject is thinking of his dead sibling and it is evident from the text that the Wiid family is a close unit held together by their obsession with death.

Wiid's mother symbolises what Kristeva (1982: 157) describes as the "two-faced mother". On the one hand she embodies love and affection, and on the other she is "tied to suffering, illness, sacrifice" (Kristeva, 1982: 158). She embodies the castrating mother who prevents the male subject from entering the symbolic order and who constantly reminds him of his association with the dead Other. This calls to mind Kristeva's remark that the subject without the symbolic regresses into "an archaic state" which is akin to Freud's death drive. According to Kristeva (1989c: 17), this idea of a death drive appears as "a biological and logical inability to transmit psychic energies and inscriptions" and results in an almost passive "disunity with the life drive". Wiid's life is characterised by a passive consumption and regurgitation of other people's ideas and a mimicking of their gestures. His decision to

not go for an operation (*M*, 121) is completely contrary to what one would expect of him and one could interpret it as his final attempt to break free from the constraints of life as the surviving child and accept his own death.

4.5 Conclusion

In Van Niekerk's three novels under discussion, there is indeed evidence of what Kristeva (in Clément and Kristeva, 1996: 118) calls "a sort of rage against mothers ... because they had carried [the child] in their bodies". In the case of the relationship between the male subject (Lambert) and his maternal abject (Mol), the ultimate taboo of incest plays a pivotal role: Even though Lambert finds the maternal body repulsive and is constantly filled with contempt for his mother, she remains his object of sexual gratification – and as a result he remains in his pre-oedipal stage and is never able to progress and become a member of the symbolic order. He even regresses into an artificial womb-like den that acts as a *chora* – which will be discussed in a subsequent chapter.

In the case of Milla de Wet (née Redelinghuys), she never really manages to break from the hold of the maternal abject over her because she merely mimics her mother's dictatorial behaviour and recreates her mother's autocratic power over her husband, child, and the farm labourers on her own piece of land. One of her ways of dealing with her abject mother is to view her as an open grave "hole in the ground", thus wishing her dead.

Wiid's main problem with the maternal abject is the fact that his mother constantly reminds him of his dead brother and in doing so, she condemns him to an almost corpse-like

existence. Her obsession with the death drive is projected onto him and subsequently he is always an outsider figure caught in his own loneliness. Eventually, he decides to liberate himself from his own abject and diseased body by not going for the scheduled operation.

The depictions of the maternal abject in the three texts under discussion show strong similarities. In each case, a particular character (Lambert, Milla, Wiid) is a victim of the maternal abject and is never able to really resist it or to be liberated. Furthermore, the fact that the main characters are either deformed or diseased suggests that they represent abject bodies that are relegated to an abject space, as will be examined in the subsequent chapters.

None of the three characters discussed in this chapter manages to separate himself or herself from the maternal object in his/her life. Milla can only do so once her mother dies, but then she perpetuates her mother's abject behaviour towards her husband and her trusted servant Agaat. These phallic women become what Kristeva (1982: 70) calls, "synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed", particularly because they are seen as a threat to male, phallic power.

Chapter 5: Abject Bodies

Agaat recovers the faculty of speech when she beholds my hairy shins.

Orang-utan, she says. She clears her throat.

I don't want to know what your armpits look like by this time. Stubble-field! Don't let us forget about them! (A, 341)

Or perhaps it would work better as a children's story? Once upon a time there was a man who lived with a livid liver. (M, 123)

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter the focus is on the representation of the abject body and the role played by the body in the three novels under discussion, especially since the main characters are either suffering from some debilitating disease or their bodies are looked upon with horror and disgust because of deformities or showing signs of disease and decay.¹⁰⁴ These bodies threaten the boundaries of society and confront its norms and boundaries with what is deemed abnormal.

In *Triomf*, Lambert represents the character that has an abject body and is therefore derided by his family and the people in the suburb where he lives. In the case of *Agaat* and *Memorandum*, both Milla and Wiid are on their death beds and the reader is given lengthy

¹⁰⁴ Buxbaum (2012) analyses the representation of the body in *Triomf* and suggests that Van Niekerk's "visceral corporeal descriptions represent an ethical intervention and an attempt to explore the formation of intimate relationships." To merely focus on the grotesque – as I do within the context of the abject – results in a detraction from the "ethical impact of her fiction" (Buxbaum, 2012: 214).

descriptions of their illnesses, their suffering and the influence thereof on their state of mind. Agaat is also depicted as someone who has a deformed arm and has suffered derision.

5.2 Lambert – the monstrous abject ¹⁰⁵

In the previous chapter, the focus was on Mol, as representing the maternal abject in *Triomf*. In *this* discussion of abject bodies, the emphasis is on Lambert, since he represents the abject body in *Triomf*. He is depicted in grotesque terms, as being almost monster-like, and throughout the novel, the emphasis is on the deformity of his body, the hugeness of his genitals and the odour surrounding his unwashed body. Lambert, however, is also associated with what Kristeva (1982: 105) calls “incestuous impurity” because of his sexual relations with his mother. In his case, the pre-oedipal male body is associated with dirt, filth and sexual impurity and indeed “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva, 1982:4).

Lambert, the product of incest, is portrayed as an aggressive, abject monster with excess libidinal energy and as someone who is selfish and shows disregard for his family. Often it is the maternal object that has to suffer under his verbal and physical aggression. A central passage in this regard is the one where Mol is forced to mow the lawn on a Saturday night just because Lambert wants to irritate the neighbours (*T*, 91-113).

¹⁰⁵ According to Shear (2006), *Triomf* follows the pattern of the British Gothic novel and Van Niekerk “redeploys the ominous presence of a monster as a force that destabilises the binary of racial privilege and racial inferiority. The product of the Benades' inbreeding is Lambert, the novel's locus of monstrosity.” To Shear “Lambert's patchwork bulk marks him as a uniquely South African Frankenstein's monster who calls attention to the binary of race and body that distinguishes [W]hite from [B]lack and [C]oloured under the policies of apartheid.” (Shear, 2006: 85)

The first description of Lambert's body in the text already suggests the abject nature thereof because it immediately associates his body with obesity and filth:

He's standing on the little stoep in front, in his green T-shirt which is stretched over his fat belly, and his black boxer shorts that keep falling down his backside. He's up to his elbows in dirt from digging his hole. (*T*, 12)

He is described by the other characters in the text as, amongst others, "not right in his top storey" (*T*, 16), "that Gadarene madman" (*T*, 49), "a genetic cul-de-sac" (*T*, 65), "a mad fucker with a big dick" (*T*, 99), "[a] fucken fat pig" (*T*, 110), "you waste of a white skin" (*T*, 110), "a fucken dinosaur" (*T*, 117) and "King Kong" (*T*, 118), "a piece of rubbish" (*T*, 220), "worse than a kaffir" (*T*, 220), "Frankenstein's monster" (*T*, 268) and "nutcase" (*T*, 464).

These labels and descriptions accentuate the freaky nature of Lambert's body as a misfit and as monster-like, despised by all who come into contact with him. When Lambert does eventually discover his family's secret, namely that both Pop and Treppie are Mol's brothers and lovers, he gazes upon his own body and sees it as a monstrosity. This serves as an example of the abjection of the self because the subject finds his own body despicable and almost feels alienated from it:

Now he sees his large knees, his hollow shins, his knobbly swollen monster-ankles, his skew, monster-feet, and his monster-toes. Ten of them! All different shapes and sizes! Dog-toenails! He feels his face. A monster. A devil-monster. No wonder! No fucken wonder he's such a fuck-up. No wonder he can't even fuck a hotnot bitch! No wonder only his mother's good enough for him! It's all in the family! The plague! (*T*, 463)

The subject views his own body as being that of some demonic animal. From the description, we deduce that everything on his body is large and abnormal; its entire shape is

abnormal and he sees himself as “a fuck-up”. Once he has studied his body, he directs his attention to his mother and turns her into the object of his phobic desire. She is the only person with whom he can have sexual intercourse, but in doing so, he merely perpetuates the “plague” that is ravaging the family.

The word “plague” in this context refers to the genetic disposition of the Benades to have incestuous relationships and to pass this propensity for having sexual relations with family members on from one generation to the next. Lambert also associates his inability to have sexual intercourse with women other than his mother as one of the symptoms of this plague. The word “plague” has connotations of punishment and death. In discussing the metaphors used to comment on Aids, Susan Sontag (1991: 130) points out that the principal metaphor used to describe the Aids epidemic is “plague”. The word has always been associated with “the highest standard of collective calamity, evil, scourge” and with “mass incidences of illness”. According to Sontag (1991: 137), such an epidemic is usually perceived by society as an affliction of the poor or foreigners, usually from some primitive country. In the existing criticism on *Triomf*, Lambert is seen as a symbol of the inclusive racial policies of the Nationalist government and the plague of racist exclusivity that leads to the demise of the Afrikaner. Viljoen (1996b: 247) describes him as “symbolic of the excesses to which the ideology of apartheid led.”

Lambert is the product of the incestuous relationship between Mol and her two brothers and it explains his sense of abnormality. The sexual relationship between the siblings started when they were still children and continues, with Lambert later also participating in it. He

abuses his mother as a sexual object and is now part of the incestuous relationship in the family. The child is particularly attracted to the mother object during the pre-oedipal phase, and during the oedipal phase is compelled to side with the parent of the opposite sex. Any child has a subconscious sexual attraction towards the maternal body, but Lambert is different from other children and acts out his sexual phantasies with his mother.

The enormity of Lambert's sexual organ is constantly mentioned and it contributes further to the portrayal of him as a monster. This phallic prowess of the subject, however, does not signify any procreative abilities because he does not father any children but uses it to abuse his mother. In his case, the phallus is a mere display of power used to oppress his mother and to intimidate other people. When confronting the feminine, represented by the prostitute hired for his birthday, Lambert is impotent and unable to perform sexually. In order to escape from Lambert, Mary is forced to pull down his pants, "Speedo and all" (*T*, 412), over his knees. The phallus, according to Lacan (1996: 581), is a veiled signifier and as such a mysterious object. When Mary pulls down Lambert's pants, she is exposing and unveiling his phallus, resulting in a loss of phallic power over her. Unable to tackle her, he only manages to grab her wig and retaliate with racial slurs and sexist vulgarities: "Fucken hoer! Fucken vrotpoes! Fucken cheapskate meid! Stupid Swiss roll of a slut!" (*T*, 412). Not only does he call her a whore and a slut, but he also alludes to the fact that she might have a venereal disease ("vrotpoes" could be literally translated as "rotten cunt"). By associating her with disease, he immediately creates a boundary between himself and her. She is turned into an abject object, a diseased Other, and he has to free himself from her threatening

femininity. His only recourse is to masturbate, because that is “all he can think of doing” (*T.* 413).

5.3 Treppie and the threat of excrement

Treppie, one of the two paternal figures in *Triomf*, represents the abject. Despite being the poet and intellectual of the family, he is repulsive, vulgar and relishes using obscenities. Kristeva (1982: 71) distinguishes between two types of “polluting objects” namely the “excremental and menstrual”. Treppie is primarily associated with the excremental, the so-called defilement “that comes from within” (Kristeva, 1982, 71).

Treppie suffers from constipation, and in one of the scenes in the novel, he goes to the toilet and the whole process of passing stool is described in detail – a scene that calls to mind a similar scene in *Agaat*, where Milla is assisted by Agaat to excrete. (*A*, 393)

According to Freud (cited in Laporte, 1994: 11), there are three requirements for civilisation, namely “cleanliness, order, and beauty”, and because of this obsession with cleanliness, there has always been a “compulsion towards cleanliness.” Laporte (1994: 45) shows that the obsession with cleanliness has resulted in a public/private split when it comes to excrement. It is “each subject’s business” that has to be performed in the privacy of one’s own house. When Marlene van Niekerk situates one of the scenes in *Triomf* in the toilet and gives us a lengthy description of Treppie’s ordeal, the private becomes public. In writing about Treppie’s constipation, Van Niekerk’s text becomes part of a series of texts with “scatological imagery” (Brown, 1959: 179).

We have a description of Treppie's agony in the toilet in the scene entitled "Peace on earth" (*T*, 311), where he observes at the outset, "[That] to shit is a fine skill" (*A*, 311) and "a turd is a work of art". Typical of Treppie, who is the poet in the Benade family, he describes the whole process in an excessive, albeit romantic, poetic discourse:

But a masterpiece of crap is one that works its way down from your guts in one piece like a tapestry, evenly textured and solidly braided, not too light but also not too dark. With all the colours blending but not so much that it gets boring. Delicate, bright flowers shining against the grass and the white horse resting his horn meekly on the Madonna's lap. (*T*, 311)

Treppie regards his struggles with his bowel movements as a "cross and it's a calling" (*T*, 311) and he views his struggle to excrete in almost mystical terms and as a form of mystical experience with God as the witness of this wondrous event. In contrast to this is his enjoyment of stories from the newspaper that deal with absurd tales such as an old lady giving her goldfish mouth-to-mouth resuscitation or the story of the best man who was caught on video having sex with a pit bull terrier (*T*, 316).

While in the abject space of the toilet, Treppie recalls incidents such as the historical centenary of the Great Trek, a juxtaposition that suggests making fun of the Afrikaner and his history. The subject expresses his defiance through anal eroticism (Freud, 1979: 313). It is also while thinking about politicians such as Carl Niehaus of the ANC that he starts to detect "stirrings of a bowel movement" (*T*, 325). He ends off his long sermon on the toilet as follows:

Noises start coming from his body. Hark the mighty roars. They hold much promise.

He feels his guts moving. Swing low, swing high, sweet chariot. Blessed is the stool's motion, happy in its peals, its psalms to the end of all meals. He tears the newspaper into small pieces. He's making confetti. Triomf, Triomf, here comes the bride, big, fat and wide.

He wipes his arse. Truly, when this happens, it feels like the seventh day, the day of rest. Emptied and unburdened. Everything well. Peace on earth. (*T*, 328)

What turns this piece of satirical writing into an abject moment is the choice of words used to describe his release. His discourse is interspersed with citations from religious texts and with a touch of blasphemy; he even suggests that he is a God-like figure who has been involved in the creation of the world in six days. This connection between God and faeces calls to mind Freud's analysis of the patient called "The Wolf Man", in which he concludes that

'God-shit' was probably an abbreviation for an offering that one occasionally hears mentioned in its unabbreviated form. 'Shitting on God' [*auf Gott scheissen*] or 'shitting something for God' [*Gott etwas scheissen*] also means giving him a baby or getting him to give one a baby. (1979: 322)

There is also a sense of pleasure and enjoyment in this scene when the subject finally manages to pass a stool because, according to Freud (1979: 322), the "column of faeces" acts as a stimulant of the erotogenic sides of the bowel, just like the penis does during vaginal intercourse, resulting in anal eroticism.

By passing a stool, the subject separates "a little one" from his body, which is analogous to the separation between the maternal body and the child that forms the basis of Kristeva's theory of abjection. She writes as follows in this regard:

Contrary to what enters the mouth and nourishes, what goes out of the body, out of its pores and openings, points to the infinitude of the body proper and gives rise to abjection. Fecal matter signifies, as it were, what never ceases to separate from a body

in a state of permanent loss in order to become autonomous, distinct from the mixtures, alterations, and decay that run through it. That is the price the body must pay if it is to become clean and proper. Psychoanalysis has indeed seen that anal dejection constitutes the first material separation that is controllable by the human being. (Kristeva, 1982:108)

5.4 Milla's pregnant body

Both Milla and Agaat represent abject bodies in *Agaat*, and they are in contrast to Jak with his narcissistic obsession with exercise, weight lifting and studying his progress in a large mirror in his room.¹⁰⁶ Through Jak's male gaze, Milla's body is associated with the abject when she is with child and he finds her pregnant body repulsive:

Jak was repelled by your pregnant body. He couldn't stand being close to you, he couldn't even hide it any more. Gone he was suddenly on that morning of the twelfth of August with the bakkie to an obstacle race with rowing and swimming and cycling at Witsand. (A, 173)

The body of the female object, which up till then has been associated with eroticism, is now associated with motherhood and the carrying of a possible heir to the dynasty. Jak's obsession with his own physique suggests not only his egocentric narcissism but has overtones of jealousy:

The bigger you grew with child the more time Jak spent on his appearance. He became fastidious about what he ate, combinations of certain foods at certain times, power

¹⁰⁶ When asked about the use of mirrors and mirror imagery in *Agaat*, Van Niekerk (2009: 149) answers as follows: "Oh ja, the mirrors were very important. Some of the mirrors stuff I didn't understand myself, I just knew it was right on an intuitive/instinctual basis; I mean mostly when one writes one has ideas that you don't understand, but for me it was important because of the narcissism that I wanted to emphasise. So I give everybody a mirror: I give Agaat a cracked mirror or a broken one; I give Jak a full-wall one; and I give Milla one with wings that can be adjusted by somebody else; and a broken middle pane that had been broken at some point that reflects differently."

supplements that stood around in tins in the kitchen. ... Every night before coming to bed he trained with his weights in the stoep room. Every morning and every evening he went for long runs in the mountains and almost every weekend since you fell pregnant he went off to take part in tennis tournaments or races. (A, 117)

Jak realises that he will no longer be the primary object of affection to Milla and will be replaced once the child is born. When the baby is eventually borne, Jak is not present during the birth but goes to an “obstacle race with rowing and swimming and cycling in Witsand.” (A, 173) Unavailable to assist his wife during the birth of his son, Jak opts to spend his time “in his canoe on the Breede River” (A, 183). Jak has turned into Narcissus, into someone who is obsessed with his own looks when he is confronted with the grotesque pregnant body of his sexual partner and wife.¹⁰⁷ It would seem that he is trying to ward off the abject by being so obsessed with sport and fitness.

