

***Unconfessed: A female slave's testimony***

by

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## **Abstract**

Although well documented in terms of historical significance, very little is known about South African slaves' experience of slavery. Except for a few accounts by slaves such as Emilie Lehn and Katie Jacobs, South African slave narratives (unlike their American counterparts) never received much attention. This can be ascribed to, among other things, the prominence of apartheid on the South African social scene and the shame associated with a slave past or being of slave ancestry. As a result of the lack of information regarding the experience of these slaves, fictional narratives such as *The Slave Book* by Rayda Jacobs and *Philida* by André Brink have succeeded in filling this gap by making use of historical documents, such as court documents and slave registers, to create stories of slaves.

Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed* makes a notable contribution to South African literature, both in terms of subject matter and narrative technique. This novel directs the reader's attention to a part of South African history that has been neglected in literature and society. It addresses oppression, racism, hypocrisy and sexual abuse, to name but a few,. It challenges the traditional concept of genre by combining different elements of the traditional autobiography, with the confessional and testimonial modes of literature. The combination of these modes creates a striking and vivid narrative, which relates Sila's experiences from her own perspective. Furthermore, this fragmented narrative, allows the reader a glimpse into Sila's mind and thoughts regarding her past, present and future.

**Key terms:** slavery, *Unconfessed*, autobiographical literature, South African slavery, genre

## Opsomming

Hoewel slawerny goed gedokumenteer is in terme van die historiese betekenis daarvan, is baie min bekend oor hoe Suid-Afrikaanse slawe die slawerny ervaar het. Behalwe 'n paar vertellings deur slawe soos Emilie Lehn en Katie Jacobs, het Suid-Afrikaanse slawe-narratiewe (anders as hulle Amerikaanse teëhangers) nooit baie aandag geniet nie. Dit kan onder andere toegeskryf word aan die prominensie van apartheid op die Suid-Afrikaanse maatskaplike toneel en aan die skande verbonde aan 'n slawe-verlede of slawe as voorouers. As gevolg van die gebrek aan inligting oor die ondervindings van hierdie slawe, het fiktiewe verhale soos *The Slave Book* deur Rayda Jacobs en *Philida* deur André Brink daarin geslaag om hierdie gaping te vul deur gebruik te maak van historiese dokumente soos hofdokumente en slaweregisters om verhale van slawe te skep.

Yvette Christiansë se *Unconfessed* maak 'n belangrike bydrae tot Suid-Afrikaanse literatuur, sowel wat betref die onderwerp as narratiewe tegniek. Hierdie roman vestig die leser se aandag op 'n deel van Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis wat tot dusver verwaarloos is in die literatuur en die samelewing. Dit handel oor verdrukking, rasisme, skynheiligheid en seksuele misbruik, om maar net 'n paar te noem. Dit oorskry die tradisionele konsep van genre deur verskillende elemente van die tradisionele outobiografie te kombineer met stylkenmerke van sowel belydenis- as getuienis-literatuur. Die kombinasie van hierdie modi skep 'n treffende en lewendige narratief wat Sila se ondervindings vanuit haar eie perspektief verhaal. Verder bied hierdie gefragmenteerde narratief 'n kykie in Sila se gemoed en gedagtes oor haar verlede, hede en toekoms.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### 1.1 Contextualisation

This dissertation examines the novel *Unconfessed* by Yvette Christiansë as a testimony cum confessional to the plight of slaves, with particular reference to female slaves within the South African context. Slavery has featured widely in literature all over the world: as early as Mary Prince's narrative, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* (1831) in the United States of America, with some accounts recorded by intermediaries, and others recorded by slaves themselves, such as Olaudah Equiano in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1814). However, South African literature only addressed this problem during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The first novels on slave conditions in South Africa<sup>1</sup>, were published by André P. Brink and Wilma Stockenström; more recently, by Rayda Jacobs, Yvette Christiansë and Zakes Mda. This year Brink culminated his narratives on slavery with the publication of his novel, *Philida* (2012). The particular significance of Christiansë's novel, *Unconfessed*, can be attributed to two unusual features of the novel. Firstly, the innovative rendition of dialogue (alternated by normal font and italics) referring to her two personas, self and other, that situates the novel within the realm of testimonial and confessional literature, with some evidence of the memoir and autobiography that also feature in the discourse of the novel. Secondly, *Unconfessed* also projects the plight of slave women by illustrating the inhumanity of the practice from a first person perspective. This variation in "voices" and the concept of uprootment and displacement of human lives, "places" the novel squarely within the postcolonial dilemma of oppression and the lack of identity experienced by these slaves.

With their lives circumscribed by boundaries of all kinds, notably the lack of personal freedom to move from place to place, social interaction and education to broaden their minds and the mental desolation of people who did not dare to hope or dream of a better world, the slaves at the Cape were mostly restricted to work on farms, in households or businesses. These places as well as the prison and Robben Island constitute the sole experience of the protagonist, Sila who struggles to maintain some

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<sup>1</sup> These novels will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

dignity which also implies a sense of identity. This aspiration of coming to terms with the self, is problematised by her restricted life which in turn motivates Sila to resist her condition and gives her the courage to opt for a better situation.

As an institution, slavery has been a part of human society from as early as 4 000 BC, a practice that possibly originated from the capture and imprisonment of prisoners of war (Van der Ross 11). This trade expanded with time and eventually developed into a very profitable business, referred to as the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. This trade “triangle” included Europe, where goods were made to either barter for or to purchase slaves; Africa, where slaves were purchased with these products and then transported across the Atlantic on the “middle passage”, and finally, to the Americas, where “[t]he triangle was completed as the goods generated by slave labour – sugar, tobacco, cotton and (from South America) gold and silver – were sent back to Europe” (Van der Ross 15).

Within this triangle, Europe proved to be the pivotal point of production and consumption. The motivation behind slavery was two-fold. It provided free labour to both European and Western society and for slave-owners, it also was a tool with which they could manipulate or control social relations (Watson 182). Furthermore, the institution of slavery could also be seen as an attempt at colonising nations to secure and reinforce their power over “lesser” nations. The European powers regarded themselves as the most advanced civilisation and tended to classify other nations and countries in terms of their degree of similarity to Europe. This was no different with Africa and as Andrews (ix-x) sarcastically remarks

since the beginning of the sixteenth century, Europeans had wondered aloud whether or not the African “species of men,” as they were most commonly called, *could* ever create formal literature, could ever master “the arts and sciences.” If they could, the argument ran, then the African variety of humanity was fundamentally related to the European variety. If not, then it seemed clear that the African was destined by nature to be a slave.

This impression of Africa and its inhabitants was not limited to Europe, but also spread to other parts of the world, such as the Americas, where slaves were also employed to perform hard, manual labour. The growing need for slaves to perform strenuous labour led to an increase of slavers going to Africa and buying prisoners of war from indigenous tribes or, alternatively, abducting Africans from their homes and villages and

then taking them to the country where they were to be sold, by being auctioned off to the highest bidder. Olaudah Equiano notes in his testimony, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, (83-84) that kidnapping not only befell those who were not yet slaves, but also those former slaves who bought their freedom and had proof thereof, a fate that almost befell Equiano himself on one of his many travels (116).

Strong and healthy men were especially in demand and “in general between half and two-thirds of any group of slaves carried off the coast were made up of prime-age men” (Klein 110). Klein (128-131) gives estimates of the impact of the slave trade on African populations and notes that the slave trade slowed down African population growth and might even have caused a decline in growth. The decline in population growth and the loss of healthy and strong men and women would have had a definite impact on communities and societies throughout Africa.

In her novel, *A Respectable Trade* (1996), Philippa Gregory addresses the effects of slavery on Africans by referring to the ways in which they had to compromise their tradition in order to survive, as well as by referring to the effects of slavery on the economy and the people of Africa. The

plague of slavery worked unlike any other. It took the healthy, it took the adventurous, it took the very men and women who should command the future. The guns and gold and fine cloth could not repay Africa for the loss of her brightest children. It was the future leaders who were bled away, along the rivers, down the trade routes (Gregory 27-28).

The slave trade treated human beings as commodities and much like other industries its success was dictated by the quality of the merchandise. For this reason it was healthy, young and strong slaves that were in demand. As the slave traders had more sophisticated weapons, such as guns, many Africans considered it necessary to obtain the same kind of weapons in order to be able to defend themselves against their attackers (Gregory 14-15). Together with this, Africans were also faced with a decline in population and a failing economy, which Gregory once more addresses in her novel mentioned above:

For all the profits that could be made from the slave trade – and they were beyond the dreams of most farming communities – there were terrible stories, garbled in the telling, of rivers where no-one dare fish and woods where no-one could walk. Whole

villages were desolate, hundreds, thousands of women and children abandoned and starving in fields which they could not farm alone. It was a blight spreading inland from the coast, a plague which took the young men and women, the fittest and the strongest, and left behind the ill, the old, and the babies (*A Respectable Trade* 27-28).

The displacement that slavery brought about not only affected the community; it also affected those individuals who were sold into slavery. By being uprooted from their homes and places of origins, slaves had to adapt to new circumstances and environments with which they were not necessarily familiar. The change in environment had an immense impact on the formation of their identity, as they were no longer among their loved ones and were removed from the society where they grew up and the environment that they knew so well. This displacement, which also affected the community and its own identity, forced slaves to adapt to new circumstances, often at the expense of their heritage.

Like all the nations and individuals who had been involved in the slave industry, South Africa, which was a hub of slave activity during this era, has also had to come to terms with the past. The notions instilled within society during the slave era were so deeply ingrained that it is still, to some extent, prevalent in contemporary South African society. In order to understand how South Africa was affected by the slave trade, one needs to understand how the slave trade was introduced into South Africa, specifically the Cape which was the centre of trade and commerce during the era of slavery in South Africa.

## **1.2 Brief overview of slavery at the Cape: Political and moral significance in South African history**

The single greatest reason for the increase in activity at the Cape from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards was its “favourable position halfway along the searoute to the East” (Van der Ross 19). The Cape became a “refreshment station” for ships sailing from Europe to the East, providing repair work to ships, fresh food and water, as well as medical attention to sailors and passengers (Sleigh 1). In 1652, Jan van Riebeeck arrived at the Cape and what was to have been only a refreshment stop, first became a Dutch colony (Watson 9) and later, after a couple of changes of government, became a British colony (Freund 226-227).

As the Cape lacked infrastructure, it would have required hard manual labour to create the necessary facilities to equip it as a half-way station. Consequently, as the colony at the Cape expanded, the need for manual labour grew. At first there was some resistance against slavery as some people were concerned that the availability of slave labour might promote laziness under the white settlers (Van der Ross 31). However, the need for “a large pool of cheap, exploitable workers” (Mason 42) only continued to grow and as a result, Abraham of Batavia (in 1653) as well as twelve other slaves (in 1657), imported from Java and Madagascar (Van der Ross 31), became the first of thousands of slaves who would, against their will and under inhumane and cruel treatment, assist in developing the Cape under the extreme conditions of slavery.

The slave trade was a system based on structure and classification which was evident in the manner they were classified and distinguished from one another. Van der Ross (47) identifies “three kinds of slaves,” namely, company slaves, household slaves and farm slaves. He further sub-divides these groups into “outside workers” and “house slaves.” Bank (36) provides an even more detailed description of the type of work slaves had to perform. The three main spheres Bank (36) identifies are as follows: services, which include domestic, retail and transport services; production, which includes the production of clothing, the building of structures such as houses, as well as other forms of production; and rural labour, which is divided into arable and pastoral labour. However, within these different classes, slaves were also assessed according to their physique, the previous schooling they had received or the trade they used to ply, and their social and sexual abilities. This rigorous classification of slaves was, perhaps, not only a testament to the great need for labour, but also an attempt to exercise control over the growing number of slaves, that, during the initial British occupation, “outnumbered all other population groups, accounting for four persons in ten” (Mason 17).

This very structured classification system reflects the notion of the colonists that slaves were not human beings, but rather possessions which justified their treatment as such. Slavery, therefore, not only describes a type of colonisation and subjugation, but also illustrates the abuse of power and human rights with regard to the weak and helpless. Slaves were subjected to strenuous manual labour, brutal beatings for the smallest of indiscretions and were often punished by separating them from their partners and

children. This ill-treatment led to numerous slave revolts, such as the 1808 revolt, led by Louis, a Mauritian slave (Freund 240) and the 1825 revolt led by a slave named Galant<sup>2</sup> (Mason 66). These revolts, as well as others, clearly illustrated the extent of the slaves' hatred and disapproval of slavery and their willingness to defy authority in order to gain their freedom. Slave protectors were appointed in order to deal with any complaints that slaves had against their owners. Although the protectors were supposed to protect the rights of slaves, they often neglected their duties in this respect. Mason (54) notes that "[a]s troublesome as the barriers of distance, language, and the attention-span of the protectors may have been, the protectors' attitudes towards the laws that they enforced and towards the slaves themselves presented even greater difficulties." It comes as no surprise then that slaves still had to endure brutal and, at times, even mortal beatings. To many slaves, the slave protectors were nothing more than an empty promise and false hope.

On the first day of December in 1834, slavery was officially abolished (Mason 59), much to the relief of those who opposed the institution. However, true freedom would only come on 1 December 1838, after a four-year apprenticeship was served by the former slaves in order to prepare them for freedom (Mason 59). Even after this period of apprenticeship, certain oppressive notions still remained such as that of racial segregation, which implied that "in practice, masters were to be white and servants coloured" (Mason 275). This effect of slavery was one of many that would, for a long time, play a pivotal role in South African society. When an ideology such as that of slavery is so deeply ingrained into society, the mere abolishment of the institution itself will have little or no effect upon the way in which people view themselves and those around them. Slavery left its "victims", both the oppressed and the oppressor, with the notion that in society there will always be a master and a slave, or rather, an oppressor and an oppressed. Whether the distinguishing factor was race, gender, wealth, legal status or reputation (Mason 30), the fact remains that slavery and its notions had, and perhaps still have, an effect on South African society.

Although historical accounts of the slave industry tend to ignore or simply downplay the effects of slavery on both the oppressed (slaves) and their oppressors (slave owners),

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<sup>2</sup> André Brink's *A Chain of Voices* (1983), is a fictional narrative based on the events surrounding the Galant revolt.

“literature from both sides of the ‘colonial divide’” (Wenzel 2004:91) raised awareness of the consequences of this lucrative industry. According to Wenzel (2004:91), while the colonised would embark on “a search for roots and markers of identity”, the coloniser would attempt “a retrospective, soul-searching exercise in determining the origin of blame and venturing some form of expiation.” This dispels the notion that it is only the oppressed who need to come to terms with the past and implies that the oppressor was also, if in a different or lesser manner, a victim of colonisation.

