



# National trauma work and the depiction of women in two Afrikaans historical Karoo novels: *Fiela's child* and *Sorg*

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*Fiela's child* and *Sorg* are two female-authored popular Afrikaans novels that entertain as subtext dynamics of female agency in the same region and historical period, namely the Little Karoo of the late 19th century. The two novels present a pertinent counter-discursive paradigm to the more mainstream master narrative representations of women of the time. The novels were written and published during the late-apartheid and early post-apartheid years, 1985 and 2006, respectively, and as a result of these dynamics of production, they also engage with the socio-politics of this time, maybe even more so than with the British imperial colonialist period in which the novels are set. As such, both novels step into the discursive streams that flow in and around the trauma work that is associated with South Africa's contemporary engagement with its colonial and apartheid legacies and heritage. Both texts also contribute to the creation and popularisation of new national master narratives. It is then in this context that these texts can be seen as participating in the multivocal discursive project of new identity construction, specifically identity construction through the writing of a new heterogeneous national autobiography.

**Nasionale trauma-werk en die uitbeelding van vroue in twee Afrikaanse historiese Karoo-romans: *Fiela se Kind* en *Sorg*.** *Fiela se kind* en *Sorg* is twee populêre Afrikaanse romans deur vroue geskryf wat in dieselfde tyd en omgewing afspeel, naamlik aan die einde van die negentiende eeu in die Klein Karoo, en wat die dinamika van vroulike agentskap as subteks het. Die twee romans verskaf belangrike teen-diskursiewe paradigmitiese uitbeeldings wat in teenstelling staan met die meer algemene hoofstroom uitbeeldings van vroue in meestersverhale van die betrokke historiese tyd. Die romans is gedurende die apartheid- en postapartheidsjare geskryf, in 1985 en 2006 onderskeidelik, en as gevolg van hierdie produksie-dinamika handel beide tekste ook oor die sosio-politieke bestel van hierdie tyd, moontlik selfs meer as oor die Britse imperialisties-koloniale tyd waarin hulle afspeel. As sulks tree beide tekste midde-in die diskursiewe onderstroming van Suid Afrika se hedendaagse omgang met 'n geskiedenis en erfenis van kolonialisme en apartheid. Albei tekste dra dan ook by tot die skepping en popularisering van nuwe meestersverhale. Dit is binne hierdie konteks dat beide tekste bydra tot die meerstemmige diskursiewe projek van hernude identiteitskonstruksie, hoofsaaklik in terme van die omskrywing of beskrywing van 'n nuwe heterogene nasionale outobiografie.

## Introduction

In this article, I shall engage with two popular Afrikaans historical novels written by South African women. In both instances, the novels were written by white women who present fictionalised narratives with female main characters who are coloured (in South Africa this is a contentious term used to refer to people of mixed-race) (Erasmus 2001; Du Pré 1994). Both novels are set in the same historical period and geographical area, namely the Klein Karoo in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa during the latter part of the 19th century. Neither novel was written during this time but rather during the more recent apartheid and post-apartheid periods in South African history. The critically acclaimed *Fiela's child* by Dalene Matthee was first published in 1985 in Afrikaans but was also translated into other international languages whilst the less-well-known *Sorg* by Micki Pistorius was first published only in Afrikaans in 2006.

Matthee's ([1985] 2010b) *Fiela's child* (see also Matthee [1985] 2010a) was written and published during the apex of national social unrest and the political struggle against apartheid. Pistorius's novel, in contrast, was published more than 20 years later, which was 12 years after the change from apartheid to a democratic system of government. During the time between the publication dates of the two novels, the suffering caused by apartheid became an inescapable reality for all South Africans, particularly through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) public



engagement with individual and national culpability, responsibility, restitution, forgiveness and healing. Though the novels are set in a time that predates apartheid and its direct effects, the novels implicitly engage with apartheid via its precursor eras and ideologies. The novels nudge the reader into engaging with ethical questions that surfaced during the country's past and which now occupy a central place in contemporary popular imagination, discourses and, most significantly, the current (re)construction of new national narratives and identities.

Whilst one recognises that these novels are just two examples from popular fiction, amongst a pluralistic and heterogeneous array across many literary and non-literary genres, they both contribute in their own way, and in conversation with each other, to the new narration of South Africa's story. In this sense, the theme of life-writing or autobiography here relates not to autobiographies in the conventional sense, as life stories of the authors or even the fictional characters, but rather to the new narration of the life story of a country: a dialectical and multivocal national autobiography. The autobiographical sub-genre of testimonials, life histories presented via the intercession of narrators, is a particularly useful metaphor to use. McClintock (1990:218) refers to Sommer's work on testimonials and identifies the following aspects as most significant in terms of literary narration: It is dialogic, public and communal rather than individual. In it, the privileged scribe records the oral testimony of the unprivileged. It bears the imprint of both speakers' voices. There is a dispersed authority of voice. They speak of struggles, and they are written from interpersonal class and ethnic positions. Provided that authors avoid the traps of paternalism and essentialism, narrative testimonials (speaking the lives of others into being or bearing witness) have the potential to be utilised in strategic ways to give voice to subaltern subjects who have been rendered invisible by the epistemic violence of master discourses. Most importantly, as McClintock (1990) states:

[*Testimonials*] effectively ... call on the reader to enter into collaboration with the collective history. The reader is invited to extend the historical community; and that extension is not simply the embrace of a given community, but also involves active participation, the labour of identification and, above all, hard choices about the politics of transformation. (p. 219)

Trauma and remembering occupy a central place in this active extension of the self through the labour of identification with another. Accordingly, trauma 'work' is a central concern in the (re)narration of the history of South Africa (Jones 1995; McGonegal 2009; Sanders 2007). Govinden (1995:170) describes narrative remembering – what Toni Morrison (1987) calls re-memory – as constructions of uniqueness as well as commonality and of coming to terms with the past through the present. Shohat (1992) describes the national trauma experience as follows:

For communities which have undergone brutal ruptures, now in the process of forging a collective identity, no matter how hybrid that identity has been before...the retrieval and reinscription of a fragmented past becomes a crucial contemporary site for forging a resistant collective identity. A notion of the past must

thus be negotiated differently; not as a static fetishized phase to be literally reproduced, but as fragmented sets of narrated memories and experiences on the basis of which to mobilize contemporary communities. (p. 109)

The convergence of interrelated and simultaneous variations on the theme of trauma – namely, that of women's oppression through patriarchal systems, racialised oppression through colonialism and apartheid and the marginalisation and exploitation of indigenous people – form the background to my reading of *Fiela's child* and *Sorg* as representative of the re-narration of South Africa. In this article, I shall look at ways in which the themes of national trauma, memory, life writing and female resistance converge in these novels and how their interweaving reflects and contributes to the construction of new narratives of national history and identity.