There is not enough time to reach the hospital so Milla has to give birth to Jakkie in the back of her car in the Tradouw Pass. The description of the birth places it within the sphere of the abject, particularly with descriptions of blood spurting (A, 182) or of “strings dangling, slime and threads of blood” (A, 182). The heir to the farm is not born in the sanitised hospital environment but in the back of a car in the middle of nowhere, exposed to the elements and without proper medical care at hand. It is significant that the mother, following the birth of her son, remarks as follows:

¹⁰⁷ Elliott (2008) describes Jak as “the charming, feckless looker” who blinds Milla with his “seductive surface”. This description underscores the fact that Jak is a Narcissus figure, who is obsessed with his own beauty.

Tradouw, you thought, a child of the Tradouw. Gantouw, the way of the eland, Tradouw, the way of the women. (A, 179)

The new-born son and heir is immediately associated with “the way of the women” and pre-empted the tussle between Milla and Agaat over the child. The remark also emphasises the importance of the matriarchal lineage in the text, because the son is associated with “the way of the women”.¹⁰⁸

On the birth of the male heir, Ma is the one who announces the birth of the son and heir to the dynasty in the following words to Milla:

It's a boy, she said, a fast boy. A real De Wet. All its toes and fingers and a handy spanner. His father's pretty mouth. You tore badly, along the cut to the top. (A, 183)

The young child is immediately regarded as a bearer of the phallus – in the words of the grandmother it is seen as “a handy spanner”; a tool that can be utilised. Jak, as the absent father figure, is almost feminised when the emphasis is placed on his “pretty mouth” that the child has inherited. In contrast to the mouth, Ma mentions that Milla “[was torn] badly, along the cut to the top” (A, 183) and that Agaat “got hold of [Milla] a bit roughly” (A, 183).

Milla's wound is described again in somewhat abject terminology (“torn” and “cut”) and her vagina looks like a wound that has to be sewn up. The maternal grandmother's words echo

¹⁰⁸ The British edition of *Agaat* was published in 2008 as *The Way of the Women*. In reviewing the novel, Brodwin (2009) comments on the intricate relationship between the two women and Jakkie: “But Agaat's close connection with the newborn son brings a much more subversive and damaging shift in power. Milla's longed-for son places all his trust and affection with the maid, and Milla and her husband, Jak, are sidelined.”

the assumption that the vagina is seen as the wound of castration where the female was robbed of her penis (and subsequently of her phallic power as well). In this scene we have the maternal rivalry between female subject and her mother following the birth of a son and heir – a significant deed since Ma was unable to bear her husband a son and heir. In line with Kristeva's theory of incestuous relations, this suggests that Milla as daughter is giving birth to her father's son.

5.5 Milla's diseased body

Milla's body is transformed from that of a healthy, economically viable individual into a bedridden abject body suffering from motor neuron disease. She is paralysed, unable to speak and only communicates with Agaat, through the blinking of her eyes.

The decay in Milla's body is described in abject terms and emphasis placed on the loss of functions and the bodily sensations associated with her helplessness. Milla, the once proud owner of Grootmoedersdrift, regresses into an almost childlike state in which she relies entirely on Agaat and has to be fed, cleaned and entertained.

Milla's feeling of absolute helplessness is evident in the following:

As if I can protest.

As if I can eat.

Breakfast.

Can one call it breakfast?

I have no choice but to swallow it. (A, 11)

Milla's diseased body is reduced to a numb immobile monstrosity subjected to the whims of her medical practitioner and her nurse. Agaat has to bathe her, feed her and even decide which music she has to listen to. From Milla's own perspective, she sees herself as being "locked up in [her] own body" (A, 21). The monstrosity of her body is inferred when she describes her hands as "the shrivelled little claws of mine" (A, 340) with their ingrown nails and in her description of her hard toenails as her "dog's-nails".¹⁰⁹

The link between food and the abject is evident in cases where Agaat has to feed Milla and Milla uses expressions such as the following to describe her sensory awareness of the food in her mouth: "I feel the porridge ooze down both sides of my tongue," (A, 41); "food that can't be swallowed and gets stuck to the roof of [her] mouth" (A, 43). There is also the description of the brushing of her teeth (A, 59), which reduces Milla to the status of an animal: "lifting of her lip" and the "chalky taste of the powder" (A, 61) left in her mouth or the "long strings of drool" (A, 63) drawn out by Agaat in her surgical gloves.

Milla's diseased body is also washed and cleaned by Agaat and she is responsible for "unfastening the nappy between [Milla's] legs" (A, 79). Since Milla has no control over her bodily functions, actions such as urinating or excreting become rather difficult (A, 81). Milla's bowel movements are described in a somewhat lengthy passage in the text (A, 393).

¹⁰⁹ This calls to mind the monstrosity of Lambert who is described in similar terms.

The unsuspecting reader is partially prepared for what is to come when Milla refers to the “green food and black food” that she has to eat in order to prepare her digestive system for the “great purgation scene” (A, 393) that is to follow. Should the food not be sufficient, then the process becomes more intense and even more dehumanising: “[S]he’ll push a pipe up me and pump me full of lukewarm saline water.” (A, 394) When Agaat arrived on the farm as a young child, ironically enough, it was Milla who had to undertake her potty training (A, 560) and now the tables are turned and Milla has regressed into an infantile state where she has no control over her bowel movements, as was the case with the young Agaat. Regarding the relationship between the mother and the child being potty-trained, Barrett (2011: 96) writes as follows:

Because the mother presides over the care and training of the infant at a time prior to language, her handling of the child’s bodily functions operate through a binary logic that articulates prohibitions related to maintaining the clean and proper body. This constitutes what Kristeva calls a primal or semiotic mapping of the body that precedes, and it is a precondition of the child’s entry into the symbolic.

The diseased Milla is regressing into a child-like state and is completely dependent on the Other, who now has to play the role of the care-giver and a substitute mother object. Despite the humoristic discourse associated with Milla’s stool, one still detects elements of the abject in the description of the entire humiliating ordeal. Compare, in this regard, the use of a suppository to assist with the process:

She pushes a hand in between my legs from the front. She runs a finger through the split of my buttocks to find the right entrance. She pushes in a finger to relax the sphincter. ... The point of the pill is hard. She pushes it in without ceremony. Take it, she says, take, swallow it. Otherwise I’m taking the horse’s pill-gun. (A, 399)

The threat to use “the horse’s pill-gun” reiterates that the diseased body is regressing into some form of animal existence. Milla’s complete dependency on Agaat is also evident as Agaat enters her anal cavity with her finger in order to “relax the sphincter”. This act emulates anal intercourse, with Milla, although the mistress, being relegated to the passive partner when she is entered by the servant’s finger as substitute phallus. Sphincteral control is one of the first actions that a young child associates with pleasure:

If both retaining and voiding matter from the body can be pleasurable – and experience teaches us that it can be both of these things – sensual pleasure can accrue to these activities and their derivatives just as it can to the oral erotogenic zone. (Badcock, 1988: 72)

The crossing of the boundary between anal pleasure and abject disgust occurs during Milla’s experiences of release from her constipation:

Here it comes. Here I lie, I can do no other. Covered whiter than snow or not.

Don’t carry on so, Ounooi. You’re not a child, good heavens!

Just in time. The enamel is cold under my buttocks.

She pinches her nose with one hand, pulls over the sheet with the other. Oh say can you hear, she says on a bated breath, the thunder almighty? ...

[S]he mimics the sound emanating from me ... My stomach loosens in spasms and cramps. Over the rim of the pan. I can feel it. I can smell myself. (A, 401-402)

By mimicking the sounds made by Milla and pinching her nose, Agaat distances herself from the unclean body of her mistress. This contrasts with the earlier intimacy between the two, when Agaat acted as nurse and administered the suppository. The diseased body is now associated with excrement and stench and is threatening to her. Since Milla is unable to

speak, Agaat is the bearer of phallic power in this instance because she is able to voice her disgust, whereas Milla is speaking in some sort of pre-oedipal language, consisting of mere sounds.

After Milla's death, the preparation of the corpse for burial is also Agaat's task and is described from Jakkie's perspective:

Relieved after all that I was too late. Couldn't have stomached it. Agaat herself sewing Ma up in the fully-embroidered gown, Agaat lifting Ma into the coffin, placing the hand-splint that she wrote with in the last years in the coffin as well and screwing down the lid. Nobody else was allowed to touch her, according to the undertaker. (A, 678)

By touching the dead body, the Other, Agaat, has willingly transgressed the taboo associated with dead flesh. This final deed of compassion is also an act of getting rid of the abject body of the surrogate mother object who had reared the Other as her own child. The "fully-embroidered gown" is one of Agaat's creations, and by wrapping the body in this gown, she ensures that the corpse, as the ultimate object of abjection, is hidden and her death instinct, as the subject, is fulfilled. The only desire left in the diseased body of the subject is to die, knowing full well that she will never recover. Now she has reached "the border of [her] condition as a living being" (Kristeva, 1982: 3) and once buried, she can no longer disturb the order.

5.6 Agaat's deformed arm

Agaat, however, despite her important position in the household, is also portrayed as an abject body. Encountering the young Agaat sitting in “the corner of the blackened hearth” (A, 656), the first thing, apart from her thin frail body, that Milla notices is

a deformed arm, thin and underdeveloped, the hand bent down from the wrist, the fingers half squashed together, the thumb folded in so that it looked like a shell, like the hand that [Milla's] father taught [her] to make by candlelight when [she] wanted to imitate the flat head of a snake. (A, 656)

From the outset, Agaat is associated with the abject: she is depicted as dirty, she lives in a hearth, she is emaciated and her body is covered in scars and bruises. The hearth is associated with fire and cooking, thus recalling Kristeva's reflections on the impurity of uncooked food and its association with the abject. However, the hearth is usually a place of gathering together and sharing ideas, but in the case of Agaat, it does not elicit such connotations.

Agaat has been abused both physically and sexually by her siblings and by her father. The dirty hearth could be read as signifying some form of *chora* where she, as the young subject-in-process, has found safety and security. Within this *chora*, she does not speak and it is only when she is threatened that her father will be asked for her name, that she attempts to speak by uttering some “guttural sound” (A, 657). The only name that Milla can really make out is nothing more than a “scraping sound” (A, 657). These attempts at communication suggest that the child subject has not been taught to speak properly and as a result finds herself in a pre-oedipal almost regressive state where she is only able to make sounds and cannot form

proper words. She has also not been given a proper name by the symbolic order and the phallic father, represented by the male, her father, sleeping on the mattress on the floor.

He is the representative of the symbolic order, who has to name the child, but she fears him and attempts to communicate in some form of semiotic language with the female object who will eventually assume the position of substitute mother in her life. Incidentally, the father object in the young child's life is a drunkard and is abusive and violent. He is otherwise uninvolved in her life and is associated with pain and suffering, which foresees the type of life that she will eventually lead as a deformed being in the symbolic order.

As a result of her deformity, she will always be associated with the abject, but it is during her stay on the farm with Milla that she eventually manages to transcend the impediments of living as a physically disadvantaged person, when she takes over the running of the household and the farm in Milla's absence.

Initially, Agaat's family thought that her arm was nothing more than "a bit of gut hanging out" (A, 664), and subsequently, her father refused to acknowledge her as his child. According to him, there were no deformities in his family, which suggests that, in his mind, this lack of a proper healthy body disturbs the existing order and marks Agaat's body as that of an Other; an abject Other who is to be shunned and scorned.

The father does not acknowledge the fact that *he* was the one who had kicked Agaat's mother in the stomach during one of his drunken and violent episodes. As is the case in *Triomf*, this

incident also shows that conduct outside of the accepted norms of the symbolic order may result in the birth of a defective and abject child.

Agaat, with her deformed arm, is also at the mercy of Jak's critical gaze, characterised by an obsession with bodily perfection, which explains why he refers to Milla and Agaat as "a wonky-legged woman and a one-armed golliwog" (A, 378). He thus shows his obsession with their physical flaws, and it is a clear attempt at humiliating them. Even when Agaat came to live with them as a young child, he observed that she gave him "the creeps" (A, 474), probably because he saw this deformed object of derision as a threat to the existing order in his environment. His means of defence against the onslaught of the abject is to overcompensate with exercise, taking supplements and working out with weights in front of a huge mirror in his study, wherein he can monitor his progress.

The question does arise: Why does Jak always associate the female objects in his life with the abject? Is there a definite rejection of the female Other, particularly because he regards their bodies as inadequate and imperfect? Does his narcissistic attitude display a homosexual tendency towards self-love of the masculine ideal? Or is he only able to act out his masculinity in a context characterised by physical activity and an obsession with violence and military precision? His on-going obsession with the fact that the female objects in his life are castrating him and stealing his phallic power results in his turning inwards, particularly when both Milla and Agaat try to keep his son away from him.

Jak does not have 'affairs' with other women, despite the fact that they admire him (A, 119) for his beauty. He channels his repressed sexual energy into physical activities, and when he and Milla infrequently have sexual intercourse, it is usually very violent and she has to seduce him first. One attempt at seduction ends in him humiliating Milla and remarking sarcastically:

Poor Jak de Wet, look at him, see what his wife has made of him, Jak said, as if addressing the portrait [of Milla's great-grandmother]. First the stud bull. Then the obelisk. What dost thou say, O Great-Grandmother? You are after all the origin of the world around here. (A, 347-348)

Another incidence of abjection occurs after the discovery that the servant girl Agaat is breastfeeding the young Jakkie (A, 205), and the first signs thereof are the "wet patches on the uniform". Milla describes the breastfeeding scene as follows:

There is A with her back to me on the apple box in front of her bed. Her one shoulder bare, the crooked bones of the deformed side wide open to view & I look & I see & I can't believe what I see, perhaps I dreamed it, the apron's shoulder band is off & the sleeve of the dress hangs empty & her head is bent to the child on her lap. Could just see his little feet sticking out on the one side. Perfectly contented. There I see on her bed on a white towel untouched lies the fourth bottle full of milk. There I stand in the drizzle on the paint tin ... & I listen to the little sounds, it sucks & sighs, it's a whole language out there in the outside room; I can almost not bring myself to write it. (A, 206)

Agaat performs the role of a wet nurse, a surrogate mother who breastfeeds the child, and the scene with her and the baby reminds one of a typical Madonna and Child painting, such as the ones by created Bernini and analysed by Kristeva (1980: 237-270). This breastfeeding scene has religious overtones and anticipates the closeness between Agaat and the older Jakkie throughout the novel. Agaat is Jakkie's confidante and she is the link between him

and his parents, particularly after he has fled the country and begun his life as an ethnomusicologist in Canada. Commenting on the relationship between Agaat and Jakkie, Stobie (2009: 64) reads the breastfeeding scene as Agaat's "secret act of revenge against Milla" because Agaat has replaced Milla by breastfeeding her son and no longer regards herself as Milla's child.

Despite avenging herself on Milla, Agaat acts out her own maternal instincts in this scene and acts as if she has given birth to a child. This feeding of the male child is an attempt by the daughter to steal the mother's child and alienate him from her. The nurse attempts to supplant the mother, resulting in an interesting twist in the whole oedipal triangle, because it causes confusion as to who might represent the mother functions to the young child.

During this close encounter between surrogate mother and child, Agaat tells Jakkie her own life story but amends it to sound as if she were really his mother:

And when the noon struck in the church towers on both sides of the mountain, then she took the child out of the blood and the slime and she cut the string and she cleaned him and she covered him in cloth and she gave him a name that only she knew about.

You-are-mine she called him.

And he grew up on her breast and she washed him when he was dirty and gave him milk when he was thirsty and rubbed his tummy when he had winds ...

I am slave but You-are-mine, she always whispered in his ear before she handed him over to his mother. (A, 690-691; Kristeva's italics)

By calling him "You-are-mine", she suggests the possessive nature of the surrogate mother who believes that she is a substitute for the real mother. This name becomes the

“hieroglyph” (Kristeva, 1982: 34) which turns the unnameable into the nameable. Because of the frailty and impossibility of the relationship between the servant and the young master (which the father-master tries to put an end to) it is merely a case of satisfying the expression of want. On his side, the young boy accepts this relationship passively and never questions it. This reading of the passage differs from existing analyses which foreground a shamanic interpretation to it.¹¹⁰

Significantly, this intimacy is played out in Agaat’s outside room, which is her private space. The mother is witness to the semiotic language used by the child towards his surrogate mother when he uses “sucks & sighs” to communicate with her. The subject-in-process desires the breast of the surrogate mother to fulfil his needs and is unable to distinguish whether it is his real mother or not. Ironically, his mother provides him merely with a “bottle of milk”. In her discussion of the mother and child relationship, Kristeva (1982: 105) calls mother’s milk “a food that does not separate but binds”, and in the case of Agaat, it leads to a binding together of the male subject-in-process and the female Other, who is trying to usurp the maternal object’s dominance in the child’s life by providing him with her breast and her milk.

5.7 Johannes Wiid’s diseased body

¹¹⁰ See for instance Carvalho (2009) and Olivier (2011).

In *Memorandum*, the main character, Johannes Wiid, suffers from cancer and on the night before his hospitalisation for “radio-frequency ablation of the cancerous tumours in [his] liver” (*M*, 10), he starts to write his “memorandum” about the two strange characters he encounters while in hospital. He introduces them as “Mr Wheelchair” and “Mr Dark Glasses” and cannot help but hear all of their Beckett-like absurd dialogue. Eventually, he decides to call them “X” and “Y” respectively (*M*, 14). He meticulously makes lists of all the strange words that he hears them say, and with these words, “all ludicrously misspelt” and “cryptic” (*M*, 26), he attempts to reconstruct their conversations with the help of the librarian. The result of his research into the various topics discussed by Mr X and Mr Y has the effect of “a tonic” (*M*, 27).

In the case of *Memorandum*, the reader is confronted with the portrayal of three abject bodies within the abject space of a hospital. Although Wiid does not participate in any of the conversations between Mr X and Mr Y, he seems to be blessed with a phenomenal memory and recalls most of what the two say during their dialogues. Later on, with the help of the librarian, Joop Buytendacht, he is able to look up some of the words and terms used.