Gqola’s (6) observation that “uncovering memory and history demands a critical attentiveness to the uses of the past to negotiate positions in the present” clarifies, to some extent, why, continually, apartheid is linked with slavery. Although these institutions of oppression were established in different centuries, certain similarities exist, such as the domination of an “inferior” group by a “superior” group, the limitation of freedom and the marginalisation of the oppressed. It is important to note that although these institutions have been formally banned, human trafficking still exists, which is evident in recent newspaper articles<sup>3</sup> on the subject. What can be observed from this is that South Africa’s history seems to be rampant with practices of oppression. As this cycle of oppression seems to be an ongoing one, an investigation of past oppressive practices, such as slavery, and the comparison thereof with recent or current social discrimination, such as apartheid and human trafficking, will serve to indicate why society, both now and in the past, still seems unable to overcome these dehumanising conditions.

### **1.3 The plight of female slaves and their children**

Although male slaves were exposed to the same harsh and inhumane conditions<sup>4</sup> as female slaves, the plight of the female slave was exacerbated by her inability to choose: she was faced with conditions that exploited her personal space, sexuality and motherhood. The female slave had no claim to her freedom, her body or even her

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<sup>3</sup> Le Roux, André. "Slawe: SA Se Wette Te Sag." *Beeld*: 6. 21 June 2012 2012. Print.

Isaacs, Lauren. "Human Trafficker Gets 23 Years in Jail in Landmark Case." *Cape Times*: 4. 21 Feb 2012 2012. Print.

Hamman, Melanie. "Shining a Light on the Darkest Times." *Saturday Star*: 14. 14 Apr 2012 2012. Print.

<sup>4</sup> The conditions that male slaves had to endure can be observed in narratives such as that of Olaudah Equiano and Juan Francisco Manzano.

children who could be sold without her knowledge. The physical imprisonment of the female slave also led to her mental and emotional imprisonment, thus inhibiting any personal growth or development which did not conform to the boundaries imposed on her by society. She became a possession with no sense of identity.

Mason (244) expands on Lenta's concept of double subordination (2010:100) by identifying three main areas of subordination, namely, gender, social status and race. The areas of race and social status were familiar to both male and female slaves, although subordination according to gender entailed much more dire consequences for female slaves. Not only were they expected to perform hard manual labour and endure unfair and harsh punishments, they were also expected to accept their fate as "breeding animals" (Andrews xxxiii) and endure constant sexual abuse, more often than not, at the hands of their masters.

The area of sexual subordination was one which impacted greatly upon the female slave's life, both as slave and as a woman of colour. This subordination entailed that the slave woman was to be used for sexual gratification whenever her master or other superiors pleased which robbed the slave woman, not only of her dignity and virtue, but also of any right over her own body. Masters not only used female slaves for sexual gratification, but also to breed more slaves. This practise was not uncommon, as a child born to a female slave automatically became the possession of her master, which secured his future labour source at a minimal cost<sup>5</sup>. Procuring slaves in this manner was much cheaper than buying them at auctions or from other slave owners or slave traders. For female slaves, unwanted pregnancies were the norm as they had no choice but to submit to constant sexual abuse. For example, in *Unconfessed*, Sila is repeatedly abused by the prison guards and later on by the guards on Robben Island. The women were also expected to care for and raise the children from these encounters, until such time that the children were deemed fit for the strenuous labour that was part and parcel of a slave's life.

One of the most notable effects that the master's sexual harassment of his female slaves incurred, was the resentment and jealousy that it invoked in his wife. According

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<sup>5</sup> In her narrative, Linda Brent (52) notes that "[w]omen are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner's stock. They are put on a par with animals."

to Mason (99), this fury was not one born out of a sense of sympathy, but was rather the result of an intense feeling of humiliation and powerlessness. Mason (99) further argues that

The slave owners' abuse of slave women was both a consequence and a symbol of the patriarchal power that the legal, economic, and ideological structures of the slave-owning society had invested in them. Society did not applaud a master's sexual exploitation of his female slave, but it did everything to make it possible and almost nothing to prevent it. The mistresses' physical abuse of the victim of sexual exploitation was emblematic of their own weakness.

This practice is also described in South African novels such as *Cion* by Mda (2007) and *Philida* by Brink (2012).

Although of a higher status, the mistress still had to contend with the same patriarchal system of which "abuse of slave women was both a consequence and a symbol" (Mason 100). Much like any female slave, the mistress was expected to be loyal and obedient to her husband, the master, whether she agreed with him or not. This meant that she was also expected to look the other way when her husband sexually abused the female slaves. The mistress then experienced an intense feeling of hatred towards the female slaves abused by her husband, regardless of the fact that they had no choice in the matter. Consequently, the mistress wreaked vengeance on them when she was enraged, because she was helpless to confront her husband as the true perpetrator. Female slaves, did, however, not have the luxury of venting their anger towards their oppressors on a subordinate, as they had the lowest status in the social hierarchy of the time. Yet, at times, their slave children felt the brunt of this anger, as they were "the safest, most readily available target" (Mason 235-236). This seems, however, to have been the exception rather than the rule. For the most part, slave mothers were fiercely protective of their children, doing their utmost to shield them from the harsh realities of slavery.

In an attempt to protect their children from suffering the same way in which they did, many slave mothers (including fictional characters, such as Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Sila in Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed*) committed infanticide. Although this might seem to contradict the claim that slave mothers were fiercely protective of their children, the motivation behind the acts of infanticide only provided more proof of

their determination to protect their children from suffering the same fate that they had to endure. Slave mothers had numerous reasons for committing this act,

[m]any did so to free their children from a life of bondage; one woman killed her newborn to prevent her master from selling him as he had sold her three previous children; yet another woman killed her child to end its suffering caused by the continual abuse of her mistress. The last woman claimed that the master was the father of her child and that that was the cause of the abuse; if true, the situation was not uncommon (Lee 367).

Lee (367) further claims that infanticide was also a “method to handle unwanted pregnancies resulting from sexual abuse by the master, and it was also a form of passive resistance by which the female slave exercised control over her body and the body of her child.” For outsiders, this form of passive resistance might still seem selfish, however, the fact that this act did not result in bettering the life of the female slave, but, instead, added another dimension to her subordination, namely that of imprisonment, serves as proof that this act was purely for the good of the child, as well as an attempt to draw attention to the suffering of slave mothers and children alike. *Unconfessed* not only illustrates the slave mother’s unselfish love for her child, but it also draws attention to the psychological damage that both slavery and the act of infanticide inflicted upon slave mothers and their families.

A very common characteristic of slavery was the “matrifocal” family (Mason 211), which resulted from fathers and husbands being separated from their families through sale, before it was prohibited by law in 1830 (Mason 210). Although there were many reasons for the existence of the matrifocal family, the most common being the separation of husband and wife, the fact remains that the female slave played a pivotal role in raising her children, as well as in caring for other children who were orphaned or separated from their parents. Such a situation is described in *Cion*, where the Abyssinian Queen (the farmer’s mistress) managed to take care of her sons and eventually helped them to escape (101). This act was motivated by her responsibility to take care of her children as best she could; this same responsibility motivated the actions and behaviour of many other slave mothers. To outsiders, the actions taken by slave mothers to protect their children might have seemed extreme, but in an extreme institution such as slavery, it was their only option.

#### 1.4 Slave literature

The abuses of slavery only became public with the evolution of the slave narrative “between 1830 and 1860” (Andrews xxxii) which rendered accounts of oppression told by both male and female North American slaves to sympathetic outsiders or “scribes”. The scribe or amanuensis might, however, not always have given an accurate account of events. Feminism and publications by women were only acknowledged towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when, in contrast to the amanuensis or facilitator that characterised the traditional Afro-American slave narrative (Wenzel 2004:93), the contemporary female slave narrative claimed personal “narrative status”.

Extensive research has been done and numerous dissertations and theses have been written on various aspects of American slavery, such as the effect of white patriarchy on black women (Wolfe 2010) and the role of religion in slavery (Rayner 2009). Together with this renewed interest in slavery, numerous studies on human trafficking, which is often likened to the institution of slavery, have also seen the light. Aspects that are covered in research about human trafficking include the extent of media coverage with regard to human trafficking (Burnette 2010) as well as the extent and effects of human trafficking (Miranda 2011).

Within this context, Yvette Christiansë’s novel, *Unconfessed*, makes an important contribution, not only towards the genre, but also towards the recent revival of slave narratives in South African fiction. Christiansë creates an interesting perspective on the past by literally engaging with it in dialogue, so that the parameters of autodiegetic narration are expanded to include a dual consciousness. This variation in narrative stance and addressee has been the topic in recent dissertations and theses, such as that of Muston (2011) and Thomte (2009) and has also featured in recent novels by South African male writers, such as J.M. Coetzee in *Slow Man* (2005) and Zakes Mda in *Cion* (2007). Furthermore, *Unconfessed* occupies an interesting position within the autodiegetic narrative as it could be classified as autobiographical, testimonial or confessional. As a possible combination of different styles/genres, *Unconfessed* could consequently indicate a new type of novel which would not only embody the transgression of boundaries in its subject matter, but also in terms of generic boundaries.

The personal accounts, or one could perhaps say, autobiographies, of slave women that, as Lenta (2010:100) comments, illustrate the “doubly obscured condition of women slaves”, have pertinently featured in several recent South African novels. Although this phenomenon highlights the particular plight of slave women as labourers, sexual objects and mothers, the role of the narrator becomes increasingly important, because it emphasises and interprets the slave’s experience in different ways reminiscent of autobiography, testimonial and confessional. These modes, although closely related, often intermingle as in Mda’s *Cion* (2007), which implicitly distinguishes between the Creator, the author and the narrator-cum-biographer in Toloki. According to Gilmore (3) “autobiography’s project” is the act of relating the story of one’s life, which conveys a sense of history, whereas confession seems to be more of an emotional and “internal” account of the self, with little or no concern for the degree of accuracy in the relation of historical events (Attridge 145). The historical aspect of autobiography and the personal aspect of confession come together in the form of the testimonial, or what Felman (5) refers to as “a relation to events.” Consequently, the testimonial combines the political/public and the personal to qualify the narrator’s role as part of society. The position and gender of the narrator, however, also play a crucial role, as he/she could be narrating either as a homodiegetic narrator (“the narrator who is present in the story”) or as a heterodiegetic narrator (“the narrator who is absent”) (Bal 2006 6-7) which, in turn, could affect the entire interpretation, role and function of the reader.

In Afro-American literature, for example, it can be said that a novel such as *Beloved* (1987) by Tony Morrison, as well as films such as *Amistad* (1997) and *Amazing Grace* (2007) initiated the revival of the slave narrative. This narrative trend developed to raise awareness of the former slave conditions, but also conforms to the postmodernist and postcolonial approach in acknowledging other voices. Although some Afrikaans authors had previously included slave tales in their novels, such as *A Chain of Voices* (1983), *An Instant in the Wind* (1976) and *The Other Side of Silence* (2003) by André Brink and *Die Kremetartekspedisie* (1983) by Wilma Stockenström, the slave narrative’s revival became more noticeable in South Africa during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Within the South African literary context, however, recent novels and articles on slavery in the Cape have become more prominent (Lenta 2010:100). The popularity of slavery as topic and theme in recent South African literature should also be seen as an indication that it had formerly been omitted, perhaps in recognition of its shameful

practices. Within this context, several texts have appeared to raise awareness of the former silence on this topic, and act as testimonies, such as Rayda Jacobs's *The Slave Book* (1998), Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed* (2006), Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007) and *Cion* by Zakes Mda (2007). A notable but older text is Elsa Joubert's *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* (1980), which "represent[s] the hardships of so many black people during the apartheid years" (Wenzel 1999 127). Although this text deals with another oppressive institution (apartheid) altogether, it sheds light on the experience of the oppressed and it deals with the oppressor's attempts to come to terms with the past as well.

Academic interest in this topic has also been evident in articles, including Lenta (1999), Wenzel (2004), Samuelson (2008), Baderoon (2009) and Lenta (2010), as well as dissertations such as that of Bank (1991), Van der Spuy (1993) and the present study. Apart from academic responses to the slave question, authors such as Dan Sleigh with *Islands* (2004) and Karel Schoeman with his *Early Slavery at the Cape of Good Hope 1652-1717* (2007) and *Armosyn van die Kaap: voorspel tot vestiging, 1415-1651* (1999) contributed towards a more comprehensive overview on the topic. André Brink recently also made another important contribution towards slave literature with his latest novel, *Phillida* (2012), for which he was awarded the Jan Rabie and Marjorie Wallace bursary in 2009 (Muller 9).

In Rayda Jacobs's *The Slave Book* (1998) the male slave, Sangora, relates the events in the life of Somiela, a young slave girl in a manner which clearly illustrates that even as a slave, Sangora is unable to comprehend Somiela's trauma as a woman. When compared with the narratives of the female slaves, Sethe and Siela in, respectively, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed* (2006), the immense difference between Sangora's narration of Somiela's life and Sethe and Siela's narration of their own lives, it becomes apparent why the female slave needs to be the narrator of her own story.

In *Unconfessed* (2006), Sila assumes the role of autobiographer in a retrospective stance on her life, which indicates her search for identity. She also engages in dialogue with her deceased son with regard to her confession of infanticide, which rates the narration as a confessional. The narrator is also situated in a larger context of slavery in

general, which places it under the genre of a testimonial. *Unconfessed* (2006) then can be termed a hybrid novel<sup>6</sup>, as it encompasses elements of all three of these genres.

This renewed interest in the subject of slavery could be ascribed to an awareness of the colonial/postcolonial conditions that characterise South African history, as well as attempts to re-write and confront the past. In recognition of its symbolic value and as a contribution towards the South African historical “archive”, the present government has also renovated/rebuilt the Slave House (Pinchuck 2000) in Cape Town. The present renewed threat of global human trafficking could also be responsible for the renewed awareness concerning human bondage and displacement, which severely inhibits the development of personal identity and also denies the usual interaction with context (as in place and space) that aids physical and mental orientation in terms of identity formation.

### **1.5 Yvette Christiansë and *Unconfessed***

With the publication of her first novel, *Unconfessed*, in 2006, author, poet and scholar, Yvette Christiansë, managed to draw attention to what seems to be a long forgotten chapter in South African history, that of slavery. Christiansë’s intent with the novel was to give a voice to the main protagonist, the female slave, Sila, without detracting from her individuality by making her a “universal” representative of female slaves in South Africa (Nieuwoudt 12). By relating Sila’s story, however, Christiansë also drew attention to the fact that there were many more like Sila, whose stories have never been told.