## Setting and brief plot summaries

Both novels start around the year 1870 in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa. They are set in the Langkloof in the semi-arid Little Karoo, around the town of Oudtshoorn, and what the tourism trade today calls the Garden Route, around the Tsitsikamma forest. It is also in the vicinity of the town of Knysna which was, at the time in which the novels are set, a thriving export seaport for products of the region (mostly wood and ostrich products). The two areas are separated by the majestic Outeniqua mountain range.

*Fiela's child* tells the story of Fiela Komoetie and her poor but decent mixed-race family (husband Seling and five children) who live on their own small farm in the Langkloof where they survive through subsistence farming. A man arrives on the farm one day to take their details for census purposes and discovers that Fiela's youngest child, 12-year-old Benjamin, is white. It transpires that, nine years earlier, Fiela awoke one night to find this child, lost and crying, in front of her farm house. Not knowing where he came from, she took him in and incorporated him into her own family where he was loved and cared for as one of their own. The child is then forcibly removed from Fiela, and a court case ensues in which a destitute and decrepit white family of woodcutters, the Van Rooyens, from the Tsitsikamma forest on the other side of the mountains claims him as their own child, Lukas, who had disappeared nine years earlier. Against his will, Benjamin/Lukas is forced to accompany them, and the rest of the novel tells of Fiela and Benjamin/Lukas's individual struggles to be reunited with each other. After many unhappy years spent in the forest and later as a fisherman/sailor in Knysna during which he falls in love with his forest 'sister', Nina van Rooyen, he returns to Fiela in the Langkloof to settle his identity crisis. However, he is haunted by the possibility that he really could be Lukas van Rooyen and the implications of incest this would carry for a union with Nina. Returning to Knysna via the forest, he confronts his 'white' mother, Barta, who finally admits that she lied years before, under pressure from the census man, when she claimed him as her own child. Freed from the burden of a life in the forest as Lukas, he returns to Nina as Benjamin Komoetie, an identity that he freely chooses and embraces:



From now on I will be known as Benjamin Komoetie. It is not a new name, it's my old name ... I'll be going back to the Long Kloof. To my people. (Matthee [1985] 2010b:309)

*Sorg* tells the story of Eva Damon, a servant of mixed-race decent, and Hendrik van der Westhuizen, a white farmer, and their descendants. The two plot lines (one historical and the other contemporary) develop parallel to each other, merging at the end as Tessa and Danie, the great-great-great-grandchildren of Eva and Hendrik, meet and fall in love during the Klein Karoo Arts Festival in Oudtshoorn, an annual national cultural event. The contemporary strand of the story line is also populated by ghosts from the past, and the significant characters of the historical plot (most notably Eva and Hendrik) are seen to be waiting around in a kind of ethereal limbo for Tessa and Danie to meet, reunite the families and thereby correct the wrongs of the past. The historical plot is introduced with Eva's arrival as the new house maid on Hendrik's family farm, ironically called *Sorgniet*, shortly before his wedding to Isabella. Hendrik immediately desires Eva, and she is equally attracted to him. There is a sexual encounter between them, and from that, a love relationship develops, deeply fraught with sexual desire, power, control and ownership. Hendrik's marriage to Isabella is unhappy from the start, but they have a son, Evert, and later also a daughter, Cornelia. Eva and Hendrik in turn have a son, Daniël.

When an economic recession hits the farm community, Hendrik is ruined. Eva offers to buy the piece of farm land where the mixed-race workers' homes are situated and where she had started what was initially a small yard business with geese and ostriches but which had grown into a prosperous enterprise as a result of her entrepreneurial spirit and the friendship and advice of a roving Jewish tradesman. For the sake of economic survival, Hendrik is forced to sell part of his farm to Eva, but it leaves him feeling betrayed and emasculated and forever sets them against each other. Love, desire, revenge and counter-revenge against the backdrop of the South African War make up the rest of the story which culminates in Hendrik disinheriting Evert, both sons permanently leaving the farm (Evert dies in the First World War and Daniël in another unnamed country), Hendrik attacking and blinding Eva and, in a final act of revenge from Eva, the tragic death of Lia and her unborn child, the only remaining heir to the farm, *Sorgniet*. The novel ends on a celebratory note, with the meeting of Evert and Daniël's descendants (Tessa and Danie) amidst the festive atmosphere of the Oudtshoorn festival and the subsequent 'settling' of the ghosts of Eva and Hendrik: 'and so Oudtshoorn's sins are cleansed' (Pistorius [2006] 2010).

Two rivers again became one ... one from Daniël's descendants and one from Evert's. One white and one mixed-race (Pistorius [2006] 2010).

## Production and reception dynamics

The dynamics around the production and reception of the two novels were very different and demand brief contextualisation. Both novels can be categorised as popular

historical fiction though Matthee's novel is also viewed as 'literary' and as such is often prescribed by schools and universities in South Africa. Matthee's novels were, in fact, the most often prescribed novels for schools between 1984 and 1990 (Fairer-Wessels 2010:134; Van der Westhuizen 2004:144) whilst previous decades saw literary texts dealing with similar concerns censored and even banned. In contrast, Pistorius's ([2006] 2010) novel, *Sorg*, was less enthusiastically received in 2006, receiving quite severe treatment from renowned literary critic, Hambidge (2013) who dismissed it as overly ambitious and melodramatic with ineffective use of magic realism and redundant imagery.

*Fiela's child* forms part of what today is known as Matthee's series of four 'forest' novels and contains a subtle subtext of eco-consciousness and environmentalism. The first of these novels, *Kringe in 'n bos*, was published in 1984, one year before *Fiela's child*, which is the second of the four novels. At the time, these novels were a unique phenomenon in Afrikaans literature. Not only did they cross the divide between 'literary' and 'popular' fiction by being enthusiastically accepted on both sides (Brink 1987; Kannemeyer 2005; Smuts 1984), but at the time, they also represented the largest-ever marketing strategy in Afrikaans literature. Van der Westhuizen (2004:144) and Fairer-Wessels (2010:135) show how this represented a turning point in Afrikaans literary production, reception and popularisation dynamics: A publicity campaign started months before the first novel was published, including advertising, reviews, newspaper articles, radio and television interviews with the author and translations into various international languages (even before publication of the original Afrikaans versions). As a result, the sales figures for Matthee's novels reached unprecedented heights (Van der Westhuizen 2004:144), followed by library orders, book-club subscriptions, inclusion in school curricula, literary and environmental awards and later very successful stage and screen adaptations of *Fiela's child*.

The time of publication is particularly significant: During the mid-1980s, South Africa was in turmoil. Increasing international pressure through sanctions and internal civil unrest crystallised into the often violent anti-apartheid 'struggle' movement. Race relations in the country were at breaking point, with fear and anger the pervasive emotions on all fronts. Amid these conditions, Matthee's story of a mixed-race mother's unconditional love for a white child entered the national imagination and resonated with the slowly changing political and ideological dynamics of the country. As a result, *Fiela's child* played a significant role in acclimatising popular attitudes toward reconciliation amongst its mostly white Afrikaans-speaking readership public and represented a larger cultural shift in consciousness about race relations in South Africa. It also influenced a generation of children and students who studied the text as part of school and university curricula and through this institutionalised discursive practice contributed to the early reconfiguration of the mainstream South African popular imagination.