As in the scene with his parents, in hospital, Wiid again acts as an “eavesdropper” (*M*, 20) and even calls himself as “a sponge that absorbed everything, finally a hart panting after water brooks” (*M*, 20). He describes his two fellow patients:

X, the fanatical poet without fee, who chattered about birds and birds’ nests, Y, the blind mocker, who delivered one speech after another on antique building methods, the foundation of cities and on hospitals when he wasn’t singing? What were they to each

other that they could talk like that to each other? A secret language filled with nonsensical references, which they bandied to and fro? (*M*, 23)

During their altercations, the two physically challenged patients provide the terminally ill Wiid with a unique opportunity to broaden his horizons on a variety of subjects. Aspects of their conversations, such as their “pronouncements on the history of medical care” (*M*, 52) annoy him because he feels sorry for the nurses who have to suffer under their verbal onslaught. He even goes as far as calling X and Y “two agitators” (*M*, 53) who are out to undermine the structured environment of the hospital. As guests of the hospital system, they should show some gratitude and refrain from criticism. This conduct is typical of the bureaucratic Wiid who has always been meticulous in his work as a city planner and as someone who has never criticised the hegemonic apparatus of municipality and state.

It is, however, only after he familiarises himself with Mr X and Mr Y’s conversational references to architecture, music and philosophy (included in the text as Addendum 2, Memorandum I – *M*, 132-137) that he decides to phone the hospital and cancel his operation (*M*, 121):

A small adjustment to the schedule and they’ll forget that I was ever on the passenger list.

What is the alternative? That is the question. Such an act of consumer resistance, to quote Mr Y’s Illich, is possible only if one has some idea of one’s other options.

The interaction between the three abject bodies – even though Wiid never participates in the conversation – enriches his character and leads to an acceptance of his mortality and his willingness to face his own pain and suffering. Whereas he has previously mostly written official documents and memorandums in his job as city planner, he now writes the story of

the man “who lived with a lived liver” (*M*, 123) and he also becomes an autodidact and an intellectual like Mr X and Mr Y.

The writing process becomes increasingly important to him too, and the best form of “aftercare” that he envisages for himself is to sit at his table and type on his old Remington typewriter. The interaction with Mr X and Mr Y results in a critical assessment of his living conditions:

Apart from that, X and Y’s opinions are causing me to sit here gazing with a disillusioned eye at my living arrangements of thirty years. Perhaps a permanent removal isn’t such a bad idea at all, because what a cheerless place this is. It starts with the façade, a pinkish-grey six-storey building with an outside staircase, box balconies to the north. Fortunately I have the stone pine. How I survived here, heaven only knows. The back is even worse, frosted glass in the bathroom windows, view on roll-up garage doors. (*M*, 47)

Finally, having listened several times to Bach’s *Passacaglia*, Wiid renounces his isolated existence and becomes some sort of caregiver who is even willing to take the “lonely tramp” from the street into his flat and nurse him, in his new position as “friend and hospice” (*M*, 124). Wiid realises that he is probably not going to survive yet another operation and decides that he would rather live with the pain. His former way of life has “almost bereaved” (*M*, 124) him of a life of sensory experience.

The choice of Bach's music¹¹¹ to start this journey of self-expression is significant. Bach's music is known for its mathematical precision and thus fits in with Wiid's meticulously ordered way of life. Ian Bostridge (2005), the well-known tenor, comments on Bach's music as follows:

Bach is a strange mixture of the meta-physical and the emotional, a fitting father-figure to classical music. Grounded in the old-world picture, drawn to the music of the spheres, he produced oratorios and passions with profoundly human dimensions, but his music also seems – and I say this in spite of my own rationalism – to point beyond, nowhere more so than in his greatest fugues, where emotion and the cosmic achieve a thrilling synthesis.

Bach's music is, in my view, a rampart against the onslaught of abjection, with its mathematical precision and its devotion to a higher metaphysical ideal. Whilst listening to Bach, Wiid comes to his life-altering decision to be more compassionate and caring.

Consider the following excerpt from Wiid's final piece of writing:

I shall lift the manhole in the middle and there meet the goddess of this writing, Mania crowned with mottled bunch of snakes, and she and I and X and Y will walk along across the squares and walkways, by the termini of bus and taxi, the messy markets and the small cafés, the pawnshops and the dealers in second-hand wardrobes fill the fall at last of twilight, and I make my final home in the darkness of the shaft, there to feel as need dictates from down below with whispering this sad city. Stranger, be welcome to this place! Death has here been restored! (*M*, 124)

¹¹¹ The music of Bach plays a central role in Van Niekerk's oeuvre. One of her famous texts is the poem "By Toccata and Fuga in D Mineur". In this poem, she takes Bach's organ piece as a point of departure for a poem about her poetic manifesto.

Significant in this passage is the reference to the goddess Mania, who in Greek mythology is the goddess of madness and in Roman mythology, the goddess of the dead, who rules over the underworld with Mantus. From a psychotherapeutic point of view, *mania* is defined as:

a state of excessive or abnormally high arousal, mood and energy levels. Mania is often associated with bipolar disorder, which was known as manic-depressive disorder in the past. People with bipolar disorder experience cyclic periods of mania with alternating periods of major depression. (<http://psychology.about.com/od/mindex/g/mania.htm>)

The subject mistakenly imagines Mania with a “mottled bunch of snakes” on her head, usually the description given to the monster Medusa. The subject associates his writing (almost in the form of a tribute) to Mania and in turn changes her into a guide who accompanies him (and X and Y) on their journey through the “sad city”. In this passage, the subject is suffering from mania and, in his hallucinatory delirium, he prefers a life associated with abjection. He crosses a boundary between normal and abnormal when he decides to live in the “darkness of the shaft”, which in terms of Bachelard’s poetics of space, serves as “the valorisation of a centre of concentrated solitude” (1994: 32).

He also re-establishes unity with a maternal object (in the guise of madness and death) emblematically represented by Mania. The subject accepts his approaching death and experiences a sense of pleasure when he accepts his fate. His act is a “final rage against the Symbolic” (Kristeva, 1982: 178) and a return to a pre-oedipal state of semiotic modularity, with the shaft (and lid) as a uterine symbol.

Before deciding against any further medical treatment, Wiid meticulously kept a record of events, and Addendum 1, Memorandum 2 (*M*, 128-131) contains tables with information on

Wiid's surgery. From these tables, we deduce to what extent his body is associated with abjection and disease. His body is examined and entered with specific instruments and everything is accordingly entered into columns with headings such as Time, Place, Action, Agent, Outcome Positive and Outcome Negative. From these tables, we, can deduce that he has a tumour in his liver and several medical procedures are mentioned by means of which his body will be invaded and investigated: "insertion of nasal stomach tube & urinary catheter", "intravenous drip", "lower stomach incision", "examination of abdominal cavity", "[t]umour segment of colon removed" and "closing up of abdominal cavity".

In Table B there are references to his "colostomy and the post-operative trajectory" and his operation is described in detail:

Stoma incision on marked out templum on stomach skin. Mobilising of the colon proximate to tumour, pulling through of colon in a supported loop through the stoma incision & fixing of colon to ventral wall. ... Closing of ventral wall & opening of the extruded loop colon outside the ventral wall. Cutting open of colon. (*M*, 131)

This meticulous record of his disease and the medical interventions echo the remark by Vrettos (1995:181) that, with regard to disease, there has always been an "obsessive interest in the measurement, comparison, and differentiation of bodies". The diseased body of the subject is reduced to an object of scientific curiosity, and since it disturbs the norms and standards of what constitute a healthy society, it is relegated to the abject space of the hospital where it has to serve the development of science, but in the process, it is also completely dehumanised and becomes devoid of its subjecthood. The body is now an abject object to be studied and dissected.

Several figures act as “agents” during the process and there are references to Wiid, the ward sister, Dr Reinhard Snyman (aptly named since it means “Cutting Man”), the anaesthetist, the trolleyman, theatre sisters, the recovery ward sister, and the nurses. After Wiid’s release from hospital, the caretaker’s wife “brings oats in the morning & chicken soup in evening” (*M*, 129). All these characters form part of an interwoven network of abject objects whose aim is to care for the diseased body of the subject.

It is evident that the subject wants to liberate himself from this dehumanising process to which his body is being subjected. His decision is to refuse surgery and to accept his ensuing pain and possible death. Rather than submit to being an object of scientific curiosity and to be classified according to a medical discourse, he opts to live out his life in the more humane space of Mimosa Flats 17 in McIntyre Road, Parow. It is here that he wishes to die and to indulge in previously forbidden pleasures such as red wine or “a green-fig preserve for dessert” (*M*, 122) – in contrast to the tasteless hospital food or the oats or the chicken soup provided by the caretaker’s wife.

The subject’s acceptance of his imminent death is also an example of “rage against the Symbolic” (Kristeva, 1982: 178) as represented by the medical establishment and to a lesser extent, the bureaucratic municipality who employed Wiid as a city planner. In an imaginary report in the “local rag” (*M*, 83) following his death, Wiid envisages that his former employer Dr Ashraf Pillay would remark that “[Wiid] was intimately acquainted with traffic and sewage systems, park design, water purification installations and housing schemes in the area” (*M*, 84). And in conclusion,

Dr Pillay described Wiid as an unusually thorough and meticulous official, who seldom laughed and was extremely reserved in social contact.

Because of his lack of social skills, he is unable to invite his friend the librarian for supper because he does not know how to make conversation with him and subsequently decides to rather spend his time editing his memorandum:

Perhaps by that time I myself will have an idea of how I can make the thing more readable, shorten the sentences, rearrange the paragraphs, work out X and Y's conversation in more (or perhaps less?) detail, complete the footnotes, so that I can leave behind a rounded-off document, something that Joop one day when I'm no longer here can bind in a booklet and put on his shelf with the 'Parow Memorabilia', or in the catalogue under 'Memoirs of our Members'. (*M*, 123)

The subject, in the grip of the abject, decides to write about it as part of his cathartic analysis of his life. Just like Céline, Wiid is also at "that fragile spot of [his] subjectivity where [his] collapsed defenses reveal ... the wounding exterior turning into an abominable interior" (Kristeva, 1982: 135).

The subject's decision to write down his thoughts in his memorandum and letters, being the "experienced administrator" (*M*, 140) that he is, seems to be an attempt to ward off death and ensure immortality. In his essay on the concept of "the author", Foucault (1998: 206) shows that there is a "kinship between death and writing":

This relationship inverts the age-old conception of Greek narrative or epic, which was designed to guarantee the immortality of a hero. The hero accepted an early death because his life, consecrated and magnified by death, passed into immortality; and the narrative redeemed his acceptance of death. ... This conception of a spoken or written narrative as a protection against death has been transformed by our culture. Writing is now linked to *sacrifice and to the sacrifice of life itself*; it is a voluntary obliteration of the self that does not require representation in books because it takes place in the everyday existence of the writer. (Emphases added)

The subject's decision not to go for an operation but rather to focus on his intellectual activities and his writing in particular is not only his self-sacrifice but is also his desire for death and dying and the way in which he is driven towards death and self-destruction. His description of his writing project is in the language of abjection, especially his reference to outside/inside:

It is a jungle of sentences and paragraphs in which I have strung myself upside down. What is first, must be last, and what is outside, inside and every detail must be bricked in the right spot, it seems to me, but it's too late now to start afresh, or to draw up a proper plan. (*M*, 26-27)

The link between writing and death is a recurring theme in Van Niekerk's novels. In *Triomf* Lambert discovers the letter which explains the incestuous family secrets:

Vrededorp, 1938, it says. And in brackets after that: (The year of the ox-wagons.) And then: Ma and Pa and Treppie – 10, Little Mol – 14, Lambertus Jnr in front of our little house. ...

With love from Pop to you all, my flesh and blood, in memory of a big moment in the history of our volk. Given for safe keeping to Treppie (Marthinus), the apple of my eye, so he'll never forget from whence he comes. (T, 461)

Letters also play an important role in *Agaat*. One particular incident where there is a definite link between writing and death occurs when Jak reads the letter written by Jakkie, in which he tells Agaat of his decision not to stay in the army but to flee the country to Canada:

Dear Gaat, by the time you get this letter I'll have left the country. I asked somebody to post it for me in town once I'd gone, I hope it doesn't get intercepted. (A, 619)

The father figure is so enraged by this treachery of the son that he decides to take the letter to the authorities and arrange for his son to be arrested. This has tragic consequences because Jak is subsequently killed in a car accident with "a broken wattle branch [penetrating] his chest" (A, 620). The male subject's deed has triggered a series of events, including the death of the oedipal father. This has not liberated Jakkie from his filial duties as the only son and heir, but at the end of the narrative, he decides not to return to the farm and it is left in the hands of his surrogate mother, the servant who is both 'slave' and 'Other'.

5.8 Conclusion

At the centre of all three novels under discussion is a character defined by his or her abject body. They are either deformed or sick or are social pariahs and forced to live on the periphery of society. During their interaction with other characters, the issue of the border or the liminality that they have to cross is emphasised. The sick person has to go to the sanitised hospital and the consulting room of the doctor or the doctor has to visit the patient in her refurbished sick-room and thus has to cross the border between spaces associated with healthy living and one marked by disease. Or the character, product of an incestuous

relationship between sister and brothers, has to eke out an existence in the poorer parts of the city and spend his days on the trash heaps surrounding the city.¹¹²

The abject body, as is evident from my analysis, transgresses the boundaries of society and is inscribed into a series of binary oppositions such as sick/healthy, life/death, normal/abnormal. From the viewpoint of the symbolic order and its obsession with cleanliness, the abject body has to be pushed out to the margins of society and turned into some object of derision. Similarly, when expressing one's feelings about abject bodies in the language of the symbolic order, it is deemed appropriate to use a metaphor such as "the plague", and in the words of Kristeva (1982: 32), it is "something to be scared of".

¹¹² Barnard (2007: 137) talks of the "apartheid city as uncanny palimpsest" because the main characters in *Triomf* are predominantly racist, yet "their decay is initiated by the discovery of 'kaffir bones' in their back yard."

Chapter 6: Abject Spaces

“Just look at the house,” says the one. Lambert sees how they look the house up and down, with their hands on their sides.

“Looks like it’s falling to pieces,” says the other one.

“Just look at all the rubbish under that roof,” says the first one.

“Bad,” says the white constable. “Bad to the bone.” (*T*, 112)

All the rooms of my house, the progress to where I am now, the history leading to this last room, the domain remaining to me. Shrinking domain. I’m locked up in my own body, my limbs form a vague contour under the bedspread. (*A*, 21)

That what is fixed in a house can be wheeled away in a hospital? (*M*, 44)

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I focused on the representation of abject bodies in the three novels under discussion, and in this chapter, the emphasis is on abject spaces, populated by characters that are constantly “ejected beyond patriarchal social systems of rationality, order, and value” (Mickalites, 2008: 502). A good example of such abject characters is the lesbian couple in *Triomf*, who live across the street from the Benade family and are subjected to the male gazes of both Treppie and Lambert. They do not subscribe to the heteronormative notions of sexuality and are thus open to ridicule. Treppie’s remark is significant in this regard because it suggests their outsider status within this community:

Those two look like the type with money to spend on fertilizer. He wonders what they think they’re doing here in *Triomf*, and, why they’ve got so much time for gardening. If you ask him, they don’t exactly look unfit for employment. (*T*, 189)

Unlike most of the inhabitants in Triomf, the two women are employed and do not live on state grants, which contributes to their outsider status. However, it is in particular the sexual habits of the two lesbians that satisfy Lambert's voyeuristic curiosities and he is quick to tell his family that the two women across the street "fuck each other" (*T*, 190) and then goes into detail about what he has observed. The two women are also objects of curiosity because of the kind way in which they treat their gardener. This differs markedly from the behaviour of the other inhabitants of Triomf and their racist treatment of black people in particular.

This racism is evident from the beginning of the novel when Mol says that the rubbish that Lambert has dug out "[m]ust still smell of kaffir" (*T*, 1). Triomf, the suburb for "less privileged whites" (*T*, 2) was built on the ruins of Sophiatown:

The city in *Triomf* is, in part, an architectonic phenomenon, where the human habitation of Johannesburg, the city of gold, *Egoli*, is epitomized through the relentless metaphorical delving of the novel into the social and political archaeology of the recent past. The habitation of the atavistic Benade family is an incessant reminder of the distorted value systems represented by the construction of a British (and Western) imperial urban culture upon the African high terrain named "Witwatersrand" by European settlers. In this process, the behaviour of the Benades can be seen in the novel as entirely dependent on their location, which is contemporary Triomf, formerly Sophiatown, and soon to be "Sophiatown" again. (Stotesbury. 2004: 26)

Triomf is a suburb populated predominantly by poor Whites and the Benade family is one of the families living in this environment. Historically, Sophiatown was home to black people who were marginalised by the system. In the apartheid years, it became the home of poor white people who were marginalised because of their economic position and possibly

because they did not live up to the stereotype of the industrious, hardworking Afrikaner.¹¹³ The system tried to marginalise the “poor whites”, but because of the colour of their skin, they had to be endured since they formed part of the superior class within the apartheid class system. Triomf was created by the Law of the Father as represented by the White government of the day. Throughout the novel, the characters are preparing for the 1994 elections that would herald a new political dispensation in South Africa and the symbolic Father, represented by the people canvassing votes on behalf of the National Party, is making a last minute attempt to reaffirm its position of power. It is evident from the remarks made by the National Party workers, Jannie and Annemarie, two young people canvassing for votes for the NP, that they only need the Benade vote to win the election:

“The people in this house are scum. They make me sick in my stomach,” she says. ...

“Where do you think the old bag is today, Jannie? the girl asks.

“God only knows, Annemarie. Must be lying in the back here somewhere. Befucked. Bee-fucked!” He laughs. ...

“I don’t know why we still canvas this lot. They’re rotten, worse than ...”

The man holds up his finger. “Hang on, gogga, count your words. These people are the voting public. Every NP vote is worth its weight in gold.” (*T*, 135)

It is against this background that I wish to focus on the first abject space of my discussion, namely the house of the people described as “the scum”.