Christiansë’s affinity with the topic of slavery, which is evident in her three publications thus far, *Castaway* (1999), *Unconfessed* (2006) and *Imprenehora* (2009), seems to be born from both “deep personal baggage” (De Waal 4) as well as concern over the fact that “Apartheid was greedy to absorb all history” (De Waal 4). Although Christiansë herself suffered the effects of apartheid, she recognises that South African society tends to ignore its slave history and focus exclusively on the more recent history of apartheid. While *Unconfessed* is a fictional narrative of the life of a female slave, *Castaway* (1999) and *Imprenehora* (2009) are two poetic anthologies, the former concerning St. Helena, where Christiansë’s grandmother (presumably the daughter of a slave) was born and

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<sup>6</sup> In her thesis, Bollinger (2010) addresses the tendency of the testimonial, in particular, to combine with different genres.

the latter concerning a slave ship. Christiansë, who was born in South Africa and lived in Johannesburg, Mbabane (Swaziland) and Cape Town, before emigrating to Australia to escape the effects of apartheid, is also thought to be descended from slaves (De Waal 4), something which she gathered from stories told by her grandmother. Christiansë then, has a personal history associated with slavery and the shame and secrecy attached to it (Shaw 23) as well as personal experience of apartheid, an institution which, in several ways mirrored the institution of slavery.

While it can be argued that Christiansë's "closeness" to the subject of slavery might inhibit her ability to attain her goal of telling Sila's story, without compromising her individuality, *Unconfessed* refutes this argument, by employing a fragmented first person narration. Although this mode of narration might seem somewhat incomplete to the reader, it is exactly this manner in which Christiansë "found" Sila's story (Nieuwoudt 12). Christiansë's conscious decision to avoid "imprisoning" Sila in a neatly constructed narrative, gives Sila the voice that she never had, as well as an opportunity to "escape" (Nieuwoudt 12), even if at the expense of closure to the reader, as well as the author.

An important issue that arises in interviews with Christiansë is her concern over the lack of South African slave narratives, as well as the apparent favouring of more recent South African history, that of apartheid, above South Africa's slave history (Nieuwoudt 12, Nel 17, De Waal 4). With *Unconfessed*, Christiansë aims to redirect attention to slavery, not in an attempt to detract from the suffering of victims of apartheid, which includes herself, but to delve deeper into South African history in an attempt better to understand the "ghosts of the past". *Unconfessed* then is not merely a therapeutic exercise for Christiansë, but it also serves as a platform from which to compare the injustices of apartheid, in order to establish why South African history seems to repeat itself.

From the above-mentioned concerns the following questions arise:

1. What is the significance of the revival of the slave narrative, particularly the female slave narrative, within recently published South African novels?
2. How relevant are the traditional autobiographical, confessional and testimonial modes of narration in terms of autodiegetic narration in *Unconfessed*?

3. How does the protagonist manage to transgress and transcend the physical, social and moral boundaries imposed on her person and her freedom?

This dissertation aims to:

1. Establish the significance of the revival of the slave narrative, particularly the female slave narrative, in other countries as well as in recently published South African novels.
2. Analyse the representation of the autodiegetic narrator in *Unconfessed* in terms of traditional autobiographical, confessional and testimonial modes of narration.
3. Indicate how the protagonist manages to transgress and transcend the physical and social boundaries imposed on her person and her freedom.

*Unconfessed* can be seen as a novel that both challenges and changes the traditional concept of genre that is associated with definitive and delineated boundaries. In the novel, the autodiegetic narrator's memories of the past are presented as a dialogue which traces and exposes Sila's life and acts as a silent confession of her guilt of infanticide. At the same time, her story/voice becomes a testimony towards the universal plight of both women and slaves. This dissertation aims to prove that *Unconfessed* is a groundbreaking and important novel, both in terms of subject matter and the use of genre and narrative technique.

### **Chapter division**

The first chapter will provide an overview of slavery and its ramifications in the past and its new guise in the present, both in the world and South Africa in particular. In addition, the plight of female slaves and children will be addressed and some background will be given on the author of *Unconfessed*, Yvette Christiansë. Chapter two forms the theoretical framework for this dissertation and discusses the relevance of place and space with regard to social isolation and psychological trauma. Furthermore, it addresses the role of the autodiegetic narrator as well as the autobiographical genre and the affiliated modes of confessional and testimonial literature. Chapter three will give an overview and examples of international slave testimonies and novels. Together with this, slave narratives in South African literature will be discussed. Particular attention will be paid to the relevance of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in relation to *Unconfessed*. The theoretical framework in chapter two serves as the basis for the

analysis of *Unconfessed* in Chapter four which deals with the autodiegetic narrator and identity, as well as themes such as place and space, boundaries, society and the plight of the female slave. Chapter five examines the role of silence and metaphor as a language in *Unconfessed*. Finally, Chapter six concludes this study to indicate the relevance and significance of *Unconfessed* within the South African context and suggest potential future research.

## Chapter 2

### Theoretical context

#### 2.1 Place, memory and identity

This chapter will discuss spatiality in terms of its historical impact on the lives and identities of slaves as well as its role and function in the postmodernist/postcolonial novel,<sup>7</sup> *Unconfessed*, by Yvette Christiansë. Within this context, the function of genre and narrative will be highlighted and the significance of the first person narrative in the early slave narrative as well as the role of the autodiegetic narrator in first-person contemporary literature will be addressed. In particular, different versions of autobiographical writing, such as the testimonial and confessional modes of literature, as well as the memoir will be studied in order to prove that *Unconfessed* is a groundbreaking text that seems to incorporate all these modes of expression. In fact, the novel appears to expand the boundaries of personal writing by using different voices. Sila recalls her memories and past experience in order to explain her present situation and the persistent evocation of her conscience that acts as her alter ego. These different spaces constitute the sum of Sila's experience and tend to echo and illustrate the postmodernist concept of different angles to a situation.

Several critics point out that interaction with the environment is an important stimulus in the formation of identity. The human being orients himself in terms of space, by choosing a "place" for which he/she shows a predilection, an "attachment for a chosen spot" (Bachelard 4) or a home. As Crang (102) perceives it: "people do not simply locate themselves, they define themselves through a sense of place". He (Crang 103) furthermore claims that "Spaces become places as they become 'time thickened'. They have a past and a future that binds people together around them". With this statement Crang touches on the personal and historical value that places and by definition houses and countries, have for humans. Place provides a sense of belonging or an "illusion of stability" (Bachelard 17) and this experience is lacking in the lives of slaves.

When one considers the interaction of a person with his geographical and social environment, the uprootment and dislocation of slaves assume an important

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<sup>7</sup> Both approaches would be applicable here, as postmodernism acts as an umbrella term for the more specific characteristics of postcolonialism, feminism, metafiction and intertextuality which all appear in this novel.

psychological dimension. Slaves were deprived of their familiar surroundings, their families, friends and language and most importantly, their freedom; their lives became stunted and meaningless. They were even denied a conventional family life and as Mason (213) points out,

[t]he slave family was a contradictory institution. Slave owners must have known that slaves who were members of families would be less likely than other slaves to rebel, escape, or otherwise defy their authority. At the same time, families gave slaves and apprentices the physical and emotional space that they needed to think and act in ways that checked the processes of soul murder and social death.

The restriction of freedom plays a major role in any oppressive practice. During the slave era, the movement of slaves were restricted to the places they worked and they were condemned to work in towns and on farms in various capacities, including domestic and pastoral labour. When disobedient, they were meted out physical punishment or imprisoned. In the case of the Cape slaves they were conveniently banned to Robben Island where they were forgotten by the authorities and put at the mercy of the local prison warden or governor.

As they could do nothing to change their circumstances, they simply had to adapt to their environment in order to survive. However, this environment was unfriendly and restricted; they did not “belong”. The boundaries imposed on slaves did not only apply to movement or travel, but also to social contact that was denied them and especially the opportunity to receive some kind of education or training in skills. This deprivation must have impacted on their mental capacities to make them docile and lacking in any sense of enterprise. The single goal for slaves was to escape, but on the outside a hostile, alien world awaited them. The slaves lacked a sense of identity and their mental condition reflected despair and hopelessness with regard to the future. The important fact was that slaves were bereft of any free will.

Slavery was, however, not the only practice that caused disruption in people’s lives, the diaspora and political refugees as well as voluntary exile also caused uprootment and displacement. All of these events caused significant psychological damage; they affected identity formation, caused a lack of social interaction and of belonging to a certain community and nation.

Stuart Hall regards identity formation as a process that occurs by “the *re-telling* of the past” (1997,111) and states: “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (112). In fact Hall (1997, 113) suggests that the past is “always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth”, which would apply to *Unconfessed*. Hall also mentions a second point in the formation of identity, namely the acknowledgement of difference. Within this context, Hall (113) refers to the “profound discontinuity” caused by the slave trade, which ironically also created unity among the different ethnic groups in their fight for freedom. This fact is especially relevant to the condition of slaves, as Sila’s experience reflects, because “the boundaries of difference are continually repositioned in relation to different points of reference” (Hall, 114).

Slaves were therefore associated with specific places on farms and in households and were not permitted any leeway to cross any of the boundaries imposed on them – neither with regard to personal preferences nor social interaction, which is illustrated particularly well in André Brink’s *A Chain of Voices* (1983).

Despite the fact that slaves had no freedom of movement, they still had the ability to escape in their thoughts. By creating an internal reality which was free from the restrictions of their external conditions, slaves could procure a different type of freedom, one which allowed them to escape their circumstances, even if only for a little while. In *Unconfessed*, Sila does exactly this, which allows her to communicate with her dead son and voice her thoughts of revenge: “*I will call up bad things and send them there and they will crawl into Van der Wat’s ear and scream at him until he runs into a wall, head first, until he breaks his head open the way he broke our lives*” (*Unconfessed* 47, italics in text).

This internal reality that Sila creates is constructed on her memories and her perception of the world around her: in this reality she does not have to adhere to the laws and demands of her oppressors. Swanepoel (15) notes that “Whereas past occurrences cannot be accurately or objectively recalled, the places in which past occurrences happened, continue to exist and people continuously interpret and reinterpret them.” Sila’s memories and recollections of the past can all be linked to specific places in her past and present: Mozambique, the various farms on which she worked as a slave, the

town prison, and Robben Island. Even though Sila no longer finds herself in any of these places (except for Robben Island), they still exist and she continues to go back to her past in order to make sense of her present.

An internal reality was the only place where slaves could object to their circumstances without being even further oppressed for daring to do so. Women slaves, in particular, were forced to take recourse to silence as a form of resistance. As women, female slaves had to endure physical abuse as well as sexual abuse, which subsequently led to pregnancies (often an attempt on their owners' part to procure a stronger labour force). Their status as "lesser beings" coupled with their sense of responsibility towards and love for their children prevented them from behaving in irresponsible ways which might have been considered reason enough to sell them and separate them from their children. This silence indicated a thorough understanding of their circumstances, as they knew that their opinions and experiences were of little importance to their oppressors.

## **2.2 Narrative space and genre**

### **2.2.1 Intertextuality**

The importance of reading and interpreting a text depends on former knowledge and experience of reading. Therefore, the concept of intertextuality plays a significant role in the discussion of literary texts and *Unconfessed* in particular. Susan Stanford Friedman (2002) explains her interpretation of spatiality in literature by reverting to two famous literary critics, Bakhtin and Kristeva respectively. She (Stanford Friedman, 217) adopts Bakhtin's term of the "chronotope" because it perfectly expresses "the intrinsic interconnectedness of temporal and spatial relationships" in narrative as identified by Kristeva in her text *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980). Friedman devises a model according to "the interplay or dialogue between the horizontal and vertical narrative coordinates" (220) which she also terms the "surface" and "depth" (218) levels or axes of narrative respectively. While the horizontal narrative involves the sequence of events in the fictional world, the vertical narrative engages "the writer and the reader in relation to each other and to the text's intertexts" (219). This "interplay" creates an awareness of the intertextual quality of a specific text. The horizontal narrative is determined "by historically specific narrative conventions" in particular the narrative point of view (220) that includes "from the omniscient to the

multiple, unreliable, or first person narrator” that, in various degrees, feature prominently in *Unconfessed*.

Friedman talks about the vertical axis in terms of a palimpsest (221) which would explain her claim that “The literary aspect of the vertical axis exists first of all in relation to genre” (221). Within this context, *Unconfessed* could lay claim to various generic strands or modes that the reader recognises from other texts (222) as Friedman claims that “all literary texts exist – however centrally, ambivalently, or marginally – within one or more literary conventions or cultures” (222).

Furthermore, Friedman (224) also refers to the historical aspect of the vertical narrative that could reveal ideological perceptions based on race and class, such as the treatment of slaves (223); and also mentions the “psychic dimension of the vertical narrative” (224). All these aspects that emerge when a text is read, constitute the palimpsest of the “composite ‘text’” (224). With regard to autobiographical narratives, Friedman (224) refers to “the split subject of the writing ‘I now’ and the written about ‘I then’ [that] perform the different roles of analyst and analysand in a kind of writing cure” (224). This observation can be illustrated by Sila’s alternation of narrators in recounting her life; it also stresses the cathartic process of coming to terms with her fate. The significance in the different “spaces” of narration, such as the past and the present in *Unconfessed*, allows the reader to perceive “the interactive relationship between the surface and palimpsestic depths of a given text” (226). The next section of the discussion will concern the topic of genre and its application to contemporary texts.

Since the 1950s when “autobiography began to be substantially theorised” (Marcus 229) theorists and critics have attempted to define and categorise autobiography. Autobiography did, however, prove “very difficult to define and regulate” (Marcus 1) and most critics seem to agree that autobiography is not limited to a specific form (i.e. a novel, poetry) (Misch 4). The difficulty in classifying autobiography is centred on concerns relating to subjectivity, genre, factual accuracy and “the status of fictional entities” (Marcus 179).

The major concern regarding genre is whether autobiography should be classified as historical writing or a literary genre. Important to note here is a common distinction that

is made between autobiography and memoir. Marcus (183, 21) notes that “memoirs and other ‘historical’ or ‘outer-directed’ forms of life-writing” are considered incapable of self-analysis. It is clear from this distinction that autobiography and memoir are not considered to be similar, even though both relate actual events. As autobiography relates actual events in an individual’s life, it can be regarded as historical writing. However, seeing that autobiographical truth is not necessarily factual or objective, but rather “a mode of consciousness” as both Olney and Gusdorf indicate (Marcus 187), it is better suited to be classified as a literary genre. Marcus (3) notes that

Very few critics would demand that autobiographical truth should be literally verifiable – this would, after all, undermine the idea that the truth of the self is more complex than ‘fact’. Thus, it is claimed, the ‘intention’ to tell the truth, as far as possible, is a sufficient guarantee of autobiographical veracity and sincerity.