Matthee's novels present small, individual stories as opposed to grand master narratives and can, in Foucauldian terms,



be seen as significant discursive events in the South African landscape. *Fiela's child* represents a moment of historical transformation, signifying when what previously was not said is said and what was said is no longer said (Lemert & Gillan 1982:42, 121), thereby '(re)presenting reversals in force relations ... a coming together of rearrangements of ... relations' (Lemert & Gillan 1982:43).

In contrast to *Fiela's child*, *Sorg* was produced amidst very different social, political and economic conditions. Technology, globalisation and competition, combined with a transforming social and political climate, presented the post-millennium reading public with a much larger global stage, more popular products competing for investments of time, money and attention and an institutionalised corporate marketing agenda that often focused on consumption and consumerism rather than social critique or political expression. Amidst all of this, *Sorg* became, at least, just another popular historical romance novel and, at most, a bit of a curiosity because of the author's particular position in South African society.

The author, Pistorius, is best known as a highly acclaimed criminologist and psychological profiler, specialising in crimes committed by serial killers. She was the first criminal profiler to be employed (significantly in 1994, the official date of apartheid's demise) by the South African Police Service (SAPS). Her public persona as a female profiler catching serial killers was entrenched through a number of media articles and interviews as well as through five non-fiction books she wrote about serial killers in South Africa. In 2000, she resigned from the SAPS. In a television interview in July 2000, she said that she had to live with a constant feeling of uneasiness, as she invited these killers into her mind and that, towards the end of her career found the need to cleanse herself of the dark memories by writing down her thoughts (Phirippides 2000). Using this as a personal trauma-writing and cleansing process, she also tapped into the rising global interest in crime and crime narratives, and as a result, these books were very successful, even amongst the general public.

Breaking away from crime writing, Pistorius wrote her debut novel *Sorg*, which could superficially be categorised as a historical romance, in 2006. However, with the added significance of her expertise in victimology – what Pistorius herself calls 'trying to work out what the victim felt [and] what went on in the killer's mind' (Phirippides 2000) – and her background in and understanding of social manipulation, the dynamics of power, control, psychological dysfunction and trauma, the novel lends itself to a larger psycho-social and socio-political contextual reading. Even though as a historical romance, it is far removed from the gritty modern reality of serial murder, *Sorg* conveys a critical contemporary engagement with historical atrocities, human rights violations and the psycho-social dynamics and systems that move individuals to often tragic ends. If one considers the post-apartheid time during which this novel was written – thinking of the much publicised TRC hearings and its concomitant effect of 'entrench[ing] ... a new public

morality' (Attwell & Harlow 2000:1) – one cannot dismiss it as merely another popular historical romance, irrespective of its 'literary' quality. The inescapable politics of production and reception are central to the dynamics of any text. This provides scope for a reading of *Sorg* for the contribution it makes to the South African national engagement with traumatic memory and reconciliation. As such, it is also, like *Fiela's child*, a literary event marking a moment of historical discursive transformation and the reversal of socio-political power dynamics and force relations.

## The novels as 'ghost work': Trauma and national autobiography

In both novels the symbolic use of the theme of haunting and ghosts acts as metaphor for personal unrest and individual restlessness as well as for alienation from a sense of belonging to a community. As liminal beings, ghosts move in an in-between world where their very disruptiveness becomes a resistance to and refusal of so-called historical reality. Quite simply, ghosts are associated with unresolved memories and trauma. When read in the context of the traumatic history of South Africa, this also carries the implications that the characters are being haunted by history. As such, both novels become literary trauma work, thereby: 'creating a space for mourning' and 'coming to terms with [our] legacy' (Tran 2011:53) through Morrison's concept of re-memory, which Wisker (2000:6) describes as 'a re-investigation and imaginative re-envisioning [of] the past by way of the lens of the present'.

Ester, Van der Merwe and Mulder (2012:5) use Frank Hermans's definition of trauma in *Woordeloos tot verhaal*, their work on trauma and narrative in Afrikaans and Dutch literature. Hermans says that a traumatic experience is one in which a person is confronted by death, the threat of death, serious wounding or a threat to physical integrity of the self or other and in response to which the person would react with feelings of anxiety, helplessness and disgust. Caruth (1991:1) eloquently summarises it when she says that a traumatic narrative is one which oscillates between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life, between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival (Tran 2011:64).

For Tran (2011:53), following Caruth, trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures, not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves. Arguably that has nowhere been clearer in recent history than in the South African 'truth and reconciliation' process. The TRC hearings, amnesties and related processes may have had a specific end-date, but this is not the case for experiences of trauma. As Graham (2003) correctly says:

the Commission has ... given birth to a crisis of public memory and collective agency which have long-lasting effects and repercussions in terms of the ways South Africans engage with history and one another'. (p. 11)

Gobodo-Madikizela (2008:169) rightfully points out that South African trauma is unfinished business. Literature and



other forms of creative production fulfil a very important role in the continuing trauma work of South Africa, and the 'official' TRC processes should be seen as only an initial major contributing factor and catalyst to an on-going process of healing (Tran 2011:54). As Ester *et al.* (2012:7) say, narrative production in this sense means the conversion of life and lived experience into story, and as such, it is an engagement with the search for causal relationships and patterns. It is thus ultimately a hermeneutical process of existential meaning-making, for as Rigney (2005:381) says, certain things are remembered not because they are actually true of the past (which may or may not be the case) but because they are somehow meaningful in the present.

Narratives are therefore also the task and even preoccupation of nations (Ester *et al.* 2012:7) with concomitant implications for the dynamic interplay of socio-political power shifts and identity transformations. McClintock (1990) says the following about Joubert's (1978) *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*:

The story does not express the disappearance of power but rather its redistribution under contest. Identity does not transcend power; it comes into being through the ceaseless contest and results in dispersal and realignment of power rather than a vanishing of power. (p. 209)

It is the social practices that constitute the redistribution of power and the moments of rearrangement of force relations (Lemert & Gillan 1982:43) that can be presented to the popular imagination of a society through literary and other artistic texts. Such texts can illuminate the extended systemic contexts in which institutions, discourses, hierarchies, bureaucracies and related power dynamics perpetuate and reinforce trauma, resulting in the personal as well as collective engagement with trauma. It is the traumas that result from social practices and the subsequent damaging extended constellations of life experiences (Erikson 1994) that are the focus of trauma work. In the context of a national history, the traumatic 'damage' is equally on a personal, individual and a national scale and is reflected in the multifarious imaginations, preoccupations, fears, memories, hallucinations, narratives and discourses of the traumatised. It also implies multivocal interpretations and renderings, complexities and paradoxes rather than a singular grand or master account of historical catastrophic experience (Tran 2011:55).