¹¹³ Devarenne (2006: 111) describes Triomf as “a site of ethnic ‘purification’.” According to her, “the untenability of white racial superiority is demonstrated by Triomf’s inhabitants and by the Benades particularly. The real lives of these poor whites belie their supposed genetic superiority: as the products of in-breeding, their genes are ‘scrambled’.”

6.2 The house at 127 Martha Street¹¹⁴

The Benade house at 127 Martha Street is another example of an abject space – almost like an abject space within the larger abject zone of Triomf. This dilapidated house serves here as emblematic of the semiotic order, wherein the norms and regulations of the symbolic order are not applicable. The house is in disarray, is falling apart; there is no sense of proper planning and structure – no decent meals, just broken furniture and overall dilapidation. The only outsiders who are allowed into this abject space are the Jehovah’s Witnesses (regarded as a sect by the state church at the time) and the young people canvassing votes for the NP (the party associated with white minority rule since 1948). In classical Freudian and Jungian psychology, a house serves as a symbol of the psyche, with the attic and the cellar as representing the conscious and unconscious minds respectively. Freud (1976: 156) describes “the house” as symbolising “the organism as a whole” and regards actions such as opening of doors as one of “the commonest sexual symbols”.

As mentioned above, the establishment of the new Triomf in line with the official racialist policies of the government is a direct result of the workings of the symbolic order and in particular the Law of the Father, associated with the then government. Amidst this highly regulated existence, one finds the Benade house, described as follows:

¹¹⁴ Stotesbury (2004: 24) describes the Benade’s house as “both metaphor and metonym in relation to the Afrikaner and the apartheid state. At times it is riven by internal dissension, but at the same time it functions as a bastion against a hostile world, a latter-day fortress community set artificially apart from its larger urban and African context, a grim reminder of the worst aspects of the crucible of the Boers in the self-inflicted isolation it has endured throughout history.”

[Mol] stands up and walks away from the house. Some of the roof's corrugated strips have come loose. Every year a few more. She's going to have to put down empty tins and buckets all over the show again. Leaks. Just leaks all over the place.

And then there's also the overflow that keeps on dripping. The dripping is so bad that all the wood is peeling off. Here and there the wood has rotted through completely. Loose pieces hang from the roof. (*T*, 9)

Another description of the house's exterior is given by one of the policemen who had to restore the peace after Lambert's altercation with the neighbours:

'Just look at the house,' says the one. Lambert sees how they look the house up and down, with their hands on their sides.

'Looks like it's falling to pieces,' says the other one.

'Just look at all the rubbish under that roof,' says the first one.

'Bad', says the white constable, 'Bad to the bone.'

'Ag jirre, shame,' says the Coloured constable. (*T*, 112)

Obviously, the house is in a state of decay and the description of dilapidated outside hints at the inner rot associated with the moral decay inside the house. It is significant that the Coloured constable, himself marginalised by the racially dominated system, also considers the Benade establishment to be abject.

Mol sees herself as the centre of the household, as the one who holds the family together (*T*, 250) and thus plays a pivotal role in this semiotic order – directly in contrast to the regulated Other outside. Inside the house, a strong mother-son relationship is delineated and the demands of Lambert as the male subject-in-process dominate the narrative. Any outburst by Lambert, the pre-oedipal subject, leads to him breaking the post box and smashing the furniture and the mirror, and shows the attempts of the subject-in-process to liberate himself from the hold of the abject mother and in particular from her domineering presence in the

semiotic order. The crude expressions used by Lambert, for example when he calls her “the old cunt of a mother” (*T*, 93) or “dumb cunt” (*T*, 101) suggest his frustration at his inability to free himself. She is reduced to a corporeal orifice in a futile attempt by the male subject to ward off the fearful maternal figure. The mother’s genitals, associated with childbearing and menstruation, are associated with both “the fear of women” and “the fear of procreation” (Kristeva, 1982: 77). His verbal abuse is some sort of mantra-like cry, which he uses to ward off her frightening presence.¹¹⁵

From her perspective, as the narrating agency, Mol also comments on the exterior of the house and points out its fragile nature when she compares it to a shell:

The house is dark and closed. She can see the cracks on their outside walls in the light of the streetlamps. The house is just a shell. But she knows that the stuff inside that shell is thick. Thick and quiet from all the things that have happened. All that escapes from the thick stuff inside is the flickering blue light of the TV, playing without sound behind the curtains. ... Funny you’d expect the house to be heavy from all the stuff that goes on. But the house is light. It looks like it wants to float up, like a little balloon. (*T*, 255)

The notion of the house as a floating balloon suggests the fragile nature of the semiotic order, and the mother appears fearful of the symbolic order. She is aware that the child will have to break his ties with her, even if he is, as in the case of Lambert, abnormal (“Frankenstein’s monster” (*T*, 268) as Treppie calls him) and will never be able to function properly as a fully-

¹¹⁵ I discussed the interaction between Lambert and Mary in the previous chapter, pointing out that in his fit of anger directed at her, he uses the same type of register to express his anger.

fledged member of the symbolic order. Compare in this regard Mol's remark that Lambert "wasn't born to mess with women, [and] he must make peace with his lot in life" (*T*, 33).

The house is later painted, in a symbolic gesture suggesting a renovation of the protected abject space, but despite this, the inner rot will continue. It is at this time that Lambert learns about his true origin: his father, Pop, is in fact his mother's brother. In contrast to the traditional pattern of the Oedipus drama, the subject, in this case, murders the father figure and also loses a limb, through amputation, in the process (*T*, 469). This symbolic castration of the subject suggests that he will never leave the limitations of the semiotic order and will thus never be liberated from the constraints imposed on him by the abject mother. The death of the father also implies the effacement of the incest taboo and the collusion between the abject mother and the two male objects following the death of the father figure:

'We were painting', said Treppie. 'The house, I mean, and I saw him clutching his chest.'
'And then he moered off the ladder,' said Lambert. 'Boom! On his head.'
'Moered off?' asked the doctor.
'That's right', said Treppie. 'That's what happened. We all saw it.'
Then she also maar said 'yes, Pop fell on his head'. (*T*, 468)

Ironically, this new sense of collusion between the three of them also serves as an indication of a new type of oedipal structure in which Lambert will remain a subject-in-process, now confined to a wheelchair (*T*, 470), and will remain within the constraints of the semiotic order. There cannot be two fathers within the oedipal triangle, and one way of getting rid of the obsolete father figure is through patricide; the other is by incapacitation or castration. Mol observes that following Pop's death, Lambert acts as if he were the "boss of the house"

(*T*, 470) but that she is really in control because now “she’s faster than him” (*T*, 470) and able to outrun him. This abject space is thus under the control of the abject mother even though the male subject believes that he is now the phallic father figure who is in charge.¹¹⁶ The three are also confronted with what Kristeva calls “the utmost of abjection”, namely the dead body of Pop. Mol describes it as being “blue” but with Pop’s nose being white (*T*, 467). At the sight of the corpse, they are forced to form a united front against the symbolic order that threatens their existence in the form of a possible murder charge, post mortems and the issuing of death certificates. The corpse disturbs the order within the abject semiotic order sustained by Mol, Treppie and Lambert, and it, therefore, has to be disposed of. A decision is taken not to bury Pop but to cremate his body and bury the ashes in the garden.

6.3 Agaat in the hearth¹¹⁷

As with the abject space portrayed in *Triomf*, namely a dilapidated house inhabited by poor Whites, the first abject space to be considered in *Agaat* is also situated in a run-down house, that is, the house of the workers on the farm. It is in the hearth, usually the heart of the house, that Milla discovers Agaat as a young child. Here she is kept like a modern

¹¹⁶ For Du Plessis (2009: 60) Pop represents the “debunked patriarch ebbing out of the present” because he realises that the supremacy of white males has come to an end. As representative of the symbolic order, Pop has to bow out and relinquish control.

¹¹⁷ The hearth in the worker’s cottage differs considerably from the one recreated by Agaat in her servant’s quarters on the farm. Carvalho (2006: 249) comments in this regard as follows: “Opposing Milla’s feeble attempts to create a homely environment, Agaat decorates her room in a feral style. ... As Milla found Agaat in a hearth, the fireplace holds the closest identification with the Coloured woman’s cultural origins. Consequently, the fireplace houses her ‘secret other self, [her]concealed feral energy’ (2006:566), which is at complete odds with her role as compliant servant.”

Cinderella figure (*Aschenputschel*) sitting in the ash, who is repeatedly abused. Agaat is described from Milla's perspective:

Only when you pushed open a shutter did you notice the child, crouched in the corner of the blackened hearth with the knuckles of one hand crammed into her mouth.

You went on your knees in front of the hearth. The child was bitterly thin, the little legs full of scratches and bruises, her bony body visible in patches through the rags in which she was dressed. One foot was turned in and one little arm she kept pushed in behind her back. (A, 656)

Milla's crawling into the filthy hearth in order to rescue the child suggests something of a birth process, with the hearth as a womb-like space containing the object which she, as a childless woman, desires. In order to reach the object, Milla first has to endure the abject smells of the house: "of rotten piss, of vomit, of old sweet liquor, of unwashed human bodies, of cold cinders and half-burnt bluegum wood" (A, 656).

The notion of a semiotic relation (in the Kristevan sense of the word) between Milla and the child is evident from the conversation between them. Milla wants to know the child's name but the child only responds by making a "scraping sound" (A, 657). The subject, as representative of the symbolic order, realises that in order to communicate with the object (the child), she will have to imitate the child's way of speaking:

You turned your head with your ear against the child's face and imitated the ggggg-sound. You could feel her breath on your face. This time you heard the ggggg clearly, like a sigh it sounded, like a rill in the fynbos, very soft and distant, like the sound you hear before you've even realised what you're hearing. (A, 657)

The "ggggg"-sound symbolises the type of language associated with the *chora* and which does not ascribe to the formal syntax of the symbolic order. The process during the first

years on Grootmoedersdrift, when she is taught to speak properly and even to appreciate tunes and classical music, changes her into a full-fledged member of the symbolic order. Radford, Atkinson, Britain, Clahsen and Spencer (1999: 105) point out that one of the first tasks of a child learning his or her language is “to figure out the sound system” and how to distinguish between the different sounds. According to them, children “seem to be innately disposed to perceive the sounds of a language”. In contrast, the ability to form sentences or structural learning of a language is more complex. According to Radford et al. (1999: 391), the main difference between adult and child sentence structures is that children “sometimes omit functional elements in obligatory contexts (e.g. they omit auxiliaries, determinants and tense/agreement inflections)”. Only once the child subject Agaat masters the more complex structures of language will she enter the symbolic order.

6.4 Milla’s bedroom ¹¹⁸

The domain of the feminine, where she sleeps alone (while her husband is in his own bedroom cum study, symbolising his association with language and the symbolic order) becomes, after Milla’s illness, a domain of the abject; the domain of disease and of awaiting death. It is also the space where she will eventually die, cared for by Agaat. The motor neuron disease she falls prey to disrupts Milla’s entire life and the structured order that she

¹¹⁸ Wessels (2006) offers an interesting reading of the farmhouse on Grootmoeder’s Drift within the tradition of the so-called Big House novel. According to this genre there is a symbiotic relationship between the house and the farmland surrounding it.

had established on the farm. In the following excerpt from the text, we see how Agaat prepares the bedroom and turns it into a sick room:

First, she emptied the room.

Everything redundant she carried out. To the cellar. I heard her bump and shift, here right under my bed, to make space for the stuff. The sofa and footstools, the doilies and cloths on the dressing table, the ornaments and wall hangings. The clothes horse, the hat-stand, the walking stick stand, the walking frame, the wheelchair, the snows of yesteryear, the posies of dried everlastings.

So that she could move fast and clean easily, she said.

Because there shall be no dust or obstacle. It will be the best-managed death in history, you'll see, her eyes said. Her mouth was a thin line. (A, 17).

And further on, to single out the change from bedroom to sick room:

She carried in a melamine surface on trestles and on that everything we need is arranged in rows and piles against the wall. Packs of swabs, neckbraces for every occasion, quick-drying sheets, mattress protectors, clean hospital gowns, bedpans. Under the trestle table are three enamel pails with lids.

There's a triple-level stainless hospital trolley with washbasin and clean clothes and towels and disinfectants and medicinal soap.

And a smaller trolley of hard plastic with removable baskets containing my medicines and pills in bottles and boxes. Fresh water in a carafe. Sponges, cotton wool, ear-buds, ointment for my lips that dry out, paper towels for accidents, tissues for drool, for tears. Things get disordered quickly in the trolley. ...

And then there's the bridge, a broad flat shoulder on one steel leg that fits over my bed, and on which my little bowls of food and my spout-jugs full of thickened tea can stand. And my reading stand. (A, 20)

In this clinical space, with its obsessive sense of order that characterises the symbolic order, – which calls to mind Wiid's hospital room (*M*, 129) and the depictions by Adriaan van Zyl

of order and structure in hospitals¹¹⁹ – the subject relinquishes all power to her servant and her life becomes a routinised existence characterised by the ministrations of Agaat in her capacity as carer and nurse. Whereas the subject was free to come and go as she pleased on the farm, she has become the abject: her non-communicative diseased body existing in the realm between life and death. Her body is in the liminal space between the two and, in line with Kristeva’s theory of the abject, will cross the border into the realm of the abject when becoming a corpse. Previously, her private space was filled with “the tubes and jars and lipsticks that [she’d] taken out to beautify [herself]” (A, 107), and it was in her room where she “took [her] time over [her] make-up” (A, 108). The objects associated with making her look attractive and appealing to her husband – and the other men visiting them on the farm – have now been replaced by medical appliances and supplies. The feminine space has now been turned into a clinical space associated with disease and dystrophy of the body that was once the object of the male gaze and desire.

Whereas Milla’s sickroom is one of her familiar surroundings and presents her with the opportunity to die in her own bed and bedroom, this is not initially the case with Johannes Wiid, the protagonist of *Memorandum*. He has to go to a state hospital and endure being one of many patients in a general ward and to comply with the rules and regulations of the hospital staff.

6.5 Wiid’s hospital room

¹¹⁹ In Crous (2012), the interrelationship between Van Zyl’s paintings and the novel *Memorandum* is examined.

The hospital room in *Memorandum*, just like the sick room in *Agaat*, serves as an example of an abject space because not only is Wiid constantly reminded of his own disease while being there but he is also confronted with the illnesses of both Mr X and Mr Y. Both these characters are deformed – the one is blind and the other lame – and as such serve as examples of the abject because their bodies are no longer regarded as normal.

In contrast to Wiid, who acts amicably towards the nursing staff, Mr X and Mr Y are openly critical of the system of “medical care” (*M*, 52) and the institutionalisation of the individual in a non-sympathetic environment. The almost naïve Wiid regards them as ungrateful especially since they can afford “First World medical services in Africa” (*M*, 62). As such, he views their “think[ing] up [of] grievances” with disdain.

To express his dissatisfaction with the care he receives, Mr Y addresses the nurse on duty as “Your Excellency, Ambassadors of Pain” (*M*, 15). It is, however, through Wiid’s eyes, as the focaliser, that the reader becomes familiar with the hospital as an example of an abject space. Consider, for example, his description of his fellow patients on their arrival back from the theatre:

... this was Mr X. They drew the green curtain around him before they lifted him from the trolley onto his bed. I caught a glimpse of limbs swaddled in white.

Even before Mr X’s curtain was opened again, Mr Y was pushed in and posted to the left of me. There were round sponges on both his eyes, with bandages over them swathed around his head. Drips of different colours were suspended from stands over his head. (*M*, 16)

In this clinical medical environment the lights are never turned off, whereas visitors are limited to “only nearest relatives” (*M*, 18) and patients may not receive flowers. There is also a suggestion that the patients are constantly subjected to a form of medical gaze, since even the doors in the hospital have “surveillance windows” (*M*, 31). The hospital as abject space is characterised by a “monotony of colours and spaces” (*M*, 32) and owing to Wiid’s cynicism about “institutional architecture” (*M*, 41) – Buytendacht even calls him “an augur of spaces” (*M*, 50) – both the exterior and the shape of the hospital depress him. He calls the hospital a “yellow-grey ark of brick” (*M*, 41). When Wiid address Doctor Snyman, he also makes reference to the interiors of hospitals and points out the colour-coded scheme acting as some functional regulator to streamline the running of the hospital:

They paint a green line on the floor and name it Greenacres Road for oncology, or Sunrise Crescent, pink for heart bypasses. (*M*, 79)

Wiid is “particularly interested in doctors” (*M*, 102), which suggests that while they subject him, as a medical object, to close, clinical observation, he also studies them and comments on their position.

Wiid not only eavesdrops on the conversation between Mr X and Mr Y but provides the reader with a close observation of the space surrounding them.¹²⁰ The almost machine-like inhuman nature of the environment is suggested by the “glass cases” (*M*, 44) which are everywhere and used to exhibit “strange tubes and clamps”. Another facet of hospital life is

¹²⁰ According to Sanders (2009: 117) Wiid “can mimic but he never participates” in the conversation between Mr X and Mr Y. His position is similar to that of Agaat, who mimics her mistress.

the fact that everything is in flux in the hospital as is suggested by the wheels under the beds: the bed stops at some spot for a while and then is moved on. The anonymity and the dehumanising aspects of hospital care are also illustrated poignantly in the incident with the “grease gun” (*M*, 70):

On my right they were trying to administer some substance to Mr X from a container shaped like a grease gun. His head was all the way back, his mouth wide open like a gaping chicken’s, his Adam’s apple a motionless lump on his gullet. Uck-uck he went. They shone a little red light into his mouth to see if there was an obstruction. Uck-uck-uck. From the shadows on his curtain I could see that the nurse was vigorously massaging his throttle, while with equal emphasis shaking her head at the other nurse.