The individual’s personal development and experience gained of certain events (characteristics reminiscent of the *Bildungsroman* and Picaresque) will therefore enjoy more attention than the actual events. The individual who experiences the event or events and his personal history, therefore form an important part of the analysis, as the relation of events is subjective by nature and will have a significant impact on any analysis of the text.

Lejeune whose influence is still relevant today, claims that autobiography and personal literature can only exist if the author, narrator and protagonist are identical (Lejeune 5). This concept is explained in Lejeune’s definition of autobiography which he claims to be “a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality”. According to Lejeune (4), this definition incorporates elements from the following categories:

1. Form of language: a) narrative; b) in prose.
2. Subject treated: individual life, story of a personality.
3. Situation of the author: the author (whose name refers to a real person) and the narrator are identical.
4. Position of the narrator: a) the narrator and the principal character are identical; b) retrospective point of view of the narrative.

Lejeune (5) notes that categories 3 and 4a are prerequisites in the definition of autobiography. These categories, that address the question of identity, distinguish autobiography from biography and the personal novel. This does, however, leave no space for fictional autobiography, in which the author and the narrator will not necessarily be identical. Whereas Lejeune's definition of autobiography is relevant for this study, his contention that the author, narrator and protagonist must be identical in order to be classified as autobiography is not relevant, as the focus of this study is on a fictional text.

Wilhelm Dilthey, who is considered to be "the founder of a scholarly approach to autobiography", was of the opinion that autobiography is central in understanding human behaviour, development and history (quoted in Marcus 137). This study does not attempt to redefine or otherwise classify autobiography, but seeks to identify it within the primary text in order to perform an accurate analysis of the text. For this purpose, Lejeune's definition of autobiography mentioned above will serve as a guideline.

Although *Unconfessed* is a fictional narrative, it contains elements of the autobiographical genre, which necessitates an investigation of the relationship between the author, Yvette Christiansë, and the narrator, Sila. Christiansë and Sila are not identical, however, there are some similarities. South African born Yvette Christiansë, who is thought to have descended from slaves, moved to Australia with her family at a young age, in order to escape the apartheid regime (De Waal 4). Her experience of apartheid enables her to understand, to a certain extent, the sense of alienation that Sila and other slaves felt every day of their lives. This is, however, where the similarities between narrator and author end.

Christiansë does not relate actual events in her own life, but those of a fictional slave woman based on thorough research of slavery in South Africa (Nieuwoudt 12). She claims that she did not want to trap Sila by making her a universal representative of slave women (Nieuwoudt 12), which means that she did not use Sila as a mouthpiece to address her own past. Christiansë's personal experience with alienation and discrimination on the grounds of race and social standing, together with her (possible) slave ancestry and her knowledge of the slave era enables her to understand and respect Sila, to such an extent that she does not use her to speak for other slaves.

The second characteristic that Lejeune views as purely autobiographical is that the narrator and the protagonist should be identical (Lejeune 4). In *Unconfessed* this is true, as Sila is both the narrator and the protagonist. Lejeune points out that this identical nature can be indicated by both the first person (autodiegetic) narrator and the second or third person (heterodiegetic) narrator (Lejeune 5-7).

In *Unconfessed*, Sila is both the narrator and the protagonist. With the exception of the first and last chapter, which are narrated by an unknown heterodiegetic narrator, Sila narrates the entire text. Important to note, however, is that there are two “Silas”, Sila van Mozbiek and Sila van den Kaap (*Unconfessed* 303):

My hands were broken and dirty, the hands of a crude woman whose business is the muck of others. I was no longer Sila van Mozbiek, the place before places. I was who they said I was, Sila van den Kaap, at last. I saw this in my hands. And the stench of grief should have shaken their walls and burned their roofs, but it stifled only me.

The two Silas are not two different narrators, but rather personas that are the embodiment of Sila’s struggle with identity. This struggle is visually illustrated in the text by the employment of both a regular font and italics. The italic font represents the side of Sila that is vulnerable and free to let her thoughts wander, while the normal font represents the Sila that most people know or are able to characterise through observation and interaction.

*Unconfessed* contains elements of the autobiographical genre, as it is a subjective account of events in Sila’s life and as its main concern is not factual truth, but rather the truth of the self. When evaluated in terms of Lejeune’s definition of autobiography it does, however, also become clear that *Unconfessed* is not a purely autobiographical text, as the author does not relate events from her own life, but rather events from the life of a fictional character.

### **2.3 Autobiographical literature**

Several aspects or features of narration determine the interpretation of a text: the title that acts as a summary of the text; the genre and mode used and the type of narration. Before attempting an analysis of a text, the type of narrative and the mode of

presentation should be considered. Genette distinguishes between two kinds of narrative: the “narrative of events” and the “narrative of words” (Bal 2006 4). The narrative of events has a very strong mimetic or “descriptive element” (Bal 2006 8) whereas the narrative of words is related in dialogue, “without the mediation of an informer *within* this content” (Bal 2006 4).

While the narrator relates events, or “speaks”, the focaliser allows the reader to “see” the text from a specific perspective (Bal<sup>8</sup> 2006 13). According to Van der Merwe (25)

[t]here are certain factors that influence the selection and filtering, i.e. the focalisation of perceived objects that form the fictional world. For example, personality or individuality (character traits, predisposition and disposition, personal abilities, strengths and shortcomings), (social) identity (gender, age, roles and status) and experiences in the socio-historical context of the narrator and/or characters affect the manner in which the narrator and/or characters perceive components of their worlds.

Genette (quoted in Bal 2006 5) distinguishes between three types of focalisation: the nonfocalised narrative, in which the narrator says more than any character knows (the narrator is omniscient); the internally focalised narrative in which the narrator can only relate what he/she knows and the externally focalised narrative in which the narrator knows less than the characters. Both of these agents influence the interpretation of the text as the focaliser determines what is seen and the narrator relates what is seen; and, they provide the reader with a specific set of events, perceived from a specific perspective, related in a specific way. The focaliser usually determines the “mode” of the text, such as confessional or testimonial, as he determines the focus of the narrator. In *Unconfessed*, the protagonist is both the narrator and focaliser and therefore both determines and relates what is seen. This gives the reader more insight into the protagonist, as her priorities and preoccupations are reflected in what she chooses to relate and how she relates it.

A narrative is composed of various levels of narration: the extradiegetic, intradiegetic and metadiegetic. The intradiegetic or diegetic level presents events in the primary narrative, in the extradiegetic level the narrative act is “external to any diegesis” and at the metadiegetic level a narrative is embedded within the intradiegetic level (Coste &

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<sup>8</sup> Bal (2006) derives her theoretical aspects from Genette.

Pier 295). According to Coste & Pier (295) these levels “describe the spatio-temporal relations between the various narrating acts occurring in a narrative.”

*Unconfessed* can be classified as a narrative of events, as it relates certain events in the life of the protagonist and contains a definite descriptive element. The descriptive element is especially evident in the novel’s focus on Sila’s feelings, emotions and experiences. Some events that Sila describes, such as her trip on the boat to Robben Island (Chapter 3) are diegetic by nature as they present facts to the reader. Sila’s experience and description of her emotions and thoughts during this trip can, however, be classified as a “descriptive element” which is a connotator of mimesis (Bal 2006 8).

When I came to this place, it took many hours in the boat. We left early and by the time we were near, the sun was high over our heads. That is how long it took.

I held your sister. I thought, and now? What now? Not the hands of men, but water will roll the one child I have left away from me. When water moves like that you know it goes deep. Some of the men were sick over the side of the boat. The waves were big, hey. Up, down we went. Meisie was crying hard. Sometimes I cried out with the men when the boat’s nose went up, free of a wave and then hit down, hard. Then ... when the boat pointed down! *Hoo!* All you see is a valley of water and you think now I am going to drown. But the boat came up again. I had one arm tight around Meisie, the other around the nearest man. We were all holding to each other (*Unconfessed* 47).

In her capacity as narrator and focaliser, Sila both determines and relates what is seen. This stance/position gives the reader more insight into Sila as her priorities and preoccupations are reflected in what she chooses to relate and how she chooses to relate it. In this sense, her narration veers towards confessional and testimonial expression.

*Unconfessed* is narrated on a metadiegetic level. Sila’s narration is framed by that of an unknown heterodiegetic narrator, who narrates the first and last chapter of the novel. The first and last chapters of *Unconfessed* are narrated in an orderly and structured manner, which stands in stark contrast to the fragmented and a-chronological narration of the chapters in between. This contrast in style of narration illustrates the fragmenting effect that slavery and imprisonment had on Sila. She relates events as she remembers them and in order of importance, not occurrence.

### 2.3.1 Variations on autobiography as a genre

Genre is no longer viewed exclusively as a classification system with regard to texts, but it is now also considered to play a role in defining and organising social actions (Bawarshi 335). Genres, however, determine the form but not the actual content of the text as Bawarshi (345) notes that “[l]iterary texts are produced and exist independently of genres; genres function only as critical apparatuses.” It is important to keep this in mind, as the temptation exists to either reduce genres to rigid formulas or “deny genres any conceptual stability” (Pavel 201). The role of genre is thus to aid in the interpretation of texts and not in any way change the actual text.

Many postmodernist novels challenge traditional types of genres, such as the epistolary novel and autobiography. Contemporary generic boundaries have expanded and produced hybridised genres by employing modes or strategies such as intertextuality and metafiction. As a result, texts that employ different strategies can belong to the same genre as Cohen (vi) claims that “[t]o refer to a genre is to refer to a group of texts which have both some features in common and others which are individualized.” He clarifies this claim by stating that

The alteration of some features that members of a genre display over time while retaining others weakens but does not cancel membership. But this phenomenon makes it possible for a text to belong to more than one genre. Moreover, genres not only change, they can cease to be used, but, in time, can be revitalized (Cohen vi).

Cohen’s statement points to the fact that genres are not static, but, as Pavel (201) puts it “often possess an internal flexibility that makes them mobile and unpredictable at any given time.” To reduce genre to either a rigid formula or deny it any conceptual stability (Pavel 201) would deny the possibility of combining genres and the ability for genre to play a meaningful role in the interpretation of texts. VanZanten Gallagher (16) supports this point of view when she states that

[u]nlike earlier prescriptive critics, most scholars no longer consider genres as permanent and unchanging. Rather, we realize that authors constantly experiment with and adapt formal conventions, and that material, economic, and social factors play a major role in these revisions, adaptations, and innovations.

Even though genres cannot be contained within rigid structures, Fowler (190) argues that there are certain topics that are “obligatory” or common to certain genres “for which

material has to be found by the writer” With this statement he implies that certain themes or topics demand/require a certain format, such as the structure of a detective novel. Pavel (202) puts it more succinctly, when he suggests that genre is used “as a guideline for literary creation.” Genres, therefore, should not be seen as a recipe that the author uses to ensure the text has the exact characteristics needed to place it within a certain genre, but as a “crucial artistic tool” (Pavel 202), which, when combined with other genres can express a specific reality or situation.

Sinding (*Framing Monsters*) proposes a cognitive approach to genres that would better explain the mixing or blending of genres, when he notes that

[g]enres are central to interpretation, to literary history, and to the sociology of culture, and new models of categorization can help us rethink them. Moving to a cognitive approach radically changes the kinds of questions we ask and the kinds of answers we seek. We move from thinking about genres to thinking about how we think about and use genres – which clarifies genres themselves because they are partly constituted by the way we think. We turn the spotlight away from definitions and toward the multiple interrelated dimensions of categorical thought that cognitive science explores (468).

This approach to genre moves away from the rigid and traditional ways of thinking about genre and proposes focusing on how genres are viewed, instead of attempting to create perfect categories with no space for deviation.

Anne Hegerfeldt (2005), who agrees that genre does not lend itself to rigid definitions, distinguishes between genre and mode and states that “genre primarily relates to form and, at least on the level of sub-genre, content, while mode refers to manner of narration” (47). In *Unconfessed*, various modes (testimonial and confessional) are combined with the genre, autobiography, which creates a type of hybrid novel that serves, not only as the autobiography of the female protagonist, cum narrator, Sila, but also as a confession of her crime, a testimony to the horrors of slavery and a record of her personal development. Consequently, in this novel Christiansë successfully uses a combination of autobiography, testimonial and confessional literature that will be discussed in more detail below. These modes all conform to autodiegetic narration as discussed in section 1.2. In Chapter 4 an analysis of *Unconfessed* will indicate the function and significance of each genre within the novel.

The autobiographical, testimonial and confessional modes all aid in the interpretation of *Unconfessed*. Each genre or mode highlights a specific characteristic of the novel, which aids in providing a comprehensive analysis thereof. *Unconfessed* is a good example of a text that belongs to more than one genre or mode. It can be classified as autobiographical, confessional and testimonial. The aim of the definitions used in the analysis is not to redefine the genre, but to point out the differences between the three modes.

Testimonial literature developed in Latin America in the 1960s as an expression of resistance to social conditions that resulted from institutionalised oppression (Jehenson 75)<sup>9</sup>. The testimonial can be described as a mode of literature rather than a genre as it describes the way in which the narrative is presented<sup>10</sup>. Although both the testimonial and the picaresque affirm the speaking narrator as subject and both explore a moral dimension, it is important to keep in mind that the picaresque addresses an individual situation, while the testimonial relies on actual events that pose a collective social problem (Jehenson 76). According to Moore (2007:8)

[t]estimonial writing gained prominence in Latin America in the 1960s in response both to epistemological shifts in the social sciences and in journalism abroad, and to the slow and uneven pace of change in forms of representation and reception within Latin America.

Moore (2007:16) notes that the combination of literature with social sciences creates “a hybrid genre which questions assumptions about the production of knowledge and breaks the boundaries of disciplines and genres.” While Moore makes this statement with specific reference to the works of José María Arguedas, Elena Poniatowska and Carlos Monsiváis, it also holds true for testimonial literature in general, as testimonial literature is a response to social conditions. Testimonial literature draws attention to the problems regarding the relationship between reality and fiction as defined by its narrative construction (Amar Sanchez 447). Testimonial is regarded as non-fiction in that it relates events that took place, such as genocides, human trafficking and slavery

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<sup>9</sup> In her thesis *A chorus of witnesses: The hybrid genre of testimonial literature* (2010), Bollinger argues that the testimonial objects to social inequalities and institutions not only with regard to subject matter, but also with regard to its tendency to transgress boundaries by combining different genres.

<sup>10</sup> Hutchinson’s dissertation, *Body, voice, memory: Modern Latin American women’s testimonios* (2010), addresses the reason why the testimonio should be considered a mode of literature instead of a genre.

from a specific individual's perspective. The ostensibly objective nature of the testimonial, however, can call into question the validity or accuracy of events as related by the individual (Amar Sanchez 448).