In terms of South African literature as trauma work, many others (Attridge & Jolly 1998; Bethlehem 2006; Brink 1998; De Kok 1996; Ester *et al.* 2012; Gagliano 2006; Graham 2003; Human 2004, 2009; Nkosi 1998; Thomas 2009; Tran 2011; Van der Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela 2008; Vosloo 2012) have identified it as a significant vehicle for attempts at 'reflect[ing] South Africa's changing mood as the country endeavours to work through its trauma' and for 'exploring the tenuous relationship between memory and forgetting and healing and forgiveness in order to respond to the greater challenges posed by the limits of empathy and sympathy' (Tran 2011:59). Pearson (2000, in Chapman 2003:1) says that

South African literature since 1990 has been involved with the ambiguities of transition, the tension between memory and amnesia, whilst Chapman (1996) points out that literature helps to interrogate the South African *mythos*. Literary texts are thus constructs of what Rigney (2005:11) and Erll and Rigney (2006:115) would call "'cultural memory'" in that they are public acts of remembrance that make ... remembrance observable and come to shape our views of the past'. Through cultural memorial practices, of which literature is only one, meaning becomes inscribed in specific cultural and textual themes, sites and ideals through processes of convergence, superimposition, mythologising, recursivity, modelling, transfer and translation (Rigney 2005:11). As such, literature selectively engages other cultural products and historiographies to interpret the past in specific ways and to create an imagined communality based on the exchange of memories (Rigney 2005:11). Thus memory, and in particular literary memory, becomes the locus of everything that is missing in history proper (Rigney 2004:365, following Pierre Nora) and is always discursively informed and mediated by the experiences and memorial constructions of 'other' people as well as the institutionalised systems of power of a society.

## Haunting as a theme in the novels

Matthee's Fielia and Pistorius's Eva rise from the memories of a denied or silenced history to reclaim a new space for those marginalised by ideologies, practices of power and hegemonic dominance. The ghostly ship at Noetzie haunts Fielia's child, Benjamin/Lukas. He arrives at a moment of personal catharsis when he identifies with an unnamed 'ghost' ship that mysteriously appears off the coast of Noetzie, much as he himself mysteriously appeared in the middle of the night at Fielia's front door:

There was something about that dead ship that touched his whole being – he was like a stranger to himself, standing on the sand of an unknown bay where a ship lay wrecked that did not belong there either. ... Nobody knows how it got there. When the sun came up this morning, there she was ... As far as we could see, there is no name on her ... (Matthee [1985] 2010b:208, 209)

His crisis of identity reaches its climax when, amid a raging sea storm, the full burden of his loss, longing and grief overwhelms him when he is unable to save a drowning man and identifies his own fate in this man. This propels him onto a journey in which he is, like the floundering ghost ship, tossed from mother to mother and between the forest and the veld in search of his true identity. He is reunited with his mixed-race family in the Karoo, and he realises that they are his true emotional home and that race and colour are artificial boundaries superimposed on the true human and humane bonds of love and care forged between people. However, it is only his white forest-mother, Barta, who can finally release him from his (and her own) torment. This she does – with words torn from her like pieces of her own flesh (Matthee [1985] 2010b:298) – when she admits to having wrongfully claimed him as her own child under pressure from the census man who did not want to see him returned to a mixed-race family.



Barta's choice is, however, also informed by another trauma, namely the loss of her own child, the (real) Lukas who disappeared into the ghostly forest as a three-year old child. The grief of a mother longing for her lost child is presented in the mirror images of Barta and Fiela who, despite their many differences, also share the same traumatic experience. Pain begets pain, and trauma multiplies as Barta tries to replace her own lost child with another whilst inadvertently being aided by the powerful forces of institutional systems and structures in the form of the census man and magistrate who give legal weight to her claim to Fiela's child. The real Lukas, the unburied, unclaimed and unmourned-for child of Barta and Elias van Rooyen is the ghost that subtly haunts this novel, like the ghost ship which haunts the Knysna coast. He is only finally laid to rest when Barta admits her culpability in Fiela's and Benjamin's trauma:

I took somebody else's child that day. I only found out when it was too late, after we came home with him. Then I thought it was my imagination and I pushed it away but it would never stay away for long and now it never goes away ... I swore falsely. He is not Lukas. ... I can no longer bear it; the burden is too great. Our Lukas's bones were picked up along the Gouna river; he got lost and the angels took him. (Matthee [1985] 2010b:298)

Written more than a decade before the TRC hearings that so deeply affected South Africa, *Fiela's child* hauntingly pre-empted the many stories of grief and loss, so many of which were the stories of mothers who lost children, that cathartically played itself out on the national stage during the early post-apartheid years. As Barta confesses her guilt, culpability and own deep trauma, she retrospectively becomes a symbol of a national discursive process of confession, unburdening and healing that South Africa would only formally engage in years after the publication of this novel. Commemorating and memorialising the previously silenced and denied suffering of so many people and providing a public but safe space (Graham 2003:11) for dealing with personal and national trauma, the TRC created a national arena for critical engagement with issues of culpability, accountability and restitution. Similarly, Matthee ([1985] 2010b) and Pistorius ([2006] 2010) weave tales in which these issues are interrogated and by means of which readers (predominantly white and Afrikaans, but also mixed-race and Afrikaans and, owing to the English translations, English speakers of all races) can safely and cathartically recognise, identify with and mourn for their own and others' traumatic losses. Rigney (2005) describes this as follows:

Representations of the past facilitate sympathy with respect to 'other' people whom we do not know in any direct way, even if we think of them as our ancestors, and even with respect to people who do not belong in any straightforward way to the 'imagined community' with which we usually identify. In other words, the act of remembrance itself may arouse interest in other people's experiences and sympathy for them. (p. 25)

In *Sorg*, ghosts from the past haunt Oudtshoorn as an entire community of ghosts are seen to inhabit this town in the Little Karoo. They find themselves in a kind of limbo since they cannot rest until the trauma they have experienced and

wrought are confessed and resolved. As a result, the story of Eva must be told in a kind of confessional or testimonial way to the reader (predominantly white and Afrikaans, possibly also mixed-race and Afrikaans since there are no English or other translations of the novel) as well as to the descendants of the two main characters. The narrative catharsis that is experienced as a result finally settles the ghosts who can escape from their restless limbo. In reuniting the 'lost' descendants, Tessa and Danie, this catharsis also provides them with a sense of emotional and historical belonging that is unrelated to ownership of the land but rather speaks of being part of the land and by implication of the narrative of the people of the land. At the start of the novel, both of them are presented as searching for something they seem unable to define. Tessa says, 'It is as if there is something waiting for me and I cannot stop before I find it' (Pistorius 2010:21), and Danie says: 'If only I knew what I am searching for ... If only I could find it or at least know what I am searching for, then I can settle' (Pistorius [2006] 2010:21).