During this macabre scene, the subject is reduced to being in an animal state (“chicken”) and the once-eloquent and erudite subject is nothing more than an experimental object who is only able to make swallowing sounds. The passage shows the abject nature of science: a greased gun is shoved down the man’s throat, a light is shone down his throat and his throttle is massaged – calling to mind the force-feeding of a goose to enlarge its liver for *pate de foie gras*. The nurses also renounce their sense of compassion for the sake of the medical procedure, even though they are aware of the futility of their intervention.

After a drop in Mr Y’s pulse and his apparent problems with breathing he is linked to “another gurgling machine” (*M*, 106). Both Mr X and Mr Y are now dependent on a machine to monitor their condition and because the staff fears for a further relapse during the night “more monitors [are] connected to them, automatic devices that peeped like shipping radar” with “a glow of the instrument panels” (*M*, 108).

The body of the diseased man can only survive in this dehumanised environment and becomes almost android-like. The hospital at night is depicted as an ominous spaceship-like setting with its “a few green-lit windows”, “plastic bubbles filled with liquids” and “the

lights of the instrument panels casting red glows on the railings of the beds” (*M*, 114). Instead of human communication, there is a mechanical “tingling and tringing of time switches, telephones and call buttons” and “the rattling of trolley wheels”. Not only is the lighting artificial but also he is constantly aware of the “whispering” coming from the air conditioner. The whispering also suggests something of the pre-verbal communication associated with the semiotic and the *chora*. Life in the hospital forces the subject to regress to a uterine existence.

At night, the boundaries between real and unreal are blurred even more and the subject finds himself in an abject space, which, even though it is so regulated and sanitised (there is a constant smell of disinfectant in the air – *M*, 114) is also associated with disease, amputation and the removal of vital organs, such as the eyes, and a dependency on the machine to stay alive.

Apart from the overt abject spaces associated with mortality and a lack of real compassion, two private spaces, namely Lambert’s den and Agaat’s room, have to be considered here in terms of Kristeva’s theory because they signify attempts to return to the *chora*. These spaces are separated from the main buildings (the Benade house or the farm house); they are decorated according to the preferences of the two inhabitants and are associated with an expression of the self, which typify them as abject spaces because of their separation and subversive potential.

In a lecture delivered at the University of Utrecht, 21 February 2008, Marlene van Niekerk focused on the two characters, namely Lambert and Agaat, who are relegated to the back room. According to the author, the two characters attempt to create some sort of free creative space in the backroom and although they are seen as victims of a destructive family dynamics they are also insecure and violent in their conduct:

Is het mogelijk dat deze ambivalentie van de personages een verhelderend beeld kan werpen op de positie van schrijvers/kunstenaars ten opzichte van de gemeenschap waaruit ze voortkomen? [Is it possible that this ambivalence of the characters could shed light on the position of writers/artists with regard to the community where they come from?]

Equating the back room with a creative space calls to mind Lechte's (2004: 108) remark about the association between the semiotic *chora* and creativity:

The semiotic is experienced as the ordering characteristic of *chora*, as opposed to the law of the symbolic: the child's finger painting using colour (ordering) compared to the drawings of Michelangelo or Rembrandt, which follow the laws of draftsmanship and perspective. Thus, semiotic ordering which disrupts the law of the symbolic is also an ethical intervention. This is Kristeva's point. Art in general can be ethical. And we find that it can be so through practices (the practice of poetic language, for example) which subvert convention and conformity.

6.6 Two *choras* – Lambert's den and Agaat's room

Two important abject spaces that fit in particularly well with Kristeva's theory and serve as a type of *chora* are Lambert's den and Agaat's outside room. These two spaces are the private domains of Lambert and Agaat respectively, and it is evident that each of them communicates in a characteristic manner, be it by way of drawings (in the case of Lambert – T, 163) or in Agaat's macabre display on her mantelpiece. This new fireplace was built

especially for her and serves as a reminder of where she was initially discovered by Milla, namely in the hearth on the farm.

The first reference to Lambert's den is as follows:

There's his bed. The thing's legs are standing skew. The mattress lies at an angle on the bed. Its stuffing sticks out on the one side. Slept to death. He, Lambert, doesn't even have a decent bed to sleep in. Fuck that. He grabs the mattress and throws it, with the Scope and pillows and blankets all still on it, against the open Tedalex. The empty Coke bottle on top of the Tedalex falls and smashes all over the floor. Fuck that too. ... He kicks an empty Coke crate with his bare foot. It flies into the scrap iron behind the door. A long piece of pipe comes loose, falling slowly across the room. It scrapes his painting on the wall before falling onto the floor. Silver paint comes off his mermaid's tail. (*T*, 94)

From this description we deduce that the space inhabited by the subject is dirty and filled with scrap iron (the remnants of whole, functioning objects), almost as if he is sleeping in some sort of storage room. What makes this space so unique is the "never-ending painting" (163) made by Lambert on the wall which serves as his interpretation of the sociopolitical context and also as a form of commentary on his circumstances within the Benade family.¹²¹

His mother plays a pivotal role in this painting and even her despised housecoat (it is filthy, it smells like old dishrags and constantly exposes her body) is a central feature in the painting. Lambert depicts it as if hanging from the "horn of Africa" (*T*, 165). What makes this painting even more macabre is the fact that in order to connect it with his mother's name

¹²¹ Lambert's painting calls to mind the following remark by Bachelard (1994: 72): "Asking a child to draw his house is asking him to reveal the deepest dream shelter he has found for his happiness. If he is happy, he will succeed in drawing a snug, protected house which is well built on deeply-rooted foundations."

(“Mole” is the English equivalent of “Mol”), the housecoat is described as “a piece of slaughtered human skin”, and next to it the words “Mole skin” are added to the wall. Within this object space constructed by the subject, his mother is thus slaughtered symbolically, like an animal, and only her skin remains. The implication is that she has no inside and all her organs have been removed.

The subject, with his lack of sexual knowledge, tries to come to terms with his libidinal desire and his obsession with masturbation, and as a result, he draws a female object (“Diamond Lady” – *T*, 167) on the wall so as to serve as a masturbatory stimulus. The presence of the object on the wall results in his having an orgasm, which accentuates his sexual inexperience.

Amidst the drawings on the wall, Lambert has also written certain words or descriptive phrases, and within the context of this reading, these words signify the linguistic expressions associated with the *chora*. Apart from mostly writing down crude words or words acting as subtitles to his pictures, he also writes the word “PATYDEFWAGRAS” (*T*, 166). Within the context of the novel, this refers to the following passage in the novel:

Treppie says he’s going to have Lambert ‘certified’ so they can tie him up on a trolley and force-feed him till his liver’s big enough for export to Uganda. The kaffirs in that place are still lekker wild, Treppie says, they love eating white man’s liver. Treppie says they call white man’s liver ‘patydefwagras’ in Uganda. When Treppie says this, Lambert goes white in the face. (*T*, 154-155)

Given Lambert’s fear of being eaten for his liver, this mimicry of the word for “*pate de foie gras*” serves as an expression of what Kristeva calls “the metonymic slippage of desire”

(Kristeva, 1984: 178). The subject does not fully understand the meaning implied by the use of the foreign word, but to him it has connotations of death and the desire for death. The picture accompanying the word on the wall of Lambert's den depicts "a huge, naked kaffir with a whopper of a black cock reaching down into the water" (*T*, 166) and even more significant, he is "eating Treppie's liver". The subject projects his fear of death onto the object of disdain and subconsciously desires that the object becomes the victim of death, masquerading as the phallic Other.

Before the arrival of the prostitute, Lambert attempts to repair the two fridges in his den and he uses soap bubbles to detect any leakages – and in a moment of almost romanticised escapism, he views his space through one of the bubbles and sees it in a complete different light:

His bed, with all its rubbish-blankets and dirty pillows, looked like a love-nest full of secrets. And the painting above his bed, which was also in the bubble, looked like a masterpiece on a flower-pot, something he could never have painted himself. The Fuchs blowing bubbles was also in the bubble, like a magic machine in a science fiction movie. And all the pieces of scrap iron, the tools, his steel cabinet, the crates full of empties, his painting of things with wings, looked like Treasure Island. He was also in the bubble. He looked like something from outer space, with receding ears and a mouth and a nose popping out in front, like a goldfish in a glass bowl. (*T*, 358)

This passage, which is in stark contrast to the later events in the den when the prostitute pays him a visit on his birthday (*T*, 392), belongs within the realm of the *chora*. It is associated with playfulness, with a distortion of reality and a beautifying of the abject and the abhorrent. This passage stands in sharp contrast to the later events that are associated with Lambert's proposed sexual initiation and his admittance to the symbolic order.

Here we have the male subject who views his private space with child-like wonder. It becomes a secretive sphere with bubbles and magic, with science fiction and with the magical aura of a treasure island. The suggestion is that the subject has an inability to distinguish between reality and fantasy at times and even during sexual intercourse with his mother, he continues to act out:

Lambert doesn't know when to stop. No, nowadays he wants stories too. Stories she doesn't know; about spy women with guns in their suspenders, in trains, in tunnels, under mountains in other countries, overseas. And stories about cowboy women. ... Poor cowboy women with long dresses who live alone on farms and shoot Indians with long rifles through the kitchen window. Lambert watches too many videos. And now she has to watch, too, so she knows what stories to tell. (*T*, 42)

By watching the same video images, the incestuous pair can live out their shared sexual fantasies. Evidently, the male subject prefers independent and sexually aggressive women who, unlike his mother, are able to fend for themselves and possess substitute phalluses in the form of guns and long rifles. The only way in which the male subject can experience any libidinal satisfaction is to project his needs onto the mother and force her to act out his sexual fantasies and assume the role of the desired Other. Once she acts out the role assigned to her in his fantasy world, he becomes domineering and aggressive so as to dominate the Other and negate its phallic powers. He is also irresponsive to her agony and the way in which she expresses it:

And his mother better keep her mouth shut. Nowadays she screams like someone's slitting her throat or something. Well she'd better watch out or he'll squash her fucken voice-box to a pulp. (*T*, 67)

Since the subject is unable to act confidently on his desires and find a suitable female object other than his mother, he denies his desires for the other by silencing the sexualised body of his mother. The subject wants to negate the fact that he is fulfilling his sexual desires by having sex with his mother and the only way in which to do so is to silence her and not allow her to express her agonising pain and humiliation. The subject tends to react somatically to stimuli such as sexual exhilaration or when imagining himself as living in some sort of bubble. Once this regression into a semiotic state of playfulness has lapsed, Lambert experiences a feeling of dizziness and he is once again back in the real world; and even he has to admit that it was “really a special moment” (*T*, 358). The playfulness rubs off on the rest of the family because eventually Pop and Mol smear each other with “bubble juice” – which ends in “a whale of a bubble party there in [Lambert’s] den” (*T*, 359). Treppie’s remark after the scene with the bubbles also signals something of the playfulness and disorder of the semiotic state:

Treppie said it just showed you what fun you could have with crooked stuff. Come to think of it, he said, where was the fun in a fridge that worked? Just ice and cold polony. (*T*, 359)

Following Mary’s visit (*T*, 412) and the inability of the male subject to exchange the pre-oedipal stage for admission to the symbolic order as a sexually active male, he is so angry that he destroys most of the contents in the den and even burns it down. This violent protest by the male subject-in-process is his final rejection of the hold that the semiotic maternal has over him.

In the case of *Agaat*, Milla, once realises that she is pregnant with her first child and no longer needs a surrogate child, decides that *Agaat* will be the child's nanny and furnishes the outside room for that purpose. This outside room becomes *Agaat*'s private domain and her own space where she has to live as nanny to the newly born son and heir.

Although Milla is responsible for the furnishing of the room, *Agaat* manages to fix up the room to her own liking, especially when she demands to have a fireplace in the room. Just like Lambert, she fills the room with signs of her life and experiences. She also regards the fireplace as her "altar" (A, 267) and the association she has with this newly built fireplace is in direct contrast to the hearth where she was kept as a young child on the farm. One also gains the impression that she is trying to create some form of maternal womb-like space into which she can lure the child object and in turn becomes a surrogate mother figure for him. The fireplace is decorated with "quartz pebbles & skulls & shells & baby's toes & sea urchins from Witsand" (A, 267). The objects cemented into the fireplace are not merely mementos but are mainly items associated with water or the sea and are mostly hollow. Water and the sea in particular are both maternal symbols and actions like diving into water or coming from the water refer to giving birth (Freud, 1976: 525). Whereas Milla is not allowed to enter this private space, the young Jakkie is allowed to enter and even touch the mouldings:

Jakkie pushes his little fingers into the black nostrils of the lynx skull. A. strokes over the imprint of the hare's-foot fern he points at the horseshoe in the middle above she counts the abalone shells set around the edge ... she holds him so that he can touch the marbles quick with the fire the taws with the green & yellow

banderoles inside the small milky marbles bluish & reddish she shows the hollows of the dassie-foot he stirs the spoor of the steenbok. (A, 268)

Agaat did not have a proper home and could never really associate herself with the life at the home of her biological mother, and as a result, she creates an idealised space for herself which not only contains her treasures but shows her predilection for colour and reflection. When the female subject touches her collection of artefacts, the “archaic pleasures” (Ives, 2008: 112) of touching and a reconnection with the *objet petit a* occurs. Within this feminised space, the subject embodies a connection with the pre-semiotic and calls to mind the following description of the *chora*:

This is the space of the *camera obscura*, a dark-room or processing room outside time and removed from the demands of the social code. It is a maternal space from which the figure of the father is not absent, but rather prefigured. (Smith, 1998: 60)

Milla is not allowed into this private space, and when she manages to listen to any conversation between Agaat and Jakkie, she cannot make out the words because Agaat deliberately speaks in a low and soft voice. When acting out her role as surrogate mother, Agaat even goes so far as to breastfeed Jakkie (A, 205-207). Consider also Jakkie’s description of the way in which Agaat spoke to him during his visits to her room as a young child:

Emphases, rhythms, repetitions, questions. Agaat’s strong arm around my shoulders, her small hand on my chest. Her voice, incantatory. (A, 683).

This incantatory use of voice links to the recreation of the pre-Christian sphere, free from the influence of the symbolic order. The interaction between Agaat as maternal subject and Jakkie as child object is also a clear example of what Kristeva (1980: 238) describes as “the

desire for motherhood.” The expression of her sense of maternal *jouissance* is by means of a language filled with semiotic rhythms and repetitions and incantations – almost as if she is casting a spell on the object.

The use of “rhythms” and speaking in an incantatory voice suggest that “the linguistic sign is not yet articulated’ (Kristeva, 1984: 26) and the conversation between the two characters is not characterised by words that carry meaning or the intricate sentence structures which we associate with the symbolic ‘Law of the Father’.

Whereas Lambert’s den is depicted as disorderly, Agaat’s room is characterised by a neat ordering, particularly since it was one of Milla’s so-called projects (A, 53) and she put a lot of effort into it. Jak finds the furnishing of the room to be excessive and thinks it will lead to envy from the other workers. He says it is the “first time he has heard of a skivvy’s room with electricity” (A, 94).

Apart from the uniforms and the signs of Milla’s presence in this private space, Agaat manages to keep her own treasures that she had brought from her family home, such as the moleskin, the stick and the wheel (A, 667). Agaat’s strange collection of treasures reminds us of her peculiar dealings with the supernatural. Whereas Milla teaches her the Christian way (seen as a “task and vocation” by Ds Van der Lught – A, 487) and even arranges for her to be baptised (A, 564), she later discovers Agaat doing some form of trance dance outdoors at night, which suggests that Agaat is reverting to a pre-Christian pagan existence:

A. is on the mountain in her new uniform! ... Sideways & backwards knees bent foot-stamping jumping on one leg jump-jump-jump & point-point with one arm at the ground. Then the arms rigid next to the sides. Then she folded them & then she stretched them. Looked as if she was keeping the one arm in the air with the other arm & waving. (A, 150-151)

Does the wearing of the new uniform suggest an acceptance of her new role as nanny or is the dance an expression of her cursing her new position? Milla perceives it as “a farewell ritual” (A, 151) by which she bids goodbye to the family she has left behind.

Kristeva regards religion as “the exclusion of the abject through certain taboos that serve to reinforce the symbolic against any threats from the semiotic” (Oliver, 1993b: 125) and when Agaat acts out her resistance towards the enforced Christian religion, she does so in her own private space with her own altar – or outside under the full moon. In that sense, she recreates a semiotic unity with both her biological mother (derided as a “drunk cunt” (A, 573) by the other workers) and the earth goddess (or the “Nowherewoman” (A, 516) referred to by Agaat) – something that is almost blasphemous to Milla.

Agaat’s conduct inside (and from) her outside room suggests a close bond with the semiotic *chora*. Her incantatory talking (and singing) to the child object as well as her solitary dance under the full moon calls to mind Kristeva’s (1995: 106-107) attempts to communicate with her young patient with neurological problems:

I decided to communicate with Paul and his mother by using something that was accessible to him – song. The operas we would improvise, which must have seemed rather absurd to any onlooker, were composed of signification that I (or we) wanted to share. Yet, they were initially composed of the meaning of the affect and drive representations encoded in the melodies, the rhythms, and the accents that were more easily (if not the only thing) available to Paul.

6.7 Conclusion

Predominantly the settings of the three novels under discussion are characterised by elements of abjection. These spaces are indeed associated with a disturbance of identity, system and order (Kristeva, 1982: 4). The once luxurious bedroom filled with feminine trimmings has now been transformed into a sick-room. The flat, a respite after a day's work in the city administration, now becomes an extension of a hospital ward with its sharp lights, apparatuses, machines and its association with suffering. Furthermore, the suburban house that serves as a symbol of White prosperity, built on the foundations of the former racially integrated Sophiatown, has connotations of dirt, filth and an inhumane existence.

Discussing the setting of *Memorandum*, Roux (2009: 137) is of the opinion that spaces in the novel that are associated with the hospital (the waiting rooms, the rooms, the beds, the operation theatre) are all thoroughfares where nobody is able to remain or even feel at home. They are passages between the ostensibly normal healthy world outside and the world of the sick inside the hospital.