As testimonial literature is concerned with how individuals relate to their environment and how their experiences fit into a specific context, it is never neutral (Amar Sanchez 448); and it therefore tends to be subjective, partial and fragmented (Jehenson 76). As *Unconfessed* illustrates, the aftermath of oppression in all its forms and guises is still prevalent today. Although slavery was ostensibly abolished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its similarities to human trafficking<sup>11</sup>, which is prevalent in contemporary society, warrants its classification as a "trauma of contemporary history." *Unconfessed* proves that the aftermath of oppression in all its forms and guises is still prevalent today. According to Felman and Laub (5), "[T]estimony has become a crucial mode of our relation to events of our times – our relation to the traumas of contemporary history". Gilmore (31) claims that

[t]rauma is never exclusively personal; it always exists within complicated histories that combine harm and pleasure, along with less inflected dimensions of everyday life. Remembering trauma entails contextualizing it within history.

Memory plays an important part in this contextualisation and its task is not to deny any truths or events, but "to reconstitute turbulence and fragmentation" (Nuttall & Coetzee, 5).

It's this relation to events that juxtaposes the true, partial account of the testimonial with the total account of historical fiction (Jehenson 76) which subsequently draws attention to the different ways in which the same event may be experienced. By drawing attention to these differences in experience, the testimonial, in a sense, completes "incomplete" history by including information and facts that would normally be omitted (Jehenson 76).

Felman (68, 70-71) stresses the importance of the listener in the testimony, without whom the testimony will cease to exist. This apparent need for a listener stems from the desire to be heard and to be acknowledged (Felman 70-71). In essence, the testimonial

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<sup>11</sup> See André le Roux's newspaper article, *Slawe: SA se wette te sag*.

aims to create an environment in which the person who relates his trauma, can finally be given an audience, something which might not have been possible while actually experiencing the trauma. Testimonial literature is concerned with trauma or traumas suffered by an individual by placing the individual's experiences in historical context.

For the purposes of this study, the testimonial can be defined as a form of literature that addresses trauma or traumas suffered by an individual, usually at the lower level of society (Jehenson 76), by placing the individual's experiences in historical context. Slavery could be termed a trauma of history and it is this context within which the protagonist, Sila, has to fit her past, in order to make sense of her present.

Outside the context of slavery, Sila's past and specifically, her act of infanticide portrays her as an unfit and uncaring mother. If the narrative were completely narrated by the heterodiegetic narrator of the first and last chapter, then this perception would have been promoted. While fitting her past into the context of slavery, it becomes clear that Sila's actions were intended to save, not harm. The most significant action in this regard is the murder of her son, Baro. Within the context of slavery, this murder is an act of grace, one that releases Baro from the constraints and cruelties of slavery. Unfortunately, society does not understand or accept this, and Sila is imprisoned on Robben Island. Society's views of her actions are illustrated in Chapter 1, when Sila, together with other prisoners, is moved to Robben Island.

"What'd she do?" a man called, close enough for her to hear.

"Kindermoord," the guard nearest to her answered, and spat.

The mild attention that the group had drawn stiffened. Sila felt the change. She kept her head high. She was thankful for her damaged hearing. Things were being said and they were behind a thick wall. Then someone was bumping against her. She had to look. It was a woman. For a second, longing made her think it was Spaasie, even though the face before her was unknown. Unknown? Then why had it stretched into an open mouth, bared teeth and wise eyes?

"Animal!" the woman shouted (*Unconfessed* 26).

Sila is well aware of the fact that her actions are unacceptable to society, especially to those who do not place it within the context of slavery. By placing her story within the context of slavery, Sila enables the reader to understand better what motivated her actions and why she killed her son (much like contextualisation explains Sethe's actions in *Beloved*). There are two groups who "listen" to Sila's story and become participants in

the trauma (Laub 57): Baro, Lys and Johannes who Sila chose to confide in and, in the final instance, the reader.

The confession has its origins in religion and only later “evolved into both a judicial act and a literary form” (VanZanten Gallagher 3). Confession not only enables an individual to admit to a crime or wrongdoing, it creates the opportunity to repent and show remorse. According to Brooks (2)

[c]onfession of wrongdoing is considered fundamental to morality because it constitutes a verbal act of self-recognition as wrongdoer and hence provides the basis of rehabilitation. It is the precondition of the end to ostracism, re-entry into one’s desired place in the human community”.

Kassin and Gudjonsson (35) also point to the importance of confessions for “absolution, social acceptance, freedom, or physical and mental health”. Confession entails much more than merely admitting to wrongdoing, it is an attempt by an individual to regain a place in society by admitting to wrongdoing, showing remorse and refraining from committing the same act again. For this study, confessional literature will be defined as a mode of literature in which the narrator admits to a crime or an act of wrongdoing. Whether or not this confession is made with the purpose of re-joining society would differ from narrator to narrator.

Autobiographical, testimonial and confessional literature are all concerned with the personal experiences of an individual. The main concern of autobiographical literature is personal expression and not historical accuracy. Testimonial literature places individual experience within historical context in order to create another perspective on her/his experiences. The confessional mode describes the act of admitting guilt about committing a certain act or acts, the consequences of which could only be judged when placed within an historical context. By combining autobiography with what Sinding (*From Fact to Fiction*, 116) refers to as “prototypical forms of autobiography”, confessional and testimonial literature serve to create a picture of an individual’s experience of a certain event or events, and provide the motivation behind certain actions and their subsequent consequences.

In *Unconfessed*, Sila testifies about her life as a slave and focuses specifically on Baro and the events that preceded and followed his death, such as the day when she sent him to fetch lemons for her:

Well. I told Baro, fetch me some lemons. He was gone a long time. I asked the missus, please let me go and see where my boy is. I was washing clothes and she was standing there with a stick.

What kept me from taking that stick and pushing it through her heart?

When Baro came back all the washing was finished, even though the stains hung there for all to see. His eyes were heavy. I saw right away that his arm was worse. It was swollen, so thick, thicker than his leg. When I spoke to him he did not hear me (*Unconfessed* 313).

Although Sila also relates many other events from her life that are not directly related to her act of infanticide she always seems to return to the time of Baro's death. Sila's preoccupation with the day when she "had summoned death and drawn a space for it in the world through the living throat of her boy" (*Unconfessed* 21), speaks of her desire to confess to her son's murder and atone for her act. Sila's aim with her confession is, however, not to attain absolution from society, religion or the law, but from Baro. For this reason, her confession is never a public one, neither is it coerced (VanZanten Gallagher 6). Her confession is directed at the only people whose forgiveness and acceptance she yearns for: Baro, Lys and Johannes.

Sila's confession does not involve a reconstruction of the self, but rather a rediscovery of the self. In order to cope with slavery, Sila had to become Sila van den Kaap in order to preserve what little she had left of her life before slavery. When Sila is imprisoned on Robben Island, where she spends much of her time alone, she is afforded the opportunity to rediscover Sila van Mozbiek. This solitude also allows her finally to confess to killing her son, but also to testify to her life as a slave and the atrocities that she had to endure.

Sila's confession, which is the dominant theme in *Unconfessed*, marks the inclusion of a third mode of literature in this hybrid text. By combining confessional literature, testimonial literature and autobiographical literature, the author ensures that Sila's confession will not be judged unfairly or without taking her circumstances into account.

*Unconfessed* illustrates how different genres and conventions can be adapted and/or combined better to support the themes and arguments of the text. In *Unconfessed*, Christiansë creates a hybrid novel by combining elements of autobiography, confessional and testimonial literature. This hybrid novel is very effective in relating Sila's story, as it not only tells her life story, but it also places her experiences within the context of slavery, which better explains her motivation for killing her son. In this hybrid novel, Sila is afforded the opportunity to state her case and explain what motivated her to commit infanticide. Whereas society at the time, as well as now, would immediately condemn her, the reader is given all the facts within the context of slavery and is then left to decide whether or not Sila's act was one of murder or mercy.

Although the modes of autobiography, testimonial and confessional literature are closely related, there are differences that should be noted. VanZanten Gallagher (xiii) points out that "many, though not all, autobiographies are confessional". The same is true for autobiography and testimonial literature. Although many autobiographies are testimonies, not all of them are concerned with placing events within a specific context (Felman & Laub 5).

*Unconfessed* is a combination of Sila's life story (autobiography), her relation to her circumstances (testimonial) and her account of the self (confessional). Sila's confession would not have enabled her to atone for her actions if *Unconfessed* incorporated only one or two of these genres. Sila's place in society, that of a slave, necessitates an overview of events in her life, as well as the placement of these events within the context of slavery in order to create a clear picture of her circumstances and her motivation for killing her son. True confession and atonement are only possible after Sila has related her life story and testified to the horrors of slavery.

VanZanten Gallagher (16) notes that there are many factors, including social factors that influence the formation of or change in genres. Slavery and oppression are social factors that greatly influenced the creation of this hybrid novel. The oppressed, in this case a slave, was never granted the freedom to express herself or explain her actions. She was judged unfairly by a society that was already opposed to her on the grounds of her race and social status, which made fair and just treatment a near impossibility. Unlike society, this hybrid novel gives the oppressed a voice and the opportunity to

state her case, which makes it very effective in relating those stories that previously went unheard because of oppressive (and at times illegal) practices.

#### **2.4 The Narrator, dialogue and language**

The narrator performs an important role in any text as s/he mediates between text and reader. Genette identifies two types of narrators; the heterodiegetic (omniscient) narrator, who is “absent (invisible) or who tells at a higher level a narrative from which he himself is absent” and the homodiegetic narrator, who “is present in the story he tells” (Bal 2006 6). Genette further distinguishes between homodiegetic narrators who are witnesses and those who are main characters, or “autodiegetic” (Bal 2006 7).

Margolin notes that “the character whose epistemological position he [the autodiegetic narrator] adopts may be himself at a different time, usually in the past, but possibly also a projected future version of himself” (Margolin 361). Even though there might be only one narrator in a text, it is possible for that narrator to narrate the events at different stages of his life.

According to Minneke Schipper (46) the autodiegetic narrator’s focus on the self indicates a strong sense of individualism, as it redirects attention from the group to the individual. The tendency does, however, exist to make one individual (especially in texts concerning oppressive practices, such as slavery and apartheid) the representative of many. Although this brings attention to the plight of a group suffering the same fate, it also, once again, denies the individual the opportunity to relate his own experiences.

The narrator in *Unconfessed* can be described as autodiegetic, as she is the main character in the novel. She relates events from her life and describes how they have affected her and those around her. She alternately addresses her deceased son, Baro, her fellow inmate on Robben Island, Lys and Johannes, who was also a slave on Oumiesies’s farm.

In *Unconfessed*, Christiansë employs italicised text to aid in the representation of Sila’s internal struggle with her circumstances and environment. The italicised text represents everything that Sila’s status as a slave prevents her from saying or doing, such as replying to the comments of Pedder’s visitors

Those ladies looked at us. One said, it is a shame that such wretched creatures should be in a place of such beauty.

*Are we not here? I am asking you something, Miss Bring Me My Parasol. Are we made of air that you see through? Ek gaan jou klap! (Unconfessed 81, italics in text).*

Sila also struggles with religion and also finds it difficult to reconcile what she believes a god should be and do with what her oppressors claim about religion. This struggle is especially evident in her interactions with the minister's wife, who tries to convince her to let Meisie be taken off Robben Island:

*My god?*

My God.

*Your god says things I cannot hear.*

My God takes the blossoms of a special tree.

*My god takes such blossoms and makes this girl, me.*

God has spoken to me and said you will be saved.

*My god has a tooth the shape of a blade.*

And it is I who will save you.

*Ah. You and your god.*

My God cuts down the proud as if they were reeds.

*My god moves, I take up the task.*

Let us work together.

*Your god says things I cannot hear.*

Kneel with me.

*Who is speaking now?*

May God look down upon you in this world. Kneel...stubborn woman.

*I was made by a great god. I was made to sing... (Unconfessed 102-103, italics in text).*

It is clear from the above examples that Sila is well aware of the fact that her status as a slave and prisoner does not allow her to speak her mind or show any signs of vulnerability, as it might lead to even more boundaries being imposed on her. While Sila's silence might have certain implications, such as being viewed as remorseless and stubborn, she knows that revealing more of her true self will mean giving up her internal reality and any freedom that she experiences in it.

In her narrative, Sila, for the most part, addresses her late son, Baro. She also addresses one of the slaves on Oumiesies' farm, Johannes (presumably deceased), as well as Lys (both before and after her death). By addressing these specific listeners, Sila reflects her uncertainties, vulnerability and pain to the people she trusts as well as

her desire to be heard. The people she chooses to address, together with the fragmented nature of her narrative, points to the fact that her listeners are people who know her and her circumstances very well, which is why a neatly arranged and structured narrative is not necessary.

In *Unconfessed*, the structure of the narrative, as well as its stylistic elements reveal a lot about Sila and her inner struggles. The fragmented nature of the narrative reflects the way in which slavery fragmented Sila's life and robbed her of the right to build a life for herself and her loved ones. Much like the disordered nature of her life (being constantly moved from one place to the next), Sila's train of thought is also disordered and doesn't follow a clear pattern. Even though this technique might create some confusion and frustration with the reader, it can be deemed effective, as it mirrors the confusion and frustration that Sila experiences.

## Chapter 3

### Narratives and Novels on Slavery

Slave literature can be divided into two main categories: fictional and factual narratives. While American literature has an abundance of both, South African slave literature consists mostly of fictional narratives. *Unconfessed*, which falls within the category of fictional slave narratives and can be considered a contemporary text, combines characteristics of fictional and factual narratives to create its hybrid form. In the following, early and well-known slave narratives (from both categories) will be discussed in order to determine how *Unconfessed* differs from or is similar to them.

#### **3.1 Slave literature defined: Early slave narratives**

The literature on slavery discussed in this study answers to three main criteria: the frame or mode of presentation (oral accounts, accounts written with the aid of an intermediary, autobiographical and biographical material), the main focus on slavery as practice/institution and the significant role of the narrator/amanuensis or intermediary/author in the interpretation or presentation of the narrative.

Slave testimonies have their origin in the oral tradition which was the only way that slaves could relate their stories and experiences of slavery as they were illiterate and publication was not a viable option. Consequently, their audience consisted mostly of friends and family. By recounting their experiences orally, the slaves ensured that their testimonies, passed on from generation to generation, retained their personal history as opposed to official/historical documentation. Unfortunately, stories or testimonies related orally were also liable to contain factual inaccuracies due to a specific narrator's miscommunication/misinterpretation or an attempt by the intermediary to make the story more captivating. Some intermediaries were also motivated to convert slaves to Christianity which explains their eagerness to act as scribes. The fact remains that the oral narrative tradition was the precursor to what is now known as the genre of slave literature.