As the TRC has shown, it is often not only individuals who are traumatised but indeed whole communities and even societies. Pistorius's ([2006] 2010) *Sorg* plays on this theme as confession, forgiveness, restitution and reconciliation play itself out in the pages of the novel. Riddled by the guilt of, and shame about, their culpability in their own and one another's personal traumas, the ghosts are driven to put things right by restoring what was destroyed. The final stage of such a restoration process is, or so the novel proposes, forgiveness of self. Of this, the character Isabella, Hendrik's wife and the only main character in the novel who achieves self-insight, personal transformation and a type of enlightenment during her lifetime, is an example: Those like Isabella who could forgive themselves found rest in the graveyard, but the others who remained attached to their riches and their own ghosts are today still imprisoned in their feather palaces (Pistorius [2006] 2010:228). Only once the burden of the past had been laid down, the transgressions confessed and forgiven, could the healing of those who remained start as the ghosts disappeared. Tessa and Danie run hand-in-hand in the pouring rain down Baron Van Reede Street. As they go, the ghosts start to cheer and applaud, even the Khoi and San ghosts deep in the mountain applaud louder and louder (Pistorius [2006] 2010:239).

## The representation of women in the novels

In both novels, the female main characters are mixed-race women who struggle for themselves, their families and their communities against an inhospitable geographical environment and equally inhospitable imperial-colonialist and patriarchal socio-political environment. Both Fiela and Eva are presented as dynamic, complex and fully-developed subjects with agency. They are far removed from the one-dimensional and stereotypical depictions of indigenous women of colour (and arguably women in general) found in colonial master narratives. Conrad's *Heart of darkness*



([1899] 1987) and Haggard's ([1885] 1994), *King Solomon's mines* ([1885] 1994), for example, stand as perennial examples of the ways in which indigenous women were depicted as slaves, servants, savages or sorceresses or merely functioned as literary and thematic devices for paternalistic and patriarchal discourses of exoticism, otherness, native naiveté and female essentialism. Accordingly, women have a long history of being associated with tropes related to masculine expansionism, conquest, territoriality and land ownership, with women's bodies often being presented as uninhabited, conquerable 'virgin' land or containers of mysterious hidden treasures. McClintock's (1995) *Imperial leather: Race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest* provides an analysis of the way in which women's bodies were ideologically mapped (also quite literally as in the treasure map of Haggard's *King Solomon's mines*) in relation to colonisation and its accompanying power discourses of gender, race and class.

*Fiela's child* and *Sorg* are set at a pivotal time not only in South African but also in world history at the consolidation of Britain's imperial power and the apex of the industrial revolution, which made possible the subsequent extensive exploitation of colonies as part of 'the transition ... from merchant capitalism to industrial capitalism ... it was in this interregnum that the capitalist mode of production established itself as the most dominant' (Masilela 1988). Like elsewhere in the 'empire', in South Africa, gender, class and race mixed to form social stratifications and a caste system that privileged male over female, white over everything else, English over any local languages, Christianity over indigenous spiritual traditions and the budding capitalist economic and labour system over any alternatives based on communalism. The late 19th century was also a time of great economic, social and cultural dissatisfaction, violence and change, particularly in South Africa with the discovery of gold and diamonds in Kimberley and the Witwatersrand and the ensuing war for independence against Britain acting as major change-agents.

In this context, both novels' subtextual themes of female ownership, servitude, marginalisation, agency and subjectivity are critically reflective of the time in which the novels are set and the sanctioned roles of women in society. Both Fiela and Eva are shown as struggling with their own identity as women in a world controlled by men, as so-called 'coloureds' (mixed-race) in a world controlled by white people and as subjects of imperialist rule. Both female main characters are depicted as subversive, challenging and disruptive to the rules, laws and conventions of their time. Occupying a variety of dynamic liminal spaces of in-betweenness—as educated (though marginally), independent, mixed-race, female, matriarchal, matrilineal, land-owning entrepreneurs and community leaders – both Fiela and Eva enter the traditional domain of (white) men and thereby become vehicles for the depiction of defiant female agency and subjectivity on many levels. By presenting such complex, dynamic and subversive female characters, Matthee and

Pistorius's texts present interesting alternative discourses of marginalised female identities in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa around the end of the 19th century.

## Women and land rights

Both Eva and Fiela are mothers, and mothering, particularly mother love across the racialised 'colour line', is the central theme running through both novels. As such, the novels also present an interestingly ironical comment on the historical nationalist 'mother of the nation' ideal and its associated familiar symbolism which can be found in both white Afrikaner (*Moedertjie*) and black African (Mama Africa) nationalist discourses (Gaitskell & Unterhalter 1989; Jacobs 2009). Boehmer (1991, cited in Murray 2006:83) says that figures of mothers of the nation are emblazoned everywhere, but the presence of women in the nation is officially marginalised and generally ignored. McClintock (1993:61) and Boehmer (1991:5) argue that, in discourses of nation building, women thus usually become mere symbols of metaphorical meaning whereas 'the nation' is metonymically by implication always male. As a result, men also symbolically become drivers of national progress whilst women are presented as the embodiment of national memory (McClintock 1993:65).

In contrast to this, the novels *Sorg* and *Fiela's child* depict women as dialectical beings in constant shifting conversation with themselves, others and the systems of power they have to negotiate for survival. In addition, as mixed-race women, both of their main characters move between the traditional maternal stereotypes of white and black cultures, dismantling and problematising the experience of motherhood. Both Eva and Fiela are seen to engage in active and deliberate economic and political manipulations with motivations related to the founding of a legacy, more reminiscent of the traditional symbolism of 'founding fathers' than of merely bearers of nationalist sons (Boehmer 1991; Loflin 1998). They openly challenge the accepted and sanctioned social hierarchies and socio-cultural institutions of their society and culture and reorganised the very concept of 'family', which is, as McClintock (1993:63) argues, the very founding genesis narrative of any national history.

A related theme in both texts can be found in the representation of both female main characters as successful entrepreneurs who take on the responsibility of creating prosperity for their families and children as well as for their communities. The Little Karoo around Oudtshoorn where the novels are set is rich farmland, especially for farming with ostriches (for meat, eggs, leather and feathers), and the town of Oudtshoorn, at the time of the novels, was the centre of the booming international ostrich trade (Van Waart 1990). At the end of the 19th century, it was what Nel and Hill (2008:2264) describe as the 'economic heartland of the country by virtue of extensive rangeland agriculture, which ... dominated the then rural-based economy of the country'. In both novels, the female main characters obtain material and economic wealth by farming the land and trading feathers. Furthermore, *Sorg's* Eva is also later surreptitiously trading in diamonds mined in Kimberley, thereby securing prosperity and an inheritance for their families – an arena traditionally perceived to be the



preserve of men (white men, in fact). As Murray (2006:83) succinctly points out, 'private ownership of land lies at the centre of both colonialism and patriarchy ... [I]and ownership was also at the heart of apartheid'. Though women were often instrumental in passing wealth along through the institution of marriage and through re-marriage (Dooling 2005; Giliomee 1983, 2010; Hall 1994; Mitchell 2007; Von Fintel, Du Plessis & Jansen 2013), the cultural perception of male dominance and ownership persisted since the women, along with their property, were perceived as belonging to the man they married.