Chapter 7: Abjection, Filth and Defilement

His head is popped up against the window and by the light in the parking lot she can see the little hollow above his collarbone in front where his shirt hangs open. It looks like the skin on top of boiled milk when it goes cold – like fine little crinkles. (*T*, 387)

[F]ood that can't be swallowed and gets stuck to the roof of the mouth. That's the drill. (*A*, 43)

Nauseous is what I am. Bloating, and flatulent. Tired. Sick. I could get up from here and chuck the whole lot of paper into the bin, slam shut the black lid of the rubbish bin and nobody would even know of this night. (*M*, 111)

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will focus on the manifestations of the abject, such as decay and defilement, faecal matter and excrement, loathing for food and bodily secretions and discharges, as they appear in Marlene van Niekerk's novels under discussion. In discussing *Triomf*, Viljoen (1996: 248-9) alerts us to the "carnavalesque variety of styles" accompanied by "an almost Bakhtinian¹²² carnival of macabre situations." This reference is an allusion to Bakhtin's study *Rabelais and his World*, where he looks at the aspects of popular humour and culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Apart from commenting on popular culture, Bakhtin also discusses the language of the marketplace and the representation of the grotesque body – elements of inquiry also present in Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*. Within the tradition of grotesque realism, as exemplified in Rabelais' writing, there is an emphasis on the "lower

¹²² Bakhtin is one of Kristeva's literary fathers and in her autobiographical essay, "My Memory's Hyperbole", Kristeva (2004: 9) explains her indebtedness to him: "I reinterpreted a writer just republished in the USSR, whom we often read in Eastern Europe, seeing in his work, a synthesis of formalism and history: Mikhail Bakhtin. A post-formalist, he had introduced, through the carnival, Rabelais, Dostoevsky; and the polyphonics of the modern novel, the notion of alterity and dialogism into the arsenal of studies inspired by formalism. My conception of dialogism, of ambivalence, or what I call 'intertextuality' – notions heavily indebted to Bakhtin and Freud."

stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth.” (Bakhtin, 1984: 21)

Kristeva (2002: 406) admires Rabelais because he has articulated that “pleasure is not only organic but also emerges in words, as long as those words become sensory.” From the lower stratum of the body to the motor neuron disease in *Agaat* to the meticulous charting of secretions and bodily sensations experienced by Mr Wiid, Marlene van Niekerk is indeed an heir to Rabelais in her sensory depiction of the body and its excretions, as I will point out in this chapter.

Regarding bodily sensations and excretions, Kristeva (1982: 65) defines “defilement” as

what is jettisoned from the “symbolic system.” It is what escapes that social rationality, that logical order on which a social aggregate is based, which then becomes differentiated from a temporary agglomeration of individuals and in short, constitutes a classification system or a structure.

One such a “symbolic system” is religious prohibitions placed on the individual so as to reflect the social patterns within a particular community. Mary Douglas (1966, cited in 2002: 43-50) examines symbolic systems in connection with dirt and pollution and concludes that “our ideas of dirt also express symbolic systems and that the difference between pollution behaviour in one part of the world and another is only a matter of detail.” Two conditions play a vital role within such a symbolic system namely “a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order” (Douglas, 1966, cited in 2002: 44). An example of how order is disturbed by the onset of disease occurs when Milla is told that she has only a few years left to live:

Do take well-informed decisions now, Mrs de Wet, he said, fortunately I know you are of a practical bent, somebody who wants to be in control at all times. And you are a farmer. Illnesses and suffering are a farmer's daily bread. And fortunately you have no dependants at this stage who could hamper you ... er ... whom you have to concern yourself about. (A, 238)

The subject's orderly conduct is being threatened by her disease and she has to rely on "an-edited-for-the-sickbed version" (A, 240) of events on the farm.

The question posed by Kristeva (1982: 66) in her reading of Douglas is: Wherein lies the subjective value of those demarcations, exclusions and prohibitions that lead us to regard the social organism as a symbolic system? In pagan societies, abjection mostly resurfaces as "a rite of defilement and pollution" (Kristeva, 1982:, 17), whereas in Judaism there is an attempt to regulate defilement through rules and taboos (dietary and ritual).¹²³

7.2 Food

¹²³ In her discussion of Kristeva's theory of the abject, Elizabeth Grosz (1994: 195) points out that bodily fluids are "indices of control, disgust and revulsion" and explains this as follows: "There is a kind of hierarchy of propriety governing these fluids themselves. Those which function with clarity, unclouded by the specter of infection, can be represented as cleansing and purifying: tears carry with them none of the disgust associated with the cloudiness of pus, the chunkiness of vomit, the stickiness of menstrual blood. Acquiring a social representation as a clean fluid, as waterlike, transparent, purifying, tears take on a different psychological and sociological status than the polluting fluids that dirty the body. These polluting, abject fluids manifest themselves as secretions of the body that, according to Harradine (2001: 74), "emerge, seeping forth, oozing out, tricking across, soaking in, in a fluid excess that denies coherence and perpetually threaten the ordered and ordering systems of static identities." This ability of the body to secrete emphasizes the "permeability of the body" (Harradine, 2001: 75) and the "impossibility of maintaining it as a coherent and closed system." Grosz (1994: 203) is of the opinion that it is mostly the female body that is seen as a lack or absence but even with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or simply the phallus but self-containment – not a cracked or porous vessel, like a leaking ship, but a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order?

Food, and specifically food loathing, play an important role in *Triomf* since the staple food of the Benade family is polony, white bread and golden syrup, swallowed with either Coca-Cola or with a mixture of Klipdrift Brandy and Coke. This strange diet (with its mixture of processed meat of a lesser quality, white bread and sweet syrup, washed down with alcohol) results in severe heartburn for Treppie and he is often the one who complains about Mol's lack of domestic skills. She does not represent the traditional homemaker figure responsible for nutrition, as is evident from the following satirical take on her by Treppie:

Yes, Mol, meals, like the food you cook in this house. Fit for a king, isn't it? Bacon and eggs for breakfast. Pill. Rice, meat and potatoes for lunch. Pill. Wors and baked beans for supper. Pill. (*T*, 246)

Treppie alludes to proper meals and proper planning of balanced meals with meat and vegetables and not the hastily prepared sandwiches which they eat regularly. In doing so, he wants to inscribe the female into a gendered position of care-giver and provider of nourishment for the family. We know, however, that she is also the provider of libidinal satisfaction to the male objects in the household.

In contrast to this, we find references to the "old food" and "vrot food" (*T*, 222) eaten by the people living on the rubbish dumps;¹²⁴ one reads about the exquisite fruit salad prepared by the lesbian couple across the street (*T*, 188) and about their transgression of the racial divides in the country by "[giving] their garden-kaffir a knife and fork to eat his bread and wors with" (*T*, 189). As an attempt "to learn to be nice and sociable" (*T*, 304) Lambert suggests

¹²⁴ For West (2009b: 101) the rubbish dump represents the excess of Western consumer capitalism.

that they have a braai over Christmas with “T-bones and watermelon”, which is a glaring contrast to what they are used to when it comes to food. In Chapter 5 of the novel, Pop takes the family out for supper at the local Spur restaurant and it is a special treat to them. They eat mostly dessert (*T*, 87) and they even win “three huge bottles of champagne” (*T*, 88). This celebration serves as a form of escape from their dire circumstances and what makes it so ironic is that they are the ones who end up at the “Spur’s lucky birthday table” – especially since they are constantly stared at by the other patrons in the establishment. This scene foreshadows the democratic equality which is to follow after the 1994 elections when all will be treated equally, regardless of their place of residence.

Whereas the Benades’ meals are appalling, to say the least, the white farmer and his wife in *Agaat* are always sustained by large meals with several courses. Not only does this create the image of self-sufficiency and wealth but it also underpins the notion of living off the fat of the land. Special occasions such as weddings, birthdays and even funerals are planned around an excess of food and drink. Consider, for example, the following description:

A line of hired waiters with big trays full of dishes of dessert brushed past you on the garden path. The smell of baked chocolate pudding and date pudding and brandy tarts and liqueur sponges in your nose, Agaat’s puddings for Jakkie’s birthday. (*A*, 613)

Once all the partygoers are fed, then the servants are allowed to come and share in the leftovers.

During her illness, Milla is no longer able to eat by herself; she is fed mashed food as if she is a baby and her meals now consist of spinach or stewed prunes:

For supper there's spinach. For dessert there'll be stewed prunes.

Green food and black food. 12 December. Already noted on the calendar, entered in the log book.

Puree.

In the Braun.

Zimmmm-zoommm.

And after that strained three times through a sieve.

Fine but fibre-rich. (A, 393)

Both Milla and Wiid, in *Agaat* and *Memorandum* respectively, are patients and as a result they have to eat processed baby-like food. Wiid's description of the unappetising meal in the hospital calls to mind what Kristeva (1982: 100) calls "dietary abomination":

On my plate was a piece of grey steamed fish, a clod of pumpkin and a runny helping of spinach. Custard and red jelly for dessert. (M, 16)

The diseased body has to be nourished but since it is inactive, it receives small portions of food as part of its new dietary regimen so as to sustain the bodily functions. Abject diseased bodies are fed abject-looking food as a form of sustenance.

One would have expected from Wiid that, once he is out of hospital, he would relish food and wine but he, however, leads a very Spartan existence. Although he is very fond of a breakfast consisting of "a fried egg, three rashers of bacon, fresh tomato quarters, toast, real butter, marmalade, orange juice, coffee" (M, 30), he believes that one should prepare such a meal for oneself but then show the necessary restraint by giving it away to one of the workers

in the block of flats. Wiid returns to his flat having given his favourite meal away and opts for “a glass of weak milkless sugarless rooibos tea” (*M*, 30).

In both cases the subjects refuse to eat meat and opt, respectively, for “grey steamed fish” or “a glass of weak milkless sugarless rooibos tea”. The suggestion is that meat has disease-inducing connotations and as a result should be avoided. In the case of Wiid the “three rashers of bacon” is a sign of his attempt to escape his repressed penurious lifestyle, resulting, however, in a decision to return to the familiar austere way of living.

7.3 Secretions and discharges

7.3.1 Semen

According to Kristeva (1982: 71) neither tears nor semen have, in contrast to menstrual blood, “any polluting value”, an assumption that is questioned by Grosz (1994: 207), who then poses the question: “Is it that paternity is less threatening, less dangerous, less vulnerable, than maternity? Or rather, is it less dangerous and threatening for men?”

In the case of *Triomf* there are several references to semen and seminal fluid being discharged and these relate particularly to the incestuous relationship between the sister and her two brothers. This relationship started when they were still children and Libin (2009: 42) is of the opinion that their incestuous behaviour should be linked to their economic status and their childhood punctuated by “poor hygiene, alcoholism and vulgarity”. In an attempt to ward off their hunger pains as children, they played “sexual games”:

Little Pop's dick could already stand up nicely by then. He showed Treppie and Mol how to rub it. They killed time on those mornings by rubbing Little Pop's dick. It took away the hunger. They were allowed to have morning bread only once Pop had come three times; otherwise they'd get hungry for their afternoon bread too soon. And if that got eaten, they stayed hungry all day, until their mother came home from the factory at night. (*T*, 127)

The spilling of semen is associated with sublimation in this instance. The three children ward off their hunger pains by exciting Little Pop and making him "come three times". This incestuous children's game acts as a precursor for the ensuing incestuous threesome, which will continue throughout their adult lives. During these games, Pop represents the phallic power because he is able to sustain an erection, discharge his semen and both Mol and Treppie have to perform oral sex on him. Treppie is reduced to a sexually passive role – a position he relinquishes during their adult years when Pop loses his phallic power to Lambert, the "illicit progeny" (Libin, 2009: 38), who is the product of sexual congress between the siblings.

In the scene where Mol confronts Treppie with the information that he could be possibly be Lambert's father, especially since Lambert is just as evil as Treppie, he retorts that he had always practised *coitus interruptus* ("I always pulled out. Aimed high, to the side." – *T*, 118-119). However, to emphasise the demonic side of Treppie's personality, Mol points out to him that "evil seed" is able to fly and that he could have impregnated her as a result of that. By associating semen with evil and demonic possibilities, Kristeva's notion of the purity of seminal fluid is undermined in the text. Male potency is associated with devilish acts and the male body is seen as an intercessory used by evil to pass on its genetic weaknesses onto the female.

By contrast, the semen of the mortuary assistant mentioned in one of the newspaper articles read by Treppie (*T*, 179) connotes resurrection from the dead. The mortuary assistant had sex with the corpse of a young girl and as a result she came to life again – I will return to this in the section on the corpse below.

Considering that the character of Milla in Van Niekerk's novel *Agaat* personifies the well-educated and ladylike Afrikaner farm girl, the following scene from the text is a radical transgression of what is seen as proper conduct for a girl of her stature. It does, however, also illustrate to what extent the male is subjected sexually to his wife, who knows how to use her sexual powers to enslave him:

You started rubbing his groin. The first time you'd ever done a thing like that. Jak lost his head completely, caught off guard, he took the pass as if it were a race track. ... You removed your hand. He took it back and you resisted, but not too much, so that he could put it where he wanted it ... pulled open his fly and put your hand inside. ... you could work your hand in under the testicles. After that you could never get enough of it. The contrast between the silky shifting balls and the immense length of the erect flesh above. You were fascinated by it, surprised that you knew what to do. ... You turned towards him and fumbled open his clothing and pulled down his underpants and added your other hand and made a quiver with your fingers. ... He sat forward and accelerated and with one hand folded your hands tighter around his penis. Between your legs it felt warm, your head was ringing. ... You felt your mouth, your throat, there was a tang on your tongue as if you'd eaten radishes. ... He was wild, out of control, he tried to mount you and get inside you but the gear lever was in the way and the space too confined. (*A*, 29-31)

The female subject even wants this fantasy of hers to include her mother as a voyeuristic onlooker seeing her seducing her fiancé (*A*, 31). Not only is she willing to perform sexually explicit deeds that her mother would never have done but she would also have liked to show to her mother to what extent she could use her sexuality to force the male to do as she

wanted. The reference to the taste of “radishes” implies the sharp bitter aftertaste associated with this sexual game, but it could also refer to the acid taste of semen in her mouth. Hers is not a sweet revenge because she is left with an aftertaste which anticipates the sexualised war games between the two of them later on in the text.

Milla tries to re-enact this scene later on in their lives, primarily during the time when their marriage is going through a bad patch. She tries to seduce him (A, 345), but this time she is unable to get him to respond to her whims:

You took his hard penis in your hand. He pushed you away. Leave me alone, dammit, he swore, I’m not your toolbox. (A, 347)

He is filled with a sense of self-pity and refers to his erstwhile status as the “stud bull” who had to provide the son and heir, but who eventually became relegated to the position of “obelisk” (A, 348). Elsewhere in the text, Milla even goes so far as to compare his flaccid penis to “a piece of intestine” (A, 117), thus suggesting his lack of erectile potency and phallic power.

Whereas semen is associated with spawning “a fucken dinosaur” (T, 117) or a mixture between “King Kong and Rip van Winkle” (T, 118) in the character of Lambert in Van Niekerk’s *Triomf*, it is associated with providing Grootmoedersdrift (aptly named for its female dominance) with a male heir in the person of Jakkie. Jakkie, however, does not live up to his father’s expectations and instead of fighting the apartheid state’s war, he decides to leave the country and emigrates to settle in Canada as someone who is a conscientious objector to conscription:

A farmer seeking asylum as far as Canadian bureaucracy was concerned. A deserting soldier with his training certificates, his pilot's licences, his oath of secrecy. (A, 1)

7.3.2 Tears

Whereas Kristeva believes tears to represent purity and transparency, an interesting incident is depicted in *Triomf*, which shows the opposite. Mol is so used to being abused as a sexual object that she cannot appreciate any compassionate gestures especially coming from the men in her life. The incident occurs when Pop and she take a bath together (*T*, 266) and they dry each other bodies afterwards. Pop is so emotionally distressed by the intimacy that he bursts into tears. From Mol's reaction to this, we detect her inability to appreciate his emotionality and his romantic inclinations:

Now Pop's crying. From bathing with candles. Ja-nee, she saw it coming. But what is she supposed to say to him now? All's well that ends well? (*T*, 266)

Even her attempt at making him laugh does not make him stop crying and in this regard her remarks are apposite:

Ag Pop man, you're making me all dirty again with these tears. Just now I'll have to take another bath. (*T*, 266)

Ostensibly this is aimed at making him laugh, stopping his crying, but it also evokes a deeper psychological reaction. Mol, an abused and exploited woman, is not able to appreciate sensitivity coming from the male objects in her life and therefore makes fun thereof. The association of tears with dirt suggests that she does not want to be overtly emotional herself. She suppresses her feelings but in the end capitulates and joins him in his crying, albeit to again make fun of it and say that even though she is sober, she is crying.

Compare also her restraint in not starting to cry when she discovers the dead body of Gerty on the bathroom floor:

She feels like a big wave wanting to break in a closed place. She feels like the wave and she feels like the closed place, but she can't break. The thing struggling to break hurts her chest. (*T*, 200)

It is only when Pop starts consoling her that she gives in and realises that she is left only with "the salt taste of tears" (*T*, 201) in her mouth. The death of the "domesticated, Oedipalized pet" (Libin, 2009: 44) causes the female subject to show compassion and emotions and transcend the boundaries imprecated upon her by her situation within the incestuous, dysfunctional household. She can only act maternally towards her animals because they play an important role in life:

Dogs understand more about hard times than people. They lick sweat. And they lick up tears. (*T*, 8)

One would expect from the young child Agaat that she would cry when taken away from her family and brought to Milla's household as a surrogate child. Yet, the opposite is suggested in the following passage:

Dense as a stone. Not a peep. Close, black, dense, light, like coal. Won't talk. Won't eat. Clenches her hands in fists, one knuckle in the mouth, it's all pink and raw already. (*A*, 472)

As a sign of her frustration with the child's inability to "become human" (*A*, 481), Milla uses the stick of the feather duster to punish her. Tears, however, are seldom shed in the novel, even after all the major incidents in Milla and Agaat's lives, such as Jak's death, Jakkie's departure or even during the final scene at Milla's death bed. According to Dixon (2013),

[t]here are two ideas at the heart of the psychoanalytic approach to tears, ideas that, during the middle decades of the 20th century, entered into psychological orthodoxy among professionals and the lay public alike: repression and regression. The first implies that tears are a kind of overflow or discharge of previously repressed emotion, while the second presents the phenomenon of adult weeping as some sort of return to infantile, even prenatal, experiences and emotions.