Slave testimonies took on one of two forms. It was either written by the slave himself (Equiano (1789), Douglass (1845)) or it was written or related by the slave and edited by another party (Prince (1831)), Brent (1861)). In the case of autobiographies written

by slaves (without an editor), a preface to the narrative was usually supplied by a person in a respected position or a credible source, that supported the slaves in their venture and were supporters of the abolitionist movement, such as WM Lloyd Garrison, who supplied the preface to Frederick Douglass's narrative (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself*, 3-15) and the unnamed writer of the preface to Olaudah Equiano's narrative (Gates 25).

The function of the editor or amanuensis was mainly to assist, especially illiterate slaves, in recording their testimonies. More often than not, the prefaces that preceded these narratives that were edited or recorded by an editor/amanuensis, would include a statement to indicate the purpose or intention of the editor/amanuensis. Examples of such statements can be found in the prefaces to both Mary Prince and Linda Brent's (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*) testimonies which exposed/revealed the plight of the female slave and relied on the assistance of an editor.

Thomas Pringle, the editor of Mary Prince's testimony, indicates that his changes were purely technical and that the narrative

was written out fully, with all the narrator's repetitions and prolixities, and afterwards pruned into its present shape; retaining, as far as was practicable, Mary's exact expressions and peculiar phraseology. No fact of importance has been omitted, and not a single circumstance or sentiment has been added. It is essentially her own, without any material alteration farther than was requisite to exclude redundancies and gross grammatical errors, so as to render it clearly intelligible (Preface to *The History of Mary Prince*, in Ferguson 45).

With regard to the Preface to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the editor, L. Maria Child points out the following:

At her request, I have revised her manuscript; but such changes I have made have been mainly for purposes of condensation and orderly arrangement. I have not added any thing [sic] to the incidents, or changed the import of her very pertinent remarks. With trifling exceptions, both the ideas and the language are her own. I pruned excrescences a little, but otherwise I had no reason for changing her lively and dramatic way of telling her own story. The names of both persons and places are known to me; but for good reasons I suppress them (Introduction by the editor to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by L. Maria Child, xxi).

Although these editors claimed only to assist the slaves in producing texts acceptable to their mainly white audiences (without the intention of amending or distorting facts) they inevitably imposed their own interpretations or supposition onto the texts. By condensing and arranging the narratives and omitting “redundancies and gross grammatical errors” the editors of Mary Prince and Linda Brent’s narratives disposed of very clear reminders that slaves were not afforded the “luxury” of an education. Although grammatical errors might not have been welcomed by the entire audience, it would have added a sense of originality to the narratives, as they would have provided a more credible narration of the slaves’ experiences and impressions of slavery. A fragmented narrative would, for example, convey the fragmented nature of the life of a slave; and incorrect language use and grammatical errors would convey the extent to which slaves were denied the right to an education. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, it was more important first to gain an audience’s attention in order to increase support for the abolitionist movement, before attempting to break the mould with regard to literature and publishing.

Even though this was not the ideal situation for relating a testimony, it was the only way that slaves could relate their stories, as they did not have the luxury or the resources to dismiss the help of these editors and publishers who assisted them in penning their testimonies. While some details were omitted (for the sake of propriety) no doubt exists that these testimonies led to further investigations into the practices of slavery, which resulted in a better understanding and knowledge about slaves and their lives .

Apart from factual slave testimonies, numerous works of fiction that address slavery and the issues surrounding it also exist. It can be argued that slave literature developed to address issues relating to slavery that could not be addressed in existing slave testimonies for fear of offending the mainly white audiences. It can also be argued that fictional slave literature came into being to place even more emphasis on the slave trade, its causes and consequences. Whatever the reason, the impact of slave literature on society cannot be denied. Through slave literature, society was able to get a glimpse of the world of slavery and the major themes associated with it: the abuse of basic human rights, the sexual abuse of female slaves and children and the role of power and greed.

Slavery was built on the premise of economic prosperity and the need for power. As this need for power and prosperity determined and influenced so many slaves' lives, it is expected that all slave testimonies address this issue. In the well-known narratives of Olaudah Equiano (1789), Mary Prince (1831), Frederick Douglass (1845) and Linda Brent (1861), there are ample references to the practice of selling or auctioning of slaves and the amount of heartbreak and estrangement that such a situation created within slave families. The South African novel, *The Slave Book*, by Rayda Jacobs, clearly intimates the main incentive behind a slave auction, by advertising that buyers should "come on the day of the auction and thereby make profit" (13). Slaves were sold, for various reasons: to cover an owner's debt or raise money for a specific purpose (Prince 48-49); to dispose of troublesome or old slaves (Gates 457-458); or for breeding purposes, as Mda intimates in his novel *Cion* (2007). Whatever the real reason motivating the sale of a slave, it was always done with an economic imperative in mind, one that would benefit the slave owners and buyers, but not necessarily the slaves.

Slaves were not only expected/used to perform strenuous manual labour, they were also considered an indication of the owner's wealth and power (Van der Ross 10). Slaves discussed their circumstances and exchanged information among themselves and relayed their masters' treatment towards them. A more visible and subtle testimony of the master's wealth and treatment of his slaves was the slave's appearance. A well-dressed slave was more often than not proof of an owner's wealth (Van der Ross 10) and in some instances proved that he was treated fairly. An abused and badly dressed slave would testify of a cruel and intolerant owner who meted out physical punishment for insolence or laziness on the part of a slave. Slaves were therefore an "advertisement" for their owners, be it as an enticement for other slaves to work harder or as a warning of the consequences of disloyalty, insolence and laziness.

Slaves were well aware of the reputation of slave owners and nowhere was this more evident than at slave auctions. Linda Brent notes in her narrative that "[i]t is easy to find out, on that day, who clothes and feeds his slaves well; for he is surrounded by a crowd, begging, 'Please, massa, hire me this year. I will work very hard, massa'" (Gates 456). Slave auctions presented an especially difficult time for slave mothers, as they knew what awaited their children, but were also aware of the fact that they had no power to protect them from the life of slavery that awaited them. Some children, such as Linda

Brent, were fortunate enough to escape violence in their early years and actually had a happy childhood (Gates 445). When sold or bequeathed to another master, however, the slaves' fate changed more often than not and they often had to contend with inhumane and violent treatment. In Rayda Jacobs', *The Slave Book*, the protagonist, Somiela, was fortunate enough to be sold together with her stepfather, Sangora, to the same master (something that did not often happen in reality). Consequently, Sangora was, in some measure, able to protect her, look out for her and comfort her (*The Slave Book* 34). Regardless of their age, children were disciplined harshly: "[m]asters and mistresses disciplined their young workers in much the same way as they did the adults. Violence was essential." (Mason 105). Although this abuse was usually the trademark of cruel slave owners, parents were aware that their child would not be completely exempt from severe abuse, even if he were to be bought by a kind owner.

Slave parents were especially concerned about their daughters, as they knew that they would not merely be used for labour, but would almost certainly be sexually abused by their owners or by other men in positions of authority. This fact is expressed in several fictional accounts by writers such as Brink and Mda.<sup>12</sup> Some slave mothers such as Margaret Garner, (whose story was first related in an article in *The Cincinnati Enquirer* (1856)), Dorcas Allen (whose story greatly impacted US congressman John Quincy Adams) (Mann 2010), and the protagonists Sila in *Unconfessed* and Sethe in *Beloved* respectively, could not bear the thought of either their sons or daughters suffering the horrible fate of a slave and attempted to resolve the issue by committing infanticide. Although mothers who committed this act did so with the best of intentions, they were condemned for committing this act, as it was so contrary to a mother's nurturing nature. Their unnatural deeds were questioned and, consequently, led to deeper investigation into the plight of the slave mother.

As a precursor in the development of the genre of slave literature, the oral tradition paved the way for slave testimonies, to be followed by fictive slave novels that addressed the gross abuse of human rights emanating from a desire for power and money. The slave testimonies, whether they were autobiographical or biographical, addressed and exposed the problem of factual inaccuracies that was prevalent in oral

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<sup>12</sup> *The Other Side of Silence* and *Cion* respectively.

relation, due to countless narrators and their embellishments. In turn, fictive slave literature addressed the “distasteful” issues that slave testimonies were not permitted to address, for fear of offending the “respectable” audience. As a fictional text, *Unconfessed* has the freedom to address the “distasteful” issues of slavery in, at times, very vivid ways. It does, however, also address many factual matters, such as the strict and harsh laws imposed on slaves, the harsh treatment and punishment they had to suffer and the often hypocritical behaviour of those in positions of power.

The development of the genre of slave literature led to a comprehensive investigation of the era of slavery and the plight of the oppressed. This kind of fiction, true to the postmodernist representation of multiple voices, has contributed valuable information on the personal lives and experience of slaves, that supplement historical documentation.

As is the case with all genres of literature, there are certain texts that can be viewed as pioneers of their specific genre. In the genre of slave testimonies, authors such Olaudah Equiano (1789), Mary Prince (1831), Frederick Douglass (1845) and Linda Brent (1867) have paved the way for and encouraged other slaves to give accounts of their own lives and experiences as slaves. For a slave to scrutinise and criticise the institution that kept him prisoner, was something quite extraordinary. It was also not without its share of difficulty, seeing that slaves’ movements were severely restricted and regulated. Despite the obstacles, slaves managed to procure the help of abolitionists and sympathetic members of upper-class society who wished to see slavery abolished, and were able to assist them in printing their testimonies. Although the testimonies were required to be acceptable to a predominantly white audience/readership (Travis 71), which meant that certain “distasteful” facts, such as sexual abuse and infanticide were to be omitted, their publication was still an important step towards the abolition of slavery, and especially towards freedom of expression for those who were never allowed to make themselves heard.

The testimony of Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), was an account that invoked both admiration and suspicion (Gates 9). While his own testimony attracted the attention of “some of the most public-spirited gentlemen and eminent philanthropists in Great Britain” (Gates 19), his claims to African nobility were mostly met with suspicion (Gates

21) by those who viewed slavery as imperative to economic and social development and who feared that his claims might affect trade negatively.

Equiano's testimony, as stated on its title page, was "written by himself." There is no indication that his testimony was written with the help of an editor or an amanuensis. This implies that Equiano decided what to include and omit in his narrative, without being forced to do so by another party. It should be kept in mind, however, that Equiano's level of education and understanding of society, led him to omit certain accounts which he knew might offend readers. Even so, Equiano's narrative conveys the horrors of slavery and the blatant disregard for the human rights of those who were forced into slavery. Furthermore, his eloquence and "mastery of self-representation" as Gates (8-9) points out, made his narrative acceptable to his predominantly white audience and might even have increased awareness of the plight of slaves.

Like Equiano, Frederick Douglass wrote his own narrative (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, 1845), without the assistance of an intermediary. Unlike Equiano, however, Douglass did not remain in slavery and eventually bought his freedom: he escaped. His testimony not only reaffirms the fact that slavery was no more than a blatant disregard for human rights and the result of greed for power and money, but also sheds light on the life and experiences of a slave who managed to escape slavery.

The first female slave narrative to be published was that of Mary Prince in 1831 (Ferguson vii). Even though quite brief, this narrative describes how brutally and unfairly some slaves were treated by their owners. What is notable about both Mary Prince's narrative and that of Equiano is the lack of commentary on the sexual abuse of female slaves. A possible reason for this might be the fact that it would have been regarded as improper and offensive, both because it was not a topic to be discussed in public and because some owners might have considered it their right to have sexual relations with their female slaves<sup>13</sup>. Despite the scant reference to sexual abuse, Frederick Douglass

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<sup>13</sup> This relates to the practice of *Jus Primae Noctis* or *Droit du Seigneur*, commonly referred to as the Right of the first Night. In this practice, noblemen and the wealthy considered it their right to sleep with any of their female servants on their first night of marriage. This practice is described by Vern Bullough in the article *Philosophos: Jus Primae Noctis or Droit du Seigneur*.

refers to a specific incident where a slave owner bought a female slave “as he said, for a *breeder*” (Douglass 94) which implies that sexual abuse was practiced and, in some cases, the abuse was justified as it was a method used to procure even more slaves.

Published thirty years after Mary Prince’s narrative, Linda Brent’s narrative (*Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl*) describes the institution of slavery from the point of view of a fugitive and a mother. Brent escaped slavery and hid in her grandmother’s house, in a small, concealed space, where she could barely move, for almost seven years (Brent 166). During that time, she had no choice but to remain concealed from her children, as they might have, unwillingly and unknowingly, given away her whereabouts to her pursuers. It was only after many years that Brent was able to escape and see her children again. After escaping to the North, Brent, whose two children later joined her, realised that freedom did not ensure social acceptance as she still had to contend with prejudice on the grounds of race (Brent 197-198).

The four early slave narratives that were briefly discussed in the above all describe and convey the horrors of slavery. Not only do these narratives condemn slavery as an institution that robbed slaves of their basic human rights, but they also convey different points of view that address the plight of slaves, fugitive slaves and mothers. Apart from these American slave narratives, the topic of slavery has also been adopted in contemporary writing or re-writing, such as *A Respectable Trade* by Philippa Gregory (1995) and *The Wind Done Gone* by Alice Randall (2001) as well as *The Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys (2000).

### **3.2 The slave narrative in South Africa**

The 1960s was a turbulent time in South African history and “[t]he replacement of chain slavery by the printed pocket book cast a shadow over the entire society that practised or condoned it” (Heywood 145). South African society was divided and the struggle against oppression and segregation was manifested in violent protests and events such as the Sharpeville massacre of 1960. The protest against apartheid was also evident in the literature of the time and the 1960s became an important period in South African literature, which saw both black and white authors “joining in a general protest against apartheid” (Heywood 20).

Apartheid promoted oppression and segregation on the ground of race, which resonates with slavery's oppression on the grounds of social status and race. Heywood notes that "[i]n the world arena, apartheid replaced slavery as a symbol of female as well as black oppression" (214). The ideology of apartheid was therefore not a unique or new one. It was merely the resurgence of age old cultural imperialism.

Although there exists an abundance of South African literature that was written in protest of apartheid, the same cannot be said about slavery. Except for a few notable novels, such as Brink's *A Chain of Voices* (1983) and *An Instant in the Wind* (1976) and Christiansë's *Unconfessed* (2006), slavery receives very little attention in South African literature. Unlike the many narratives and autobiographies written by American slaves, there are also very few first-hand accounts of South African slavery.

