Still Pink and Pale: White Afrikaans Hetero-Femininity in Postapartheid South Africa

Christi van der Westhuizen

Abstract
In South Africa, the race-class debate had dominated thinking in the social sciences for most of a century. Since the 1990s, the collusion of gender with other categories in the South African postcolonial context has been problematised. Manicom\(^1\) argued for a theoretical shift to a poststructuralist focus away from the questions of ‘who rules and why’ of the race-class debate to questioning modes of political subjection, in particular through normative gender meanings. Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory,\(^2\) this chapter explores (dis)continuities in identifications in postapartheid South Africa. The focus is on the extent to which the expanded postapartheid democratic space has allowed for the emergence of a new imaginary for the production of subjectivities beyond the normative Afrikaner nationalistic volksmoeder (mother of the nation) ideal. The volksmoeder signifier served as a nodal point (privileged signifier) for the production of an ‘Afrikaner femininity’ from the rise of Afrikaner nationalism (1900s-1940s) and throughout official apartheid (1948-1994), reinforced by the idealised constructions of middle-class respectability and an ethnicised ‘racial purity’.\(^3\) The chapter shows that elements of the volksmoeder have been re-sutured by globalised discourses of the post-feminist, neo-liberal subject.\(^4\) Traces of volksmoeder femininity persist in the efforts at the rehabilitation of an ethnicised whiteness in relation to hegemonic whiteness.\(^5\)

Key Words: Afrikaner nationalism, class, discourse theory, gender, race, sexuality, South Africa.

*****

1. Beyond ‘Race or Class’

In various forms of sociological analysis, the hold of the ‘great collective social identities’ of nation, race and gender has slipped, their impression of homogeneity faltering\(^6\) as ‘new subjects, new genders, new ethnicities, new regions, new communities, hitherto excluded from the major forms of cultural representation … through struggle … speak for themselves for the very first time.’\(^7\)

In South Africa, the race-class debate had dominated thinking in the social sciences for most of a century. From the 1970s, the revisionist or neo-Marxist position replaced the previously prevalent liberal-pluralist interpretations of race domination with class domination. The discord over whether race or class should enjoy precedence in analysis continues in postapartheid South Africa\(^8\) as it determines the course of policy and activism.\(^9\) Feminist critique entered the fray
from the 1990s onwards. The simplistic, add-on construction of the ‘triple oppression’ faced by black, poor women has since given way to the problematisations of Western feminism and complexified understandings of the collusion of gender with other categories in the South African postcolonial context. It would not suffice to tack on ‘patriarchy’ to break through the ‘sterility of the race-class debate.’ Rather, a theoretical shift is necessary to a poststructuralist focus – from ‘who rules and why’ to questioning modes of political subjection: how both state and non-state sites manufacture ‘women’ as objects for rule in a mobilisation of normative ‘gender meanings … as metaphors of governance and of domination and subordination in relation to specific historic regimes…’ Similarly to Ewa Głąpka’s chapter in this volume, the discursive mediation of the constructions of gender is the object of scrutiny in this chapter. Postmodern discourse analysis is used to chart a way out of ‘oversimplified and deterministic analytical frameworks’ to study ideology, politics and culture on their own terms and to deepen democracy as ‘an academic-cum-political task.’ Similarly, analysing the discursive construction of identities exposes the relationship between apartheid and capitalism to be contingent rather than necessary while showing how apartheid shaped all social relations.

The radical dislocation of apartheid identity is understood utilising Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory. The crisis in apartheid in the 1980s came about as a result of the ‘horror of indetermination,’ which is ‘a situation in which the dominant discourse is unable to determine the lines of exclusion and inclusion according to which the identity of the social is constructed.’ The indeterminacy and ungovernability of the social had become the dominant form of sociability. This study does not approach postapartheid South Africa as constituted through an absolute break with apartheid. Rather, postapartheid is understood as ‘a given historical trajectory – that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonisation,’ or apartheid; it is a ‘specific system of signs’ and ‘distinctive ways in which identities are multiplied, transformed and put into circulation.’

This study explores the ways in which the expanded postapartheid democratic space has allowed for the emergence of a new imaginary, or ‘horizon of intelligibility,’ for the production of subjectivities loosened from the normative Afrikaner nationalist volksmoeder (mother of the nation) ideal. The volksmoeder as a privileged signifier has served as a nodal point for the production of ‘Afrikaner femininity,’ its aim from the 1910s onwards to anchor a fledgling Afrikaner nationalism. It retained its purchase, albeit in varying forms, during official apartheid (1948-1994). The chapter attempts to shed light on the ways in which democratic discourses of constitutionalism and human rights have succeeded in interpellating individuals into revisions of volksmoeder femininity. What are the (re)articulations of Afrikaner femininity in a discursive field in which ‘democracy,’ ‘woman,’ and ‘white’ have been dislodged and rendered floating signifiers?