The characters in *Agaat* are repressing their emotions and experiences and show an inability to express anger or sadness. This explains the on-going verbal abuse between the respective characters as a way of expressing such emotions.

7.3.3 Blood

In *Triomf* the spilling of blood is usually associated with death and dying, as in the case of the death of Old Mol or of the dog Gerty. The narrative suggests that both the matriarch and the dog died of tuberculosis. Both of them die in the bathrooms and an apparition of the so-called TB butterfly is seen in both instances. When Mol is confronted by the death of Gerty (*T*, 148), one senses that it is in preparation of how to deal with Pop's death at the end of the text. The demise of Gerty, Mol's "protector, her confidante, her source of creativity" (Woodward, 2001: 104), illustrates the closeness between humans and animals and links to the remark by Libin (2009: 46) that "the place of the human remains squarely within the sphere of the animal" in *Triomf*.

When Old Mol dies (*T*, 158), it is Mol who discovers her dead body:

Then, early in the morning, she went to the toilet in the dark. And there she found Old Mol, bent over the edge of the tub. Two identical spots of blood lay in the bath, the way it looks when a blot of ink seeps through a piece of folded paper.

‘It’s the TB butterfly,’ Mrs Beyleveldt said when she came to look. ‘One wing of blood from each lung. And then away she flies.’ Mol will never forget that. The crimson TB butterfly. (*T*, 158)

The suffering matriarch not only dies in an abject space such as the bathroom but she also succumbs to a disease that is usually associated with lower socio-economic conditions. Throughout her life the matriarch has only known suffering, and abuse and death is depicted as an escape from that harsh reality by presenting it in such poetic language. The reference to the butterfly is also significant because it suggests a sense of rebirth and the liberation of the body from the cocooned harshness of a life in the squalor of the city.

From death to birth: the birth of Jakkie in *Agaat* is also associated with the spilling of blood and with the secretions of the maternal body (*A*, 170-182). *Agaat* as the young domestic servant has to assist with the birth in the mountain pass, and when there is an obstruction, is told to cut open her mistress “all the way to the hole” (*A*, 182), resulting in

a spurt of blood out of you all the way up to the upholstery, it dripped back onto you. ... You strained upright, heard the scissors clatter to the ground, saw the strings dangling, slime and threads of blood out of you. (*A*, 182)

In this case the abject, and in particular abject bodily fluids, is associated with the maternal body giving birth – incidentally, it is also the body against which the oedipal male subject will rebel later on in life.

The new-born is described as “a tiny white cocoon with red palm prints” (*A*, 182). The child is depicted as an insect to be freed from his cocoon like a larva but the blood of both his mother and of *Agaat*’s palm prints already marks his cocoon. The two women whom he will

have to let go of later in life in order to be accepted into the symbolic order have marked his body with the presence of their blood. Agaat's palm print is described as emulating "the bloody forepaw of an otter" (A, 182). Agaat's perception of motherhood has a feral, almost animalistic quality. The presence of blood also suggests that the secretions and discharges of his mother's body defile the body of the male infant, in the absence of his father.

The birth occurs within a feminised space: it is a womb like a cavern with a waterfall, and it is devoid of any masculine presence. The close bond between the maternal body and that of the infant is sustained in the description of the environment and shows a clear resemblance to the semiotic *chora*, where language (patriarchal language?) is obsolete:

A waterfall. From the highest cliff a down-feather twirling on the foam, a little lily bobbing after the haze of your body, a patch of scarlet in black moss, a throat, a tongue, a gong in the dripping sparkling jet. (A, 182)

There is no need for words and language in this sphere and it is only the sound of the water that is heard. It is in this "nonexpressive totality" (Kristeva, 1984: 25), this "matrix like space that is nourishing, unnameable, prior to the One and to God" (Kristeva, 1995: 204) that the infant bonds with the mother for the first time.

Blood is not only associated with birth in *Agaat* but is also related to the description of Jak's death:

The blood seeped away in the muddy water of the drift. The colour of the blood clashed violently with the red of the Alfa. (A, 621)

The name of the type of car serves in this sentence as a homophone for “Alpha”, the first letter of the Greek alphabet, in other words, “prime”, as in the “alpha” male, and the red blood of the dead male is contrasted to the red colour of the car, which serves as an extended symbol of the self. The following description suggests the symbolic castration that the male object had to endure by the hands of the two females in his life, with the phallic branch (note the suggestive use of “penetrated”) as a substitute phallus:

Jak was hanging over the water a bit further along.

A broken wattle branch had penetrated his chest in front and emerged from his back ...

Both of you put a foot on his chest on either side and pull with four hands, Agaat said.

One, two, three, she counted.

The branch came out with a glugging sound. (A, 620-21)

On his return to South Africa following the death of his mother, Jakkie reconstructs the events of his father’s death, and in a detached manner points out that it was his letter that had caused his father’s death:

They had to lug the branch out of him, I’ve since heard, with the letter that Gaat wrote on my behalf, covered in blood in his pants pocket. Fancy the detail. Just after it happened, she wrote to me that he’d had an accident with his car in the drift, full stop. So it was ‘my’ letter, then, that caused it. My poor father. (A, 683)

The male subject’s unwillingness to become a member of the state’s military machine leads to his decision to immigrate to Canada and he asks Agaat to write a letter on his behalf. This annoys his father to such an extent that he is willing to report his son to the authorities. The letter is never delivered, and following his death, it is removed by Agaat and later burnt.

From an intertextual point of view, this game with the letter calls to mind Lacan's seminar on Poe's *The Purloined Letter*. This seminar is the opening chapter of *Écrits* (Lacan, 2006: 11-48) and is his interpretation of Freud's idea of repetition compulsion or "repetition automatism", as it is called by Lacan. The subject feels compelled to repeat unpleasant experiences and disregard the pleasure principle. In this seminar, Lacan also delineates some of the major concepts, such as the gaze and the three orders, namely the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. Regarding the symbolism of the letter itself, Homer (2006: 48) asserts that it refers to the "signifier that inscribes the subject into the Symbolic Order." Reading this passage in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* in conjunction with this intertext opens new interpretative possibilities, especially when considering Lacan's closing remarks:

This is why what the 'purloined letter,' nay, the 'letter *en souffrance*,' means is that a letter always arrives at its destination. (Lacan, 2006: 42)

Dovey (1988: 57) refers to Derrida's reading of a Poe short story, which suggests that "a letter can miss its destination and be disseminated". Barbara Johnson makes the point that, [t]he letter's destination is thus wherever it is read" (cited in Dovey, 1988: 57).

Regarding the letter found in the deceased Jak's pocket, it is obvious that this letter is not a signifier inscribing the subject into the militarised realm of the Father but rather to prevent it. By writing the letter, the female Other revolts against the system and is indirectly responsible for the death of the father and patriarch. Both the male subject and the female other premeditated this and knew how the paternal object would respond to this challenging of the symbolic order.

Returning to the description of blood, there is one reference to blood in *Memorandum*, particularly in Table B (*M*, 130) as part of Addendum 1. In the column marked “Outcome positive”, one of the inscriptions reads: “No bleeding, colon maximally decompressed under circumstances”. From this addendum, we deduce that the diseased body of Wiid is not the “clean and proper body” (Kristeva, 1982: 72) because it is discharging, among others, audible gas and soft stools.

7.3.4 Urine

Urine as a bodily fluid associated with abjection features in the scene between Lambert and Fish-Eye in *Triomf* (*T*, 277). Lambert lodges a complaint against Fish-Eye because of the noise made by the pumps for his fish tanks. In response, Fish-Eye writes a letter stating that “his property was losing its value as a result of their meddling” and he would rather live next to “a decent kaffir like Cyril Ramaphosa” than the Benades. Lambert avenges himself on Fish-Eye because

[w]hen he goes out on his rounds, late at night, he takes a crate to stand on and then he pisses into Fish-Eye’s post box. (*T*, 277)

Fish-Eye does not associate this with Lambert in any way but given the context of the changing South African political scenario, he blames it on the black men passing his house and refers to their “horsepipe-dicks” and “king-sized dicks” (*T*, 277). By doing so, Fish-Eye equates being black with phallic power and the abject deed perpetrated by Lambert serves as a catalyst for his fear of black people.

When Lambert experiences an epileptic fit, he also loses control over his bladder and “pee spurts out of [him]” (T, 240). Urine, in this case, is not associated with revenge as in the case of Fish-Eye but rather adds to his humiliation.

Milla’s loss of control over her bodily functions is serious enough to require her to wear nappies. In one of the scenes in *Agaat*, she is encouraged by Agaat to urinate:

Today Agaat looks into the pan again and again as if it contained a message. She takes her magnifying glass out of the dressing table drawer. She peers through it and she writes and she looks again. Augur of my elements, who will prevent her from prognosticating my piss? Perhaps it contains tadpoles.

Quite satisfactory under the circumstances, says Agaat, a slight little cloudiness, but nothing to fret about ...

Pees like a mare, says Agaat, nothing wrong with the pee. ... A pretty light yellow. Clear except for the little trail. And not at all over-sharp on the nose, she says, just about perfect pee. (A, 82-83)

Agaat, as the servant and nurse, imitates the role and actions of a physician and throughout the text she meticulously records Milla’s bowel movements and passing of urine and keeps track of her medication. The subject’s lack of control has resulted in the object becoming an instrument in the service of the medical profession and its obsession with meticulous recording and classification of diseases. By calling the subject “a mare”, she is given animal-like qualities, which accentuates her un-human-like diseased state of being.

7.3.5 Excrement

Treppie’s “constipated vigils on the toilet” (Libin, 2009:39) is a leitmotif the text, but for the purpose of this discussion, I wish to concentrate on the following excerpt:

He [Treppie] said the untouchables wiped off their shit, er, er pardon, he meant their excrement, with their hands, and then they used it to write messages on the walls, for aliens. 'Mene mene Tekel.' ... Then she asked him, but what about the Witnesses. They still came to visit, out of their own free will. But Treppie said the Witnesses were only interested in their souls, not their excrement; although, come to think of it, their souls were probably lodged in their excrement, otherwise he also couldn't figure out what the Witnesses thought they were looking for here at the Benades. But he said, one of these days the Witnesses would have to come visiting on stilts, 'cause they were already deeper than knee-deep, and they were sinking fast. (T, 276-277)

To show his disdain for the Jehovah's Witnesses and their intrusive visits to 127 Martha Street, Treppie makes an association between religion and excrement. He sets out his diatribe with reference to the toilet practices of the Hindu "untouchables" but then fuses the different religious traditions with his reference to the Christian Bible, and in particular the text contained in *Daniel* 5:26-28: "Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting." In the biblical king Belshazzar's case in the Bible, the text predicted the end of the Babylonian Empire, but in the case of *Triomf*, the writing on Lambert's wall suggests the coming end of the apartheid era and the machineries of the apartheid state.

Treppie also comments on the hold of the abject on his family when he refers to their souls as being anchored in excrement. The soul, which distinguishes man from animal, is now seen as being on the same level as excrement. According to Kristeva (1982: 108), faecal matter signifies

as it were, what never ceases to separate from a body in a state of permanent loss in order to become *autonomous, distinct* from the mixtures, alterations, and decay that run through it. That is the price the body must pay if it is to become clean and proper.

Furthermore, she points out that the passing of excrement is an example of the “first material separation that is controllable by the human being.” Lambert never manages to free himself of the maternal body as represented by Mol, and the excrement busy smothering the house in Treppie’s metaphor suggests that the male subject-in-process is never able to remove himself from the “waste-body” of the maternal figure.

From his ideological perspective, Treppie links excrement to Afrikaner nationalism because apart from the satirical references to the clothes, the wagons and the paraphernalia of the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek, the narrator also mentions that the Afrikander oxen pulling the ox wagons through Fordsburg’s Main Street “were shitting non-stop” (*T*, 318):

Fordsburg’s main street was strewn with shit and the dogs were going berserk from all the strange smells and the commotion. One of the dogs got between the legs of the oxen. He was kicked to death on the spot. Not a good day for a dog. And no one even bothered to pick up the poor thing. He just lay there in the road. Everyone hypnotised by the wagons. High on the Great Trek.¹²⁵

In contrast to Treppie’s ordeal with constipation and excrement, when one studies Addendum 1 in *Memorandum* (*M*, 125-131), one gets a good indication of Wiid’s satisfactory stool, and it is mostly in the column marked “Outcome positive” where the reader finds references to excrement, ranging from “soft stools” to “regular bowel movements” to audible gas and functionality of the colon. Wiid’s recording of the way in which his body reacts to the

¹²⁵ Dogs play an integral part in Marlene van Niekerk’s first two novels. Woodward (2001) and Libin (2009) examine the dog as representative symbol in *Triomf*. In *Agaat*, Milla compares Jak to a Doberman, “fine of build with a beautiful muzzle, but a dog nevertheless.” (*A*, 119) Growing more frustrated with his situation as husband, the only way in which he could exert his power is to kick the dogs (*A*, 143).

medical intervention emulates his years of recording and planning for the municipality. He is indeed an “anal” character in the literal sense of the word because not only is he precise in his observations of his body and its discharges but, despite his illness, he still manages to meticulously record and classify all the information at his disposal.

I have alluded to Serote’s “What’s in this Black ‘Shit” and Armah’s scatological writing in my introduction, but within the context of Afrikaans literature, in which *Triomf* was first published, one also encounters writing about excrement in the poetry of Breyten Breytenbach and Antjie Krog in particular. In the case of Krog, excrement is mostly associated with ineptitude and the inability of those in power to deliver service. The use of imagery associated with abjection in Krog’s work in particular, is in reaction to the patriarchal assumptions on what constitutes a well-written poem. In one of her so-called “winter poems” from her collection, *Gedigte 1989-1995*, she writes as follows:

*dinge natuurlik waaroor ‘n mens nooit ‘n gedig sou skryf nie
dring in die nuwe territory poetic temas binne*

*soos om tampon en pad te ruil te pie in toilette
van townships waar ‘n mens soms kom*

*op die vloer water en opdrifsels byna enkeldiep
op adidassole waad ek soos ‘n kat*

*geen equipment beskikbaar wat kan beweeg
soos toiletseats blikke hake slotte deure*

*my jas hang in kombersvoue om my nek
handsak vasgeklem tussen tande*

*tampon rooi geswolle muis, gevlekte strikpad
toegedraai in spaarbankteenbladsytjies*

*pis ek rillend verstard effens hurkend
tussen my bene deur*

*in 'n toiletbak tot in die helfte opgehoop
met minstens vier verskillende kleure kak*

*elke senupunt van weersin orent om mal te word
as maar net 'n enkele druppel op teen my sou spat.*

[topics on which one should never write a poem / penetrate themes in the new territory// like changing a tampon and pad or piss in toilets / in townships where one sometimes visits// water on the floor and debris almost ankle deep / on my adidas soles wading like a cat // no equipment available that can move / like toilet seats tins hooks locks doors // my coat hangs in folds of blanket around my neck / handbag clasped between the teeth // tampon red swollen mouse, stained bow / wrapped in savings bank counterfoils // I piss shudder petrified slightly crouched / between my legs // in a toilet bowl heaped halfway / with almost four different colours of shit // each nerve end horrified erect to go crazy / should just one drop splatter against my leg.]

According to Helize Van Vuuren (2008: 165), the use of excrement in the more recent novel by Ingrid Winterbach (published in Afrikaans as *Die Boek van Toeval en Toeverlaat* in 2006 and in an English translation as *The Book of Happenstance* in 2011) serves as a central metaphor for the Freudian anal phase, as well as linking it to an awareness of the body in contrast to the more spiritual endeavours in the novel, such as the collecting of delicate shells.

7.4 Dead flesh, the corpse, the cadaver

As mentioned before, Treppie, in *Triomf*, is fascinated by a newspaper item about a young mortuary assistant who falls in love with the corpse of a young virgin and decides to have sexual intercourse with her (*T*, 179). By engaging in this necrophiliac deed, the assistant crosses the boundary between life and death and ventures into the terrain of the abject. He is, however, cognisant of his transgression of civilised norms and fears the wrath of the Father. The earthly representative of the Father, namely the Catholic priest, gives him absolution and bases his argument on some strange phallogocentric logic:

If he hadn't broken the young woman's virgin, then she'd still be a dead, cold corpse. Six feet under, where the worms would have violated her soft places anyway. Was life more valuable, he asked, than a virginal membrane and a teaspoonful of blood? (*T*, 180).

The clergyman's reasoning suggests that the phallus is life-giving in contrast to the worms that act as substitute phalluses in the grave. However, as Grosz suggests in her criticism of Kristeva, the impression is created here that virginity is not sacrosanct and that female sexuality is surrendered to phallic potency – with even the blessing of the church. The reference to “a teaspoonful of blood” gives testimony to the chauvinistic discourse belittling virginity and female sexuality.

At the end of the novel *Triomf*, we have another reference to an abject corpse and in this case it refers to the dead body of Pop after he has been killed by Lambert. Lambert has discovered the family secret and in his anger kills Pop who, in an almost macabre way, is sitting “under [a] sheet” (*T*, 465), while the painters are working around him. When the sheet

is lifted and the corpse is unveiled, he is described as being “blue and his nose was white” (*T*, 467). Flint (1997: 456) associates veils with “eroticism, exoticism, and fetishism” and when one lifts the veil it is seen as “peep[ing] at the forbidden [or] to access taboo knowledge.” Once the sheet is lifted, the Benades and the reader are voyeuristically gazing at a taboo object that has to be removed out of the intimate space of the house. The suggestion that his face has turned “blue” enhances the notion of the exotic. The male subject-in-process has committed patricide but instead of inheriting the patricial seat, he will be caught up in the maternal hold and remain the pre-oedipal abject object.