In American culture, slave narratives became the historical evidence of oppression which ensured that the period of slavery was never erased from history. In South African history and literature, however, slaves were not regarded as an important topic until the middle of the twentieth century when liberal humanist writers such as Paton, Gordimer and Brink came to address the slave question and political oppression more pertinently in their work. According to Loos (87), very few slave testimonies have seen the light, with the exception of recollections given by Katie Jacobs and Emilie Lehn (Loos 87). Most slave testimonies were related orally and, in this manner, have been passed on from generation to generation, but have not been set in print. There could be various other explanations for the lack of slave testimonies in South Africa, such as a lack of resources or assistance to mediate, write and publish the stories of the slaves, or that slavery was ignored, simply because apartheid and its victims dominated South African history. Furthermore, "[s]lave descendants, demoralised by apartheid's demeaning mythology, have viewed their heritage as a matter for shame and concealment" (Loos 142). This fact in itself is a tragedy, as many stories, which might have served to enlighten society regarding the plight and experience of South African slaves, have been lost. Yet, a few have survived, and although not considered to be mainstream literature they provide a glimpse, however vague and brief, into the lives of South African slaves. These testimonies shall be discussed in the following section of this dissertation.

Apart from slave narratives and testimonies, there are also autobiographical and fictional texts that focus specifically on tracing slave heritage. In general, this literature involves an individual, usually the author, tracing his heritage back to slave ancestry. Notable texts in this regard are: *Roots* (1976) by Alex Haley; *Lose your mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007) by Saidiya Hartman and the novel, *Cion* (2007), by Zakes Mda. These texts, although not first-hand slave testimonies, are valuable as they provide some information on slavery, in the form of stories passed down by way of oral relation. Furthermore, they provide the reader with insight into the way slavery not only affected those who experienced it, but also how it affected their descendants. This insight serves the purpose of illustrating the far-reaching effects of slavery, much in the same manner as anti-apartheid literature illustrates the effects of apartheid.

Andrews (xxxi) claims that slave testimonies played an invaluable role in the abolition of slavery and were often used by abolitionists to aid their cause. It could be argued that the abolitionists were not as concerned with the plight of slaves as they were with their own agendas (such as making groundbreaking changes in politics), which prompted them to ensure that slaves were afforded the opportunity to publish their testimonies. Nevertheless, their involvement in the publication of slave testimonies ensured that the practices of slavery were exposed. These slave testimonies were not merely an exercise in creative writing, but were intended as testimonies for future generations, in order to prevent the recurrence of any such institutions in the future. Furthermore, the aim of the authors of these testimonies was not to benefit themselves, but, as Linda Brent states in her Preface to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, to “convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is” (xx).

South Africa’s main source of information regarding slaves is historical documents. As slaves were considered possessions, they were recorded as such in the same documents used to keep track of other possessions such as cattle (*Unconfessed* 255). They were also recorded in legal documents, specifically court documents as well as census documents. Karel Schoeman, who has done extensive research on this topic as is evident in his numerous publications (including *Armosyn van die Kaap: Die Wêreld van ’n Slavin, 1652-1733* and *Early Slavery at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1717*), contributes to the historical accounts of South African slavery.

Except for the testimonies of Katie Jacobs and Emilie Lehn (Loos 87), and "a trickle of articles about individual Cape slaves, no fleshed-out biography has yet appeared in English" (Loos 142). Several works of fiction, however, deal with the subject of slavery. These novels, to a certain extent, manage to fill the gap left by early slave testimonies and address the scant attention paid to slavery during the first half of the twentieth century. South African literature lacks recorded slave narratives and testimonies, but it has compensated for this vacuum by creating fictional slave characters with the aid of thorough research.

### **3.3 Slave novels**

An author who made a notable contribution to the genre of slave novels is André P. Brink. From *An Instant in the Wind* (1976), to a work of fiction, *A Chain of Voices* (1983) based on a historical event (that of the so-called Galant-revolt) to more fictional works, such as *The Other Side of Silence* (2003), Brink's focus is on different spheres of society during the slave era. He conveys the dilemma of not only the slaves, but also of their oppressors. Brink defies the notion that slaves were property/possessions without any human emotions and illustrates that many relationships between slaves and their oppressors existed that extended beyond the traditional master-servant relationship.

Some of the most notable fictional characters in *A Chain of Voices* includes Galant, the leader of the Galant-revolt; Bet, the mother of his child; Ma-Rose, who raised him; "mad" Lydia; and a host of other characters who all provide different perspectives on the events leading up to the revolt and represent different aspects of slavery. The focus in *A Chain of Voices*, is on the strained relationship between Galant, a slave, and Nicolaas, Galant's childhood friend and later master. This friendship is constantly threatened by the transgression of societal rules and class/status hierarchy, which finally leads to Galant being ousted from Nicolaas's inner circle. Galant never manages to reconcile the idea of friendship with that of slavery and grows to despise Nicolaas because of his refusal to place his friendship with Galant above his master-servant relationship with him. The strain of the master-servant relationship finally destroys this friendship and ultimately leads to the revolt, which, in turn, leads to both Galant and Nicolaas's deaths.

*An Instant in the Wind* portrays another type of relationship during the slave era. It is a romantic relationship that develops between a run-away slave, Adam, and a white woman abandoned in the South African interior, Elisabeth. The fact that this relationship was not acceptable in society at the time, points to the hypocrisy and discrimination of the erstwhile Cape society. While it was perfectly acceptable for white males to have intercourse with slave women, whether in an attempt to procure more slaves, to satisfy their sexual desires or because of actual affection between the two parties, the same relationship between a white female and a male slave, was not condoned by society. This reality induces Adam and Elisabeth to attempt surviving in the wilderness, away from civilisation. Their “escape” from society, subjects their relationship to various trials and tribulations that severely test their commitment to each other. They finally realise that their love for each other, however strong, will always be subjected to the rules and regulations that determine Adam to be a slave and Elisabeth a master. This novel illustrates how deeply ingrained the notions of slavery were in individuals, even those who wanted to break free from the oppressive system of slavery.

The focus shifts somewhat in *The Other Side of Silence*, from slavery and oppression on the grounds of race, to oppression on the grounds of gender. The protagonist, Hanna X, finds herself on the wrong side of society when she refuses to be subjected to sexual abuse by the male soldiers of the German forces that annexed Namibia during the Second World War. Her refusal to submit to those in power, leads to her mutilation and exile in an asylum of sorts, or glorified “whore house” in the middle of a desert. While not a slave novel in the traditional sense, *The Other Side of Silence* reiterates the fact that oppression is not only enforced on the grounds of race, but also on the grounds of gender. When these two motivations behind oppression (race and gender) are combined, a “double oppression” emerges, one that was a part of every female slave’s life.

Another notable slave novel in contemporary South African literature is *The Slave Book*, by Rayda Jacobs (1998). *The Slave Book* tells the story of a young female slave, Somiela, who, together with her stepfather, Sangora, is sold away from her mother. On the new farm, Somiela meets Harman (a free man of mixed descent) and they fall in love, in spite of society’s disdain of their relationship.

Sangora, Somiela's stepfather, who is sold to the same master as Somiela, attempts to protect her as much as possible in their poor circumstances. He suffers the inner turmoil and pride of a slave who tries with all his might to hold on to even the tiniest bit of dignity, but his attitude is regarded as "insolent" and he is punished for it. Sangora portrays the strong spirit of a slave and how that spirit motivated his escape from slavery. Sila (*Unconfessed*), much like Sangora, also portrays the strong spirit of a slave, but slavery and the constant abuse and heartache that she, as a woman and mother, has to suffer, finally break her spirit. Unlike Sangora, Sila never escapes physically from slavery, but she manages to create her own world and sense of freedom, by communicating with the presence of her deceased son, Baro.

Unlike the relationship between Adam and Elisabeth (*An Instant in the Wind*) the relationship between Somiela (slave girl) and Harman (free man of mixed descent) is one that is under constant threat from those around them. Whereas Adam and Elisabeth are able to develop their relationship by spending time together away from society, Somiela and Harman have to contend with the same prejudices and judgements that Adam and Elisabeth manage to escape from for a while. These different circumstances are significant in the development of the respective novels. Somiela and Harman's relationship develops within the confines of slavery but they attempt to transcend the social ramifications, while Adam and Elisabeth's relationship develop far away from slavery in a liminal zone, or the no-man's land of the South African interior. When confronted with the reality of slavery once again on their return to the Cape, their love cannot survive social prejudice and Adam is sacrificed to slavery for Elisabeth to survive in society. Although these relationships and their outcomes differ, they very clearly portray the difficulties involved in relationships between two people of different social standing and race during the era of slavery.

All of the novels mentioned in this section, testify to the horrors of slavery and the immense difficulties that slaves encountered, but they also demonstrate the strong spirit that allowed them either to escape or create some sense of safety or freedom, even if this eventually led to their deaths. Every one of these characters, although subjected to the same institution, is affected in a different manner, be it as mother, father, friend or prisoner and together they represent a "repository" of slave characters and slavery in South Africa that would otherwise have remained untold.

Dan Sleigh has made a noticeable contribution towards the South African repository of slave histories and fictional representation of slaves in his epic entitled *Islands* (2004). A prominent novelist in the field of postcolonial literature, Zakes Mda, has also touched on the topic of slavery in his novel, *Cion* (2007). Whereas Brink's novels focus mainly on the people directly involved in the institution of slavery, *Cion* is more concerned with the impact that it has had on later generations. This novel is therefore much like a fictional version of autobiographical literature that focuses on tracing slave heritage. The fact that slavery proves to have such a far-reaching effect, justifies the trend to search for examples in order to equate slavery with apartheid, as it might very well be an institution formed on the remnants of past prejudices and notions of superiority.

Although seemingly accurate and well researched in most instances, these novels lack one thing that can only be found in a slave testimony, that of the slave's own voice. In these novels, the authors have to "invent" the slave's voice after carefully researching the history of slavery. The invention of the slave's voice, accurate as it might be, often reduces the slave to a universal representative of all other slaves. The fact remains, however, that slave novels still manage to direct attention to a part of history that seems to have been conveniently "forgotten".

A more recent contribution to South African slave novels is Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed*. As previously stated, this text is a ground-breaking novel in the genre of slave novels, as it contains elements of autobiographical, testimonial and confessional literature. It is also notably one of the few slave novels that do not attempt to make one slave, in this case, Sila, the representative of all slaves and their suffering. This is a very important digression from the norm, as most slave literature, even the slave testimonies became "a communal utterance" instead of an autobiography (Gates 2). The author's conscious decision to avoid turning Sila into a symbol, led to a new type of novel, that in which the slave truly has her own voice and is not, once again, forced to become lost in an attempt to right the wrongs of the past by committing the same act of generalisation as was committed in the past.

As mentioned previously, *Unconfessed* does not only present a novel view of narration, but it also addresses the question of infanticide. The novel ironically emphasizes the

helpless role of the female slave, but also intimates an unimaginable choice for a mother to make. Its hybrid quality as confession, testimonial and autobiographical account, stresses the unnaturalness of the deed of infanticide. In these respects, *Unconfessed* resonates strongly with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which also relates the story of a female slave who killed her own child in an attempt to spare her the life of a slave.

### **3.4 Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and its relevance to *Unconfessed***

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), is considered an important novel in the genre of slave narratives, as "Morrison tells a story that other African American writers have avoided: the story of a woman who sacrifices her children" (Travis 73). Infanticide was generally avoided in earlier slave testimonies as it was probably considered to be a "distasteful" topic that would upset social sensibility. Infanticide was generally viewed as the act of an irrational and unfit mother, as the deed transgressed the accepted norms of what society considered as a good mother. For a slave mother, who had been robbed of her parental rights and duties, infanticide would have been the only way to save her children from a life of slavery (Lee 367). In the instance of Sethe and Sila, slave mothers and the protagonists of respectively, *Beloved* (1987) and *Unconfessed* (2006), infanticide was not so much a selfish act of murder as it was an unselfish act of motherly love and devotion. More recently, André Brink also published a novel, *Philida* (2012) with a similar theme and plot. This will be given more attention in the conclusion. Unfortunately, society did not bother to examine the motivation behind acts of infanticide, which resulted in respective slave mothers' further oppression, imprisonment and removal from society.

In South African literature, where slavery received much less attention than in American literature, *Unconfessed*, once again not only exposes the plight of a slave woman, but also directly addresses the forbidden topic of infanticide, which, in a society that seems to have forgotten slavery, is quite a brave venture. There are a lot of parallels that can be drawn between *Beloved* and *Unconfessed*, the most notable being that both deal with a slave mother's act of infanticide. Furthermore, Sethe's (*Beloved*) struggle between recalling and repressing memory (Travis 73) is not unlike Sila's (*Unconfessed*) attempt to distinguish between "Sila van Mozbiek" and "Sila van den Kaap," (*Unconfessed* 303) which is an attempt to restrict memory in order to affirm her identity.

Both Sila and Sethe's acts of infanticide were committed in an attempt to save their children from the horrors of slavery and oppression. While Sethe killed her daughter out of fear that she would be taken away from her and then suffer abuse, Sila killed her son after he had already suffered numerous harsh beatings. Unlike Sethe, however, Sila did not attempt to kill her other two children, who also lived on the same farm at that stage. It can be argued that Sila only killed Baro as he was still very young at that stage and was easy to subdue, whereas her older children might have put up a fight. It could, however, also be argued that there just wasn't enough time for Sila to even think of killing her other children, before she was arrested. Sethe, on the other hand planned to kill both her daughters, but only succeeded in killing Beloved.

Both Baro and Beloved play an important part in Sila and Sethe's lives, respectively, after their deaths. Their experiences of their deceased children's visitations or presences are very different. Whereas Sethe is confronted by Beloved, a character that seems to manifest the spirit of her murdered baby girl, Sila chooses to speak with her deceased son, Baro's presence. Both mothers, more out of a sense of longing than a sense of guilt, do everything that they can to maintain this contact that they have with their deceased children. There is, however, a significant difference in the effect that these surreal presences have on both the mothers and their families and acquaintances. In Sethe's case, Beloved's presence becomes destructive and threatens to obliterate her family life and relationship with both Denver (the daughter that she was prevented from killing) and Paul D. Beloved also seems to be a vengeful presence, one that does not seem to realise why Sethe killed her. Alternatively, Baro's presence to Sila is a healing presence, one which brings her peace and allows her to come to terms with her heinous deed. Baro's presence is nurturing, and allows Sila to escape from her reality, namely that of prisoner, slave and woman. She is afforded the opportunity, once more, to become Sila van Mozbiek and leave Sila van den Kaap behind.

Both *Unconfessed* and *Beloved* force their readers to face the fact that the act of infanticide is not as clear-cut as they might want or believe it to be and that judgement cannot be made on facts and evidence alone. These novels force the reader to look past the nature of the deed of infanticide and look to the reasons for and motivations behind it. They present the reader with a moral dilemma: can taking a life be justified if it

prevents the victim from suffering harsh punishments and conditions in life? These novels succeed in giving the reader another point of view on a matter which seems easier to condemn than it is to understand.

Another prominent theme in *Unconfessed* and *Beloved* is that of atonement. Apart from their acts of infanticide, their lives as slaves and the abuse, violence and oppression they had to suffer, seem to haunt them. Both Sila and Sethe's lives change quite drastically after the deaths of their children; Sila is imprisoned and Sethe escapes from the farm where she lived and starts life as a free woman. Although Sila suffered a much harsher punishment than Sethe, Sila's isolation on Robben Island affords her the opportunity to think about her past, come to terms with it and atone for it. It is for this reason that Baro's presence is not a threat to Sila but, instead, becomes a comfort and a joy.

Sethe, on the other hand, has to focus all her energy on taking care of and providing for her children and Baby Suggs. She is never really granted an opportunity or the time to come to terms with the death of her baby girl. When a strange girl (presumably the embodiment of the child she killed), appears at Sethe's home, it quickly becomes clear that the girl, *Beloved*, is a destructive force. It could be argued that this presence is the manifestation of Sethe's guilt and grief over her act and her desire to atone for her act.

Both *Unconfessed* and *Beloved* deal with similar themes, most notably that of infanticide and atonement. In South Africa, however, where slavery received even less attention than in America, *Unconfessed* is a brave venture, as it simultaneously confronts the reader with a past long forgotten and a moral dilemma that begs consideration and not outright condemnation, something that *Beloved* did several years earlier. This is, perhaps, what is needed to motivate South Africans to look into the past and re-evaluate a past that has been long forgotten.

## Chapter 4

### *Unconfessed*

*Unconfessed* is the testimony of a female slave, Sila, who recalls her past while serving a prison sentence on Robben Island. Her fragmented narrative includes accounts of her life before slavery (in Mozambique), her life working as a slave for various owners and finally, her life as a prisoner. The major part of Sila's narrative is addressed to her deceased son, Baro, who is a persistent presence on Robben Island and seems to serve as her conscience. The times that Sila spends talking to Baro are times during which she allows herself to reminisce about freedom and the way the past might have been, had it not been for slavery and her imprisonment. When she speaks to Baro she also allows herself to imagine how freedom will come about:

The superintendent will come and Pedder will have to say sorry and I will set off from this place. I will say Lys must come too. It is the price I ask for all the years that the Orphan Chamber did nothing for me and mine. And I will go and find Camies and tell him, you see, your mother never forgot you. Perhaps I will get a small house up there in the Bo-Kaap, on Signal Hill (*Unconfessed* 101).

By revisiting the past, Sila attempts to come to terms with it, in order to make sense of and accept her present.

As the narrator, Sila is struggling with her identity and she represents two different personas, Sila van Mozbiek and Sila van den Kaap that reflect her authentic identity and imposed identity respectively. These two personas present Sila at different stages of her life: before and after she completely lost hope of escaping from oppression. By distinguishing between these two personas, Sila focuses attention on the extent to which slavery fragmented her life. Yet the fact that Sila writes her "story" shows courage, integrity and spiritual maturity as she, to an extent, reveals facts about herself that would not necessarily be understood by those who hear her story. These facts include her act of infanticide (when she "sent" Baro away (*Unconfessed* 155)), which she committed in order to save Baro from further beatings and the life of a slave. Sila did this, despite the fact that she knew her actions would be viewed as a crime, one for which she would be punished severely. Her willingness to accept her punishment in order to "save" her son, points to immense courage.

Sila's recapitulation of her life and events in her life all contribute towards her development as an individual. They also shape both her behaviour and way of thinking. The focus in *Unconfessed* is on the protagonist, Sila, in her different capacities as woman, mother, slave and prisoner. The analysis in this chapter will address issues that have a direct influence on Sila, such as her surroundings (physical and geographical space), her life as a slave as well as society's views on and treatment of slaves.

#### **4.1 Place and boundaries**

Sila's life can be divided into three parts, all of which are related to specific places: her life in Mozambique; her life as a slave, with various owners; her life as a prisoner in jail and on Robben Island. Mozambique symbolises her life before slavery, where she had unrestricted freedom; the farms where she serves, indicate circumscribed space and very little freedom, which reminds of the pass system that blacks were subjected to during apartheid (Clare 297), while the jail and the island imply lack of social interaction determined by manmade and natural boundaries. Every move limits her freedom even further, until she is finally imprisoned and has no freedom whatsoever, except through memories and the spiritual freedom she enjoys from them.

Time, especially the past (Mozambique and life as a slave), plays a major role in Sila's narrative, as she constantly revisits the past. Although she had much more physical freedom in her past (both as a free girl and as a slave), it is only when this freedom is restricted even further on Robben Island that she can actually spend time reflecting on and assessing her life, so as to come to terms with it.

As a slave, Sila is moved from "Neethling to Hendrina Jansen who preferred to be called Oumiesies, Oumiesies to her son Theron, Theron to Hancke under a cloud of lies, from Hancke to Van der Wat, "pig of Plettenberg Bay" (*Unconfessed* 39). The farms where Sila worked as a slave before being sent to Robben Island symbolise Sila's development from innocent young girl to abused woman. On each of these farms, Sila has to deal with new obstacles and difficulties, all of which influence her actions and contribute to the development of her identity.

After being kidnapped in Mozambique, Sila goes to work for Minister Neethling and his wife. The Neethling farm is the first farm where Sila works as a slave. Here she learns

about the life of a slave and that slaves are to be seen, but not heard. She also learns that people, especially slave owners are not to be trusted and that their promises mean very little. On this farm, Sila also becomes acquainted with religion and the hypocrisy of those who practice religion, such as Minister Neethling. Sila's observation of Minister Neethling's drinking and irresponsible behaviour leads her to distrust those in positions of authority and power. This distrust grows stronger throughout her life as she is constantly deceived by, among others, Hancke, Theron and Missus Minister. Sila's guarded and disillusioned nature is also the reason why she only trusts those closest to her, namely Baro, Johannes and Lys with her life story and her reasons for killing her son.

On the Neethling farm Sila encounters Christianity for the first time. She is excluded from this group and "had to wait outside of the church with all the other slaves while he called upon his god and waved his fist and pointed his finger" (*Unconfessed* 15). This exclusion, together with Mister Minister's hypocrisy, lead Sila to believe that religion, like society in general, is also influenced by race and social class. It therefore comes as no surprise that she comes to distrust religion and those who practice it.

As a result of Neethling's debts, Sila is sold and goes to work on Oumiesies's farm. On this farm, Sila becomes a part of a family of slaves, all of whom were separated from their own families. Although Sila learns a lot about the sexual abuse that the other female slaves have to endure at the hands of Oumiesies's son, Theron, they protect her from him and she manages to retain some of her innocence. Sila regains some of her trust in authority, as Oumiesies generally treats her slaves with kindness and promises them their freedom in the event of her death. When Oumiesies dies, however, Sila learns that not even Oumiesies's will can save her from a corrupt and greedy Theron, who has ensured that Oumiesies would not rob him of what he considered to be his inheritance (*Unconfessed* 111).

Denied the freedom that Oumiesies gave her, Sila ends up working for Theron. It is here that Sila becomes acquainted with the sexual abuse that she had been protected from on the Neethling farm and Oumiesies's farm: "After Oumiesies had died in eighteen and oh six, Theron took me to his farm. What you and Alima, Spaasie and Philipina tried to keep from happening, happened" (*Unconfessed* 301). Sila no longer has any illusions

about the life of a slave and like so many other slaves comes to see physical and sexual abuse as an unwanted certainty of life. While working for Theron, Sila is loaned to Hancke to work in his shop. It is during this time that Sila gives birth to her children Carolina, Camies and Baro. After seemingly endless arguments between Theron and Hancke about Sila's rightful owner, Sila and her children are sold to Van der Wat (*Unconfessed* 309).

While working for Van der Wat, the sexual and physical abuse that Sila has to suffer intensifies. Unlike Theron, however, Van der Wat also beats Sila's second son, Baro. "They sent him – Van der Wat and his wife – to do the work of a man. They beat him as they beat me. And I was a grown woman and he a child" (*Unconfessed* 312). The turning point for Sila comes when she sees the effect that Baro's beatings have on him, "what had once been a light in him went dull" (*Unconfessed* 312). Although she could endure her own abuse, she could no longer endure Baro's suffering and after his most severe beating at Susanna's engagement party, Sila kills him in order to save him from a life of suffering and abuse.

When Sila describes how she and her children came to live on Van der Wat's farm (*Unconfessed* 308-309), she gives a very concise description of the effect that the time on Van der Wat's farm had on her:

Mokke took us in the wagon, hiding us.

*And tell me why I did not cry out? Why did I stay in that wagon?*

He said, we are taking you away from Theron. He said, Master Hancke is sending you away from Theron, high up into the country, but near the sea. I thought, yes, that is the direction from which I came. I climbed into that wagon with my children and let Mokke cover us and I told my children to be quiet. I told them we were going to a place far away from Hancke and Theron.

Mokke left us at the home of Van der Wat. That was how we came to the end of the world. And whatever remained of the young girl you knew was gone.

Sila's description above clearly shows that despite her difficult life as a slave and despite the sexual abuse that she had to suffer at the hands of Theron, she still seemed to have hope for her future. When her child had to endure intense beatings, however, she lost all hope in a better future.

After committing infanticide, Sila is arrested and taken to a town prison. When her pregnancy comes to light, her sentence is reduced from death to life imprisonment on Robben Island. At that time, Robben Island signified the end of the road and final loss of freedom to many slaves and prisoners. On this island, prisoners were not separated from society by walls and locks, but by physical distance. Their separation from society was a “double” isolation, as they were both shunned by and physically removed from society. The physical distance is a very clear manifestation of the disdain that society has for those who, according to them, are not welcome among the “civilised”.

In spite of its status as a prison, Robben Island provides the prisoners with a degree of freedom. The island’s geographical location and the treacherous ocean that surrounds it, prevents even the strongest swimmers from escaping. This natural boundary allows the prisoners to roam the island freely when they have no tasks to perform. Although they are granted more freedom than in a town prison, it is a constant reminder of their separation from society and their status as outcasts. The isolated and solitary nature of Robben Island gives Sila the freedom to dwell on the past and spend time speaking with Baro, Johannes and Lys. The time that Sila spends with them allows her to come to terms with her past and atone for her “crime”. Robben Island serves as a metaphor of isolation as well as imprisonment, not only as a result of its status as a correctional facility, but also as it has no physical connection to the mainland, but stands alone amidst an unpredictable body of water, which mirrors the isolation that Sila felt “in the country of lies” (*Unconfessed* 9).

#### **4.2 The plight of the female slave**

Female slaves might have been subjected to the same oppressive system as male slaves, but this entailed entirely different consequences for them. Their experience of slavery went much further than physical abuse and restriction of freedom: they also had to give up the right to their bodies and their rights as mothers. Even though most of their children were the results of sexual assault, they loved them. This made the separation between mother and child even worse, as the mothers could do nothing to protect their own children. In the following, attention will be paid to the plight of the female slave in terms of her status as a sexual object, her role in the family and her suffering.

Apart from the often brutal labour and beatings, female slaves were also subjected to rape and sexual assault on a regular basis, which set them apart from their male counterparts, which is why “the dark man” can never “be wholly expected fully and adequately to reproduce the exact Voice of the Black Woman” (Cooper in Andrews vii). Although the above quote was made with reference to the black American female, it is also very much applicable to South African female slaves.

In *Unconfessed*, the female slave’s experience of slavery enjoys priority, as the narrator herself is a female slave. The full extent of the brutal sexual abuse of female slaves becomes much more apparent in *Unconfessed*, as opposed to Rayda Jacobs’s *The Slave Book* (1998), which can be attributed to the fact that the latter novel is narrated by a male slave, Sangora. Although Sila is well aware of the fact that, as a female slave, she will never be more than a source of labour and future generations of slaves, she still, occasionally, remembers that “[l]ong before she came to this land she had been meant for other things” (*Unconfessed* 14).

Although Sila enjoyed a life of “innocence” for much longer than Alima, who also worked for Oumiesies and together with Spaasie, who fiercely protected the young Sila, she could not always rely on Oumiesies, Alima, Spaasie and Johannes to protect her from being subjected to the “breeding practices”<sup>14</sup> of slave owners. Theron’s constant attempts, and eventual success in raping Sila, was just the start of a life in which Sila had to come to terms with the fact that her body “has no say in what happens to it” (*Unconfessed* 133). Her initial denial of her future as a sexual object and her anger regarding her constant rape and sexual abuse, later makes way for an angry and stubborn resignation to her fate and frank, cynical admission to herself that her body is her enemy, “[b]ecause that is all that can happen” (*Unconfessed* 222).

Following a life of anger and hatred towards her oppressors and abusers, Sila seems to become despondent later in her life, when she realises that she is pregnant with Debora (a result of being raped by the guards) and asks to be left in peace as she is “not talking to anyone. After all these years my body still has no say in what happens to it. Another child” (*Unconfessed* 133). Throughout Sila’s life, as despondency follows anger and

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<sup>14</sup> In the article “Telling Lives: Myth, Metaphor and Metafiction in *Cion* by Zakes Mda,” Wenzel gives a short description of the “breeding practices” of slave owners.

resignation, the stubborn nature which she reveals from the beginning of the novel is constantly present, albeit in varying degrees. This fact testifies that slavery might have control over her life, but that it has never completely annihilated her fighting spirit.

Motherhood and family is a theme which is very closely related to the sexual abuse of female slaves, as the forced intercourse they suffered often led to pregnancies. Samuelson (44) notes that “the right to be a mother, and to be part of a family, is available only to those who have redefined the category of family according to the colonial power, such that the freedom to be a mother might entail new forms of enslavement.” The colonial power that governed South Africa during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (the time during which Sila was enslaved) also governed the family lives of slaves, with laws that prescribed when and under which circumstances children could be separated from their mothers and sold to another owner or when they were eligible to enter into an apprenticeship, or buy their freedom. The family life of slaves was non-existent and not at all like the conventional idea of family life; a unit consisting of two parents and their children. Slaves formed affiliations with other slaves and in this manner created a family for themselves. These families were far from conventional, but to slaves they were just as important as any other “conventional” family. Sila’s family was no different and was like most other slave families such as that of Mina, characterised by the absence of a father or father figure and constant instability which resulted in children being taken from their mothers, whether the mothers were informed thereof or not.

Female-headed families were very common during the era of slavery for two main reasons, namely, the uncertainty of the identity of the fathers of slave children, as a result of female slaves being raped on a regular basis by numerous men, including their owners, and