The very fact that both novels present a rearranged matrilineal genealogical system, disruptive of the traditional patriarchal system, is significant. Both Eva and Fiela are depicted as matriarchs and originators of new lines of descent (and, ironically, dissent). Eva and Fiela disrupt the normative power relationships and their associated discourses and rewrite history by means of the ways they manage the relationship that exists for them between motherhood and land ownership. In *Fiela's child*, there is a many-layered paradox involved in this since, firstly, Benjamin's true origins are, and forever will be, unknown. He could thus in effect be of any racial or ethnic background since without the modern science of genetic identification his genetic origins could never be known in his own time.

Secondly, his choice to self-construct his identity in alignment with his mixed-race mother and family represents a massive socio-political ideological power shift, as does the implication of him as a 'white' man being given land in Africa, as part of his inheritance, by his mixed-race mother. The implications of this are far-reaching on many levels for a country that, at the time, had a state-controlled system of and a socio-political obsession with aligning and legislating ideological constructions of race and identity. The defiance here, which is unmistakable, conveys a message of common humanity and resistance to artificially constructed discourses and systems. A similar defiance can be found in *Sorg* when Eva shrewdly uses the 1888 economic crisis as an opportunity to buy a part of Hendrik's family farm thereby ensuring an inheritance for their (mixed-race) son, who is also Hendrik's (illegitimate) eldest child. Hendrik tragically completely ignores the fact that, through this, his eldest son will, as tradition demands, inherit the land. This land is later passed down through generations of the children of Eva's mixed-race community, many of whom obtained education and professions as a result of the little farm community's prosperity. At the end of the novel, the ghost of Eva relates this history to Danie:

My little farm was developed into a trust under the van der Westhuizen name. Daniël's name. During the apartheid years, when we were not allowed to own land, some or other little government employee surely thought the trust belongs to a white family and never investigated it further. That's how the little coloured farm survived under a white surname. The trust is now large and the coloured men who wanted to study to become attorneys manage it. Some of my people still live there, as you know, but their children all receive bursaries to go and study all over across the globe. (Pistorius [2006] 2010:228)

## South African literary genres: The farm novel and oral traditions

The themes of inheritance and land ownership place both of these novels in conversation with two of South Africa's major literary genres, namely, that of the pastoral 'farm novel' (*plaasroman*, in Afrikaans) and indigenous orality. As others (Coetzee 1996, 2000; Prinsloo & Visagie 2009; Smit 2005; Smit-Marais & Wenzel 2006; Van Coller 2003, 2006) have shown, the South African farm novel is a genre in which land rights and culturally inscribed meanings of ownership are always either reinforced or contested and problematised. In fact, Mishra and Hodge (2005:375) even trace the etymology of 'colonial' to its root in the Latin words for farmer and its associations with the inhabitation and cultivation of land. Hand-in-hand with this goes the patriarchal imperative of male supremacy and its associated rights with the farmhouse and yard as symbols of female-driven domesticity, complementing but always subservient to male mastery over the family and its land. As a result, colonial and nationalist agendas often revolve around the ideal of 'home' as a vestige of social, cultural and political values relating to insularity, safety and protection from that which is 'other' and the general threatening chaos outside the controlled environment of home and family.

Like other national settler or frontier traditions, the South African farm novel as a genre engages with race and gender as determinants of identity through the representation of colonial and nationalist-sanctioned claims of white and male superiority. This is usually presented as white women being relegated only to domestic-based power relationships over the household, children and servants. It relates to what McClintock (1995:5) calls the cult of domesticity. At the same time, women were denied political power and often also economic power. Within the same ideological framework, other races and indigenous people are relegated to servile roles as labourers and mere 'hands' or resources by means of which the land can be 'tamed', 'mastered' and 'worked' to bring progress and prosperity to 'the family', and by extension the nation.

Examples of colonial and nationalist land-rights reinforcement discourses can be found especially in Afrikaans post-war (the South African War, 1902 onwards) and post-independence (1961) literature such as Cilliers's ([1911] 1954) epic poem *Martjie*, Van den Heever's ([1935] 1985) *Somer* and *Laat vrugte* ([1939] 1978) and Venter's Great Trek tetralogy *Geknelde land* (1960), *Offerland* (1963), *Gelofteland* (1966) and *Bedoelde land* ([1968] 1984). Examples of South African works by English authors are Schreiner's ([1883] 2003) *Story of an African farm* which is often also seen as a critique of the pastoral idyll and Smith's ([1926] 2006) *The beadle*. Novels in which land rights in South Africa are questioned, contested and problematised abound, especially from the 1970s onward. In fact, it has indeed become one of the perennial themes in South African literature, being deeply inscribed with other contested notions such as identity, belonging, self and other. In Afrikaans there are, amongst many others, Leroux's ([1962] 1991) *Sewe dae by die Silbersteins*, Louw's *Kroniek van Perdepoort* ([1975] 2007),





Toorberg (1986) and *Die stoetmeester Van Heerden* (1993), *Ek stamel ek sterwe* by Venter ([1996] 1999), Opperman's (1996) *Donkerland* and Van Niekerk's (2004) *Agaat*. Many of these were also translated into English and other languages and are generally accepted as 'literary' rather than 'popular' novels though these are, of course, contentious and contested terms. In English 'literary' writing, there are most notably Gordimer's ([1974] 1983) *The conservationist* and Coetzee's novels, for example, *In the heart of the country* ([1977] 1982), *The life and times of Michael K* ([1983] 1985) and *Disgrace* ([2001] 2008).

Coetzee's ([2001] 2008) *Disgrace* and van Niekerk's (2004) *Agaat* in particular engage with the relationship between women and the right to (farm) land in South Africa. As the relationship between women and land in South Africa is increasingly being explored, so, inevitably, identities and power relations are also questioned and reconstituted. In the simultaneous 'literary' and 'popular' *Fielas child* and the more exclusively 'popular' *Sorg*, the women are presented as the procurers of land, the ones who invest in the land emotionally and financially and as those in whom legal ownership of the land is in turn invested. In both novels, there is also a subtle subtext of female-driven ecologically conscious ethical farming and of a consciousness of communal responsibility, which are themes that also increasingly emerge in what is accepted as more 'literary' farm-novel literature as in *Disgrace* and *Agaat*.

In contrast to the farm novel, the land rights of indigenous peoples are often represented in literature through the use of images from oral mythologies and histories, another type of national consciousness as Bahri (1995), Mishra and Hodge (2005) and McClintock (1995) argue, with their often concomitant ethereal symbols, mystical rituals and animal association. In *Sorg* specifically, the themes of indigenous ancestral oral memory and the land rights of the earliest inhabitants of the area are continually present, questioning the rights of colonial-invested ownership. The narrative is constantly enriched with a cosmological subtext, that of the 'original' Big Ostrich and its complex and contentious relationship with humans, in an indigenous story of creation which acts as counter-narrative to the authorial power of the European biblical genesis narrative.

In Matthee's novel, there is also the subtle presence of an oral narrative in the back story of Fielas husband, Seling, which becomes a type of origin story for the Komoetie family since it provides some existential answers to why they are who they are, as individuals and as a family unit. Because Seling killed their neighbour in a fight about a stolen sheep, he was imprisoned and later sentenced to highly dangerous physical labour, and by implication starvation, as part of the construction crew of convicts that built the road from Knysna to the Langkloof. With their newborn baby in her arms, Fielas went searching for Seling. Once she found him she spent the next four years tracking the builders daily like a lion would its prey, crawling like an animal and slithering on her stomach like a snake to provide Seling surreptitiously with

contraband food to keep him alive. It is during this time that the white child mysteriously arrives on her doorstep. Her tracking and care of Seling forms a precursor to her search for Benjamin/Lukas across mountains and ravines (Matthee [1985] 2010b:93) and when she slithered through the dust like a snake (Matthee [1985] 2010b:93) at the magistrate's to claim back the child.

In both novels, land rights and inheritance are questioned through the symbolic use of animal associations. In both novels, there is a haunting in the guise of animal spirits (elephants in *Fielas child* and ostriches in both novels), which reminds one of the totemic or animistic spiritualities of indigenous peoples. In *Fielas child*, the elephants of the Tsitsikamma forest are sometimes tolerant of human intruders but at other times are vindictive and retributive regarding human cruelty to the forest and its animals. They roam the forest like prehistoric ghosts and are exclusively depicted as female. They are deeply protective of their own offspring but also of human children – 'elephants don't step on children' (Matthee [1985] 2010b:5) – but become dangerous enemies of those who attempt to harm them or their kind, as Elias van Rooyen tries to do to his own detriment. The freedom of the elephants to roam as they please and the haughty defiance and pride of Fielas hen ostrich (Matthee [1985] 2010b:163) are symbolic of the resistance to enforced power and docility that can also be detected in the character of Fielas. In *Sorg*, Eva is likewise often associated with a wild mare that cannot be tamed, with all the conventional associated sexual innuendo.

Whilst acknowledging the potential historical and discursive problems around associations between women and indigenous people and animals (Adams & Donovan 1995; Baker 2008; Fanon 1963; Haraway 1989; Said 1978), with the concomitant associations of 'husbandry', submissiveness and domestication, the use of animal symbolism does not in either of the novels degenerate to implications of mastery, exploitation, naturalisation or domestication. This is largely because Fielas humanity and her embodiment of what is traditionally associated with 'civilised' (also read 'white') values in colonial discourses are offset against the often inhumane and near-animalistic living conditions and behaviour of the destitute white Van Rooyen family in the forest. Similarly, in *Sorg*, Eva's dignity and (mostly) altruistic community involvement are offset against the cruelty, pretence and narcissism of the seemingly socially elite Van der Westhuizen family. Reversing the traditional tropes associated with coloniser and colonised here serves to illuminate the humanity of both female main characters, which, combined with their defiance and subversiveness, prevent the novels from slipping into stereotypical depictions of indigenous identity and romanticised female essentialism. Furthermore, neither of the women is presented or constructed by means of the male gaze or point of view. In *Sorg*, Hendrik's lust for Eva is presented in animalistic (specifically equine) terms, but this is presented as a subtle critique rather than as justification or sanctioning. In fact, female lust and sexuality are equally present in the novel but then as a deliberate choice of action and agency whilst Hendrik is often presented as a slave of his desires. In both



novels, it is the women who tame the animals and the land and successfully turn their products into profit. Conversely, attempts by men in the novels to control or master animals are presented as unsuccessful: In *Sorg*, Hendrik's farm flounders, he has a nervous breakdown and is physically and economically saved by Eva, and in *Fiela's child*, Elias is maimed and nearly dies when he tries to kill a female elephant for her ivory.

## Relationships between women: 'Writing back' and complicity

Though McClintock (1992, 1995) and others (Bahri 1995; Mishra & Hodge 1993, 2005; Shohat 1992; Slemon 1989) astutely summarise the many pitfalls associated with the use of the term 'postcolonial', for the limited purpose and scope of this article, it will simply and broadly be viewed as signifying that which interrogates and undermines colonialism and the imperial centre and constructs new existential and ideological alternatives (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffen 1989; Shohat 1992; Viljoen 1996). In agreement with Bahri (1995:52), it is also acknowledged that the plural 'postcolonialisms' is a more appropriate use of the term for the purpose of emphasising the diversity, variety and hybridity of positions and relationships within the larger conceptual framework. Shohat (1992:106) significantly notes that the concept 'postcolonial' also forms a critical locus for moving beyond anti-colonial, nationalist, modernising narratives that inscribe Europe as an object of critique, towards a discursive analysis and historiography addressing decentred multiplicities of power relations. Owing to the limited purpose and scope of this article that does not allow for more in-depth discussions, the same broad principle could here also apply to the concept 'post-apartheid', signifying not only that which disrupts and critically engages with apartheid ideologies but also that which moves beyond mere anti-apartheid discourse towards the analysis and construction of new ways of speaking and thinking about individual, group and national identities and affiliations.

As Louise Viljoen (1996) points out:

since the sixties but especially during the seventies and political emergency of the eighties, Afrikaans women writers have occupied a strong place in the tradition of dissidence against the apartheid regime in Afrikaans literature ... identifying with the liberation struggle of black people in their texts. (p. 63)

The danger here would be, as Robbe (2010:109) points out, the commodification of mixed-race women's narratives by white women authors, thereby rendering the subaltern voices as mere products of a commercial economically driven process. However, the depictions of the complex relationships between women in the novels by Matthee ([1985] 2010b) and Pistorius ([2006] 2010) open critical spaces for dialogue between women of mixed-race and white women. The novels present a variation on the 'writing back' theme introduced in *The empire writes back* (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffen 1989) and speak of a complex discursivity of literary and identity production by white women who occupy the space of simultaneously but ambiguously feeling aligned

with the colonised but also being trapped in the discourses of imperialism and patriarchy (Viljoen 1996:63; McClintock 1995:7). Both novels can be read as subtextual attempts by white women to understand and engage with the complicity of white women in oppressive systems of power as other white female authors such as Elsa Joubert, Antjie Krog and Lettie Viljoen or Ingrid Winterbach have also attempted to do. Such a reading also presents a concomitant variation on the theme of trauma work: life stories of marginalised coloured women written by individuals who are viewed traditionally as aligned with the wielders of power, white women. As such, these narratives are at some level also an interrogation of whiteness (McClintock 1995:9), but they avoid simplistic victim versus perpetrator dichotomies to open spaces for deeper interrogations of issues around individual and communal complicity in, and resistance to, oppression, violence and trauma.

Both Matthee ([1985] 2010b) and Pistorius ([2006] 2010) are clearly deeply aware of the complexity and ambiguity of white women's position within imperialist and patriarchal systems of power, being both central because of racial alignment with white men but also marginalised as women in an androcentric, male-dominated and male-privileging power structure. For example, the wild untamed independence of Nina in *Fiela's child* is a commentary on the boundaries set for white women of the time, particularly amongst the very poor. For such women, marriage to a man of higher social and economic standing or else what amounted to indentured servitude as maids and child-minders to more affluent white families were the only ways to survival. The latter is then indeed Nina's eventual fate when her father sends her to work for a family in town.

Nina's mother, Barta, is oppressed to the point of being broken in body and spirit by her husband and their desperate circumstances, but as a white woman, she also has a power, sanctioned by the colonial law of the time, that exceeds that of the mixed-race Fiela. The ironic dichotomy between the proud and feisty mixed-race Fiela and the decrepit and servile white Barta disrupts the traditional idea of white superiority and 'coloured' (mixed-race) servitude. It depicts the plight of many white women, particularly here amongst the very poor, under the authority of male dominance. Conversely it depicts the loving relationship between Fiela and her husband where she is clearly the dominant, arguably even domineering, figure, albeit in a benevolent way.

In *Sorg*, Eva's relationship with her 'mistress' and rival for Hendrik's affections, Isabella, is also dynamic and complex. Isabella and her daughter, Cornelia (who is later called Lia), likewise present the reader with a tragic commentary on the possibilities open to young white women of the time, albeit as rich men's daughters at the other end of the social-class spectrum from Barta and Nina. As in *Fiela's child*, the relationship between mixed-race and white women is of central importance in *Sorg*. Both Isabella and Lia are depicted as wielding great power but only in a sexualised way, either overtly like Lia, the teasing coquette, or covertly through



marriage and domesticity like Isabella, with the associated tragedy that ensues for both. Male ownership by a father or (potential) husband provides these women with power and access to other types of ownership (house, clothes, servants, social status) but, ironically, never the highly significant land which is reserved for male heirs only. In stark contrast to Hendrik's 'ownership' of Lia and Isabella as father and husband, Eva, the servant, fiercely claims and protects her independence even to the point of alienation and self-destruction, refusing all forms of intimacy other than those by means of which she can disrupt the conventional power structures through controlling men (her lover and his sons, one of whom is also her own). However, she also ultimately controls others (often to tragic ends) through her sexuality but with very different consequences as it makes her prosperous, ensuring her the ownership of land and an inheritance for her descendants and community.

Most significant for the theme of female inter-racial relationships is the fact that, at the close of both novels, the white women experience a form of cathartic self-insight which none of the men does, through their empathetic engagement with 'the other'. This is an imaginary confrontation and moment of catharsis in Barta's case when she realises the extent and effect of the pain she had caused others. For Isabella, it is a physical confrontation with the blind Eva in Eva's cave-home when they symbolically have tea together to share news of their respective sons in battle during the South African War. Thus there is in each novel the implication of forgiveness and reconciliation between the women on opposing sides of the traditional power divide. In both novels, the colour line, which becomes the fault line of love and allegiance, is disrupted when, in Matthee's novel, the two women who vie for the love of the child-man Benjamin/Lukas both reconcile themselves with the truth, namely, that he in fact belongs to neither of them, and in Pistorius's novel, Isabella and Eva transcend their individual personal pride when they become reconciled as mothers instead of remaining opposing parties in the struggle over a man who does not respect, love or care for either of them – as the name of the farm might ironically suggest: *Sorgniet*, meaning 'carefree' or 'no worries' but also implying 'uncaring' or 'careless'.

Neither novel engages with trauma, culpability and forgiveness as simplistic perpetrator versus victim dichotomies. The struggles and suffering of all the characters (female and significantly also male, but the male characters fall outside of the immediate scope of this article) are revealed as part of a larger agonistic human existential crisis though this does not imply that the sufferings are equal or even similar. Eva remains viciously bitter and vengeful about ownership and the inheritance of land until the end of the novel, and it is only through the reunion of her and Hendrik's white and mixed-race descendants many generations later that her 'ghost' is finally laid to rest in the novel, implying some sense of hopefulness for reconciliation and forgiveness in this country – an experience of forgiveness and reconciliation that has become a new and rather idealised national

metanarrative for South Africa. In contrast, Matthee's Fielia is much more readily forgiving, transcending her bitterness in forgiving Barta. It is, however, only after Benjamin/Lukas finds his own way 'home' to Fielia and openly chooses and acknowledges her as his mother that she can fully release her hatred of Barta and extend forgiveness. She sends him back to poverty-stricken Barta with a gift of half a sheep as a gesture of forgiveness and reconciliation.

## Conclusion

McClintock (1990:199, 1993:61) reminds us that Ernest Gellner (1964) said that nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: It invents nations where they do not exist. In such a national project, fiction often plays a significant role as trauma and its effects are remembered, re-imagined and recreated via the cultural texts of a society. McClintock (1990:199, 1993:61) further reminds us that Benedict Anderson (1983) said that nations are imagined communities in the sense that they are systems of cultural representation whereby people come to imagine a shared experience of identification with an extended community. In South Africa's recent discursive history, one finds many different hermeneutic streams which conflate in the one big existential question: 'Who are we?' Thus, for example, one paradoxically finds the inevitable superficial pre-election political rallying cries and popular cultural discourses about nation-building, for example during international sporting events, co-mingling with the deep trauma of TRC testimonies. All of these are part of the multivocal processes of re-invention which are, as McClintock argues (1990:199, 1993:61), not mere allegorical phantasmagoria of the mind but, in fact, intricate social fabrications invented through daily contest – in newspapers, schools, presses and popular culture (McClintock 1990:199) – and which are radically constitutive of people's identities (McClintock 1993:61).

When reading texts such as Matthee's *Fielia's child* and Pistorius's *Sorg*, one must not lose sight of the fact that these novels are but two imaginings amidst a multifarious multitude. However, they do seem to align themselves with a specific narrative approach to the experience of the trauma of apartheid and its aftermath, portraying the anticipation and possibility of a more stable future (Tran 2011:60). They also contribute to the (re)construction of popular national grand narratives which are often narratives of (increasingly female) heroic struggle, traumatic loss, redemption, forgiveness and the triumph of the human spirit despite seemingly insurmountable adversity. These novels provide us with spaces to remember imaginatively and deal with the trauma of ghosts from the past in all their dialectical and complex multivocal reconstructions in order to reconstruct self-consciously and self-narrate a new national autobiography which manifests as a revised hermeneutically-styled hybrid process of participative meaning-making. Written two decades apart, both novels represent moments on the continuum of discursive transformation in the multi-tongued national narrative process by means of which South Africa slowly deals with its traumatic history and ideologically realigns itself with an ideal of equality and non-racialism.



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### Competing interests

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