This act calls to mind Freud’s theory of the so-called “primal horde” as discussed in his book *Totem and Taboo*. According to Freud (1998: 121), the violent and jealous father keeps all the females for himself and “drives away the growing sons”. The sons then collaborate to slay the father and eat him. The sons have envied the father his powerful position, but some ambivalence in their attitude towards him is apparent:

They hated the father who stood so powerfully in the way of their sexual demands and their desire for power, but they also loved and admired him. After they had satisfied their hate by his removal and had carried out their wish for identification with him, the suppressed tender impulses had to assert themselves. (Freud, 1998: 122)

In Lacan’s theory, three concepts of the father are distinguished, namely the symbolic father, the imaginary father and the real father (Evans, 1999: 62). The symbolic father is also “the dead father, the father of the primal horde, who has been murdered by his sons.” The symbolic father is also associated with the Name-of-the-Father that represents the phallus in the paternal metaphor, which Bailly (2009: 78) explains:

In the paternal metaphor, the signifier Father is substituted for the signifier “object of the Mother’s desire”. In the course of the substitution the signifier “object of the Mother’s desire” is repressed and becomes unconscious: this is part of Freud’s primal repression. ... The signifier of the desire of the mother (Phallus) is now associated with the Name-of-the-Father, in a metaphoric structure. By naming the father as the cause of her absence from the child, the mother is nominating him in a symbolic act of language in the place of the fundamental object of her desire (Phallus) that the child imagines she is after.

By killing the symbolic father, the subject is able to gain control over the phallus. Leland (1989: 96) discusses what she describes as “the primal horde’s women”. This implies that from the Freudian point of view, the males are the ones to be restrained, whereas the females are oppressed and almost negated. The restraint of the father is thus internalised and repressed.

The fusion of the boundaries between human and animal that often occurs in *Triomf* continues after Pop’s death because his ashes are put in a hole next to Gerty’s grave (*T*, 469). His name is added to the epitaphs for the dead dogs on the wall, and it is insinuated that he has crossed over to “dog’s heaven”.¹²⁶

An incident in *Agaat* which illuminates the interaction between the living and the dead from a different perspective occurs when Agaat’s nocturnal wanderings and shamanistic activities arouse suspicion and Milla follows her up the mountain. It is during one of these excursions that the following abject scene takes place:

¹²⁶ Libin (2009: 46) writes in this regard as follows: “In *Triomf*’s conclusion, Pop’s effulgent vision of dog heaven is validated: Gerty is invested with authority, status and value whereas Pop functions merely as her ditto, a parenthetical gloss upon her existence; an afterthought that refines but does not define her.”

You didn't see the ditch in time. The torch shot from your hand as you tumbled down the side. You screamed as you tried to find a handhold against the side, but the soil was mushy and muddy and broke up into lumps under your hands. Then you were at the bottom, there was something under your feet, it gave way with a smacking sound, you sank into it up to your ankles. Something crawled against your legs. You screamed again, with long steps tried to get out of the muck. The stench was unbearable. Then you saw the torch lying faintly gleaming. And it was shining on something that crawled. It took a while for you to make out what it was. The head of a cow, half rotten, with white maggots writhing in the eye sockets and the ears and in the bloated-open mouth and muzzle in which nothing was visible of the gentle expression of the Jersey.

How did you get home? You wanted to escape from your own skin. You ran, a flare of stench. (A, 511)

Milla, as representative of the clean and proper maternal body who has potty trained the young Agaat and who teaches her to speak properly and adapt to her new circumstances, violates all the taboos such as defilement and the touching of dead flesh. She even returns bearing the stench of the cadaver on her body, which calls to mind Kristeva's observation that abjection often results in "man [straying] on the territories of *animal*" (1982: 12). Milla's entering of the body of the dead cow activates another aspect pertaining to abjection, namely "biologism as a component of abjection" (Schwenger, 2000: 408). Literally, she ventures off into the unknown and leaves the safe space of the farmhouse behind, and by sinking into the dead flesh, she enters the realm of the abject and "becomes part of the dead cow". The presence of the maggots also suggests that she is now in the realm of the abject.

In contrast to the dead animal, Wiid, in his typical almost business-like manner, describes in his Addendum 1 (M, 125-131) how he foresees his death after he had found out that his tumour is malignant:

Intensive care, septic shock & sheet over head, to hospital morgue, Kruger & Kruger informed, testamentary stipulations to earthly remains implemented.

He does not resort to lengthy descriptions of the way in which he will come to an end but summarises it in one phrase, namely “septic shock”. Wiid assumes that he has reached the end of his life when his body is being invaded by bacteria that will result in an infection. He thus believes that he will not be safe and secure within the space of the hospital, despite the fact that he is the one who reprimands Mr X and Mr Y for being ungrateful about the quality of care in the hospital.

The reference to “the confined Christ of Holbein” (*M*, 68), described as a “still-life of death”, activates an insightful intertextual reference. Kristeva (1989c: 106-138) writes extensively on this painting from 1522 in her poignant essay entitled “Holbein’s Dead Christ”, described by Lechte and Margaroni (2004: 81) as follows:

Holbein’s painting depicts a life-size body of Christ alone in its tomb immediately after the Crucifixion. The agony and suffering of a slow death on the cross are clearly visible: the head is bent back and slightly twisted to the right with eyes and mouth still open. There is no attempt to hide the contortions that death brings.

Fascinatingly, the painting almost creates the impression that Christ is lying on the coroner’s slab waiting for a post mortem. The viewer looks at it “from below” (Kristeva, 1989: 110) and is left with the feeling that: “Everything is dying. God is dying. I am dying” (Kristeva, 1989: 130). It is a study of melancholy, loneliness and despair. Furthermore, it makes the viewers conscious of their fear of death, because they are reminded of their own mortality, mostly because the inference is drawn that even a metaphysical being like Christ is subject to death. This defeatist awareness of mortality is illustrated in *Memorandum* by the

conversations between Mr X and Mr Y. These lamentations, however, prompt Wiid to call off his operation and to accept his own mortality and await his own death. Does this suggest a release of the self from the constraints of the symbolic order, signified by Dr Reinhard Snyman and his medical team?

The fear of death is often accentuated by the presence of the image of the departed. In this regard, Schwenger (2000: 400) writes as follows:

Death is the departed. The corpse remains; and that there are remains, is profoundly disturbing. For we cannot help but identify the recognizable image of the departed, that shadow without living substance, with the other's self. And sensing that process of identification in ourselves, we sense at the same time that every self is similarly created by a process of bodily identification.

In contrast to the abovementioned fear of death, in the poetry of the Afrikaans poet Breyten Breytenbach, there is strong reverence for death, and the speaker in most of his poems awaits his death with a sense of acceptance and submission. According to Viljoen (1998: 286), the quote from Karl Marx used as an epigraph to Breytenbach's collection *Kouevuur* (Gangrene) represents a central concern in Breytenbach's poetry: *In history, as in nature, decomposition is the laboratory of all life.*

Subsequently, Breytenbach's poetry has been described as the poetry of decomposition. His work contains elements of abjection and in particular in his prison poems (written during the period 1975-1983 when he was incarcerated), there is a definite awareness of the liminal

boundary between the inside and the outside, between life in jail with all its oppressive elements and the experience of freedom outside of prison.¹²⁷

Another significant text in Afrikaans in which the dead body plays a major role, is Lettie Viljoen's *Landskap met Vroue en Slang* (1996) [Landscape with women and snake]. The events in the text take place in abject spaces such as the cemetery or the morgue. The main character, Lena Bergh, attends an autopsy on invitation from an artist friend of hers and from her perspective the reader becomes aware of the smell of excrement in the intestines, the bruises on the body and the colours of the inside of the dead body, as observed by the artist, as narrator and focaliser. This text is one of the major Afrikaans novels that are obsessed with abjection and compares with the abject elements in *Agaat*. Also significant in Lettie Viljoen's novel is the strange relationship between the narrator and her mother, whereas the father is seen as a more benevolent character.

7.5 Dirt

Lambert personifies dirt in *Triomf*, because there are constant references to his dirty clothes and his dirty feet. During one of his visits to the rubbish dump, he has an epileptic fit (*T*, 222) and Sonnyboy has to help him. True to his racist nature, he is not very grateful and the first thing that comes into his mind is whether Sonnyboy is not full of germs— “He just hopes the kaffir hasn't got germs” (*T*, 226). Within his racist framework, the black Other is

¹²⁷ For a discussion on Breytenbach's prison writing, see Roux (2007, 2012: 545-564).

associated with dirt, germs and infection. Despite the fact that he is the one scratching around on a rubbish dump, the touch of the Other elicits thoughts of disease and infection from Lambert. It thus explains why Sonnyboy reacts as follows:

Okay? Relax, my bra. Relax net. Boss, king, president, chief, Caesar. Whatever. God in heaven, anything you want, ek sê. Any way you want it. At your service. Askies baas, asseblief baas, dankie baas ja baas nee baas, sorry boss that I live boss! (*T*, 224)

In *Agaat*, dirt is mostly associated with those spaces outside of the farmhouse and particularly the spaces inhabited by the farm labourers. Following the outbreak of an epidemic of pork measles, Agaat describes the dirty space inhabited by the labourers:

You're worse than pigs! They can't help it that they didn't get any brains. They eat your runny shit that lies around here stinking in the sun. That's why they're full of measles. If I come again, then I'll dip the whole lot of you wholesale with a forked stick behind the neck in the sheep-dip. ... Just look at that child's scabies! When last did she smell a piece of soap? Godalmighty! ... Just think what your guts look like! Pauperworms, they crawl up into your heads and gnaw out your brains till you're dancing around with the horrors. And what about those mangy curs? ... Now you listen well to me on this day today, you take a spade, you throw all your shit on one pile every day and you make a fire on top. ... If I catch one of you dropping your pants in the veld then I'll string barbed wire through his arse. (*A*, 287-88)

Agaat sounds as if she is reciting the Biblical prescriptions in the book of *Leviticus* and trying to distinguish between what is appropriate conduct for humans and for animals respectively. We also deduce the unhygienic and abject conditions associated with space inhabited by the labourers. They will be dipped like animals if they do not adhere to the rules laid down by Agaat. Significantly, she also refers to "soap", the purifying substance, the agent of cleanliness and conqueror of the abject and defilement. In order to stress her point, she assumes the position of some powerful mother figure and uses rather macabre arguments ("barbed wire") to frighten the workers and see to it that they do not regress into a life of dirt

and defilement. The abject lifestyle of the labourers not only influences their well-being but it also affects the productivity on the farm – the pigs eat their excrement, resulting in disease and death.

Just like Agaat in her interaction with the workers, Wiid in *Memorandum*, is mostly concerned with the loss of standards and the decay of structures underpinning an orderly society. As a former municipal official, he sees it as his duty to comment on the loss of orderliness. Not only does he view the Parow Library as a chaotic and disorderly space but even the librarian Buitendagt's appearance does not adhere to the expected norms for a person of his stature. Furthermore, the silent space of the library is polluted by "deafening music" (*M*, 138). His disdain for the chief librarian is evident from his description of Buitendagt: "with a ragged beard, unwashed hair in a ponytail ... not overly fresh as regards personal hygiene" (*M*, 139). The untidy and unkempt appearance of the official does not befit a worker in an institution such as the city council. This probably explains to Wiid why the library is in such a state of disarray, with its "piles of books, catalogues, brochures and information leaflets on the reading table" (*M*, 139). Wiid, who is famed for his sense of order and cataloguing (he calls himself "[an] experienced administrator" (*M*, 140)), finds this "total lack of administrative systems" (*M*, 139) in the library unacceptable and that explains why he feels the need to write a letter of complaint to the Superintendent of Public Libraries. This disorderly arrangement in the public space calls to mind Wiid's description of his own father's book collection:

One would have to be discreet, not make a whole song and dance of it, as my late mother used to say when my father exaggerated something. He exaggerated his book collection; there were bookshelves even in the toilet. (*M*, 92)

7.6 Conclusion

Of the three texts under discussion, *Triomf* remains unquestionably the text that is most representative of the abject and the repulsive elements in society. It deals with death and decay, dirt and filth, excrement and bodily fluids, incest, racism and all forms of discrimination. In contrast, we have the orderly farmhouse in *Agaat* and the tidy flat and hospital in *Memoradum*. These ostensibly ordered and abject-free spaces, however, are penetrated by deadly organisms, which lead eventually to the deaths of the main characters. The mortality of the characters in *Triomf* seems to be more credible to the reader when viewed in the context of the abjection surrounding them.

Conclusion

Kristeva points out that, as practices, psychoanalysis and art are similar in that they permit an inter-subjective transference of meaning and affect. In creative practice, the transference occurs ... between the artist and language itself. – Estelle Barrett

In this thesis, I have argued that in the novels of Marlene van Niekerk, there is a constant preoccupation with the abject to such an extent that one could typify her project as “writing about the abject”. Abjection forms the central theme of the novels under discussion, and the characters populating a peripheral world personify the abject: the diseased body, the white working-class person ejected from life in the centre, the black labourer on a white-owned farm or an official who is no longer employed and who has to pass his last days composing a memorandum to come to terms with his mortality. In my introductory chapter, I have posited the following hypothesis:

As an Afrikaans-speaking author, Marlene van Niekerk challenges and subverts the existing norms and values in patriarchal Afrikaner society by writing explicitly in a language that is underpinned by elements of the abject. These elements include the use of vulgar language, descriptions of disease, death and decay, as well as an incisive analysis of the role of the maternal.

The theoretical approach for this reading of abjection is based primarily on Julia Kristeva’s essay on abjection and related aspects, bearing in mind that Kristeva, in an interview with Lipkowitz and Loselle (1996: 19), observes that “it is not necessary to mechanically apply

models to the literary text, but that it was necessary to consider the literary text as another language, another type of discourse.” This other language of the literary text is “not the language of ordinary communication.”¹²⁸

It is, however, important for the sake of conclusion that Kristeva’s initial remarks about abjection be reiterated here:

L’abjection is something that disgusts you, for example, you see something rotting and you want to vomit – it is an extremely strong feeling that is at once somatic and symbolic, which is above all a revolt against an external menace from which one wants to distance oneself, but of which one has the impression that it may menace us from inside. The relation to abjection is finally rooted in the combat that every human being carries on with the mother. For in order to be autonomous, it is necessary that one cut the instinctual dyad of the mother and child and that one become something other. ... If there is sort of rage against mothers, it is not only because they take care of the child but because they carry it in their bodies. And that is something that men, even if they handle the diapers, can’t do. (Cited in an interview with Baruch, 1996: 118)

In her writing, Marlene van Niekerk explores “that something that disgusts you” and does so in a language that is both “somatic and symbolic”. Not only does she depict the harsh living conditions of the white trash family in Triomf, with all its nuances, but she also focuses on the caring interaction between the abusive and egocentric madam and her subservient servant, the dual representation.

The novels also serve as examples on how to confront the abject mother and her hold over the subject-in-process, as is the case with Lambert, Agaat and Johannes Wiid who is

¹²⁸ From the outset I wish to emphasise that this reading of Marlene van Niekerk’s novels serves as a supplement to other critics’ ideas – in the deconstructive sense of the word: “The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude. ... It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of. ... As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of emptiness.” (Derrida, 1976: 145)

constantly reminded that he has a deceased twin brother. Van Niekerk's writing is not a constant battle with the maternal because, as I have indicated, often in the texts there is a need to return to the *chora* and explore a sense of security and creative possibilities in such a place of nurture. Lambert, when painting in his den, acknowledges that "[m]ost of the time he sees nothing when he starts" and that it is "weird, seeing nothing where there's so much." (*T*, 163)

This remark is also applicable to the three novels – and we should not forget that Van Niekerk (2008a) sees Lambert and Agaat as manifestations of the artist – because it comments on the complexity of the writing. Woven into this textual web are the elements of disgust and a comment on the threats from outside, be it the law, the apartheid state or the fear of death.

Central to this preoccupation with "an external menace" (Kristeva) is the questioning of values and a revisit to what Viljoen (1996b: 246) succinctly characterises as, "a gross caricature of the nuclear family and all the values it embodies." To satirise the nuclear family story (and its concomitant oeuvre, the Freudian family romance), Van Niekerk writes about that *something* that is disgusting and that challenges the boundaries between inside and outside.

Reading her work as being criticism-as-fiction, new interpretative possibilities are opened up: All three novels are essays on abjection. In *Triomf* the emphasis is on horror, suffering and defilement, whereas in *Agaat* the inescapable power of the abject mother is symbolised in

both the relationship between Mother and Milla, and between Milla and Agaat. In the case of *Memorandum*, the boundaries are opened and we are amidst the sanitised, yet dehumanising world of the hospital. *Memorandum* is also, as Roux (2009) points out, a study on dying and how to prepare for death.

The discourse of abjection is associated with spatial crossings, boundaries, transgression, the maternal and the feminine, with death, decay and a fear of the unknown. These discursive elements are all encoded in the novels of Van Niekerk under discussion, as I have shown above. Diane de Beer (2011) when reviewing a production of Van Niekerk's Afrikaans play, *Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W*, writes:

It is not an easy show to watch and many left the auditorium because they simply couldn't weather the storm, but in many different ways, if you have the stomach, it blows you away. It is relentless in its message and its tone. And if I could wish for anything different, it would be that Van Niekerk's anguish about violence takes me on a journey of some kind.

This captures, to my mind, the essence of Van Niekerk's writing, especially the reference to the "anguish about violence" in all its forms, since this anguish constitutes, "that of being opposed to *P*" (Kristeva, 1982: 1), "a brutish suffering that [the] 'I' puts up with", a reality that annihilates the subject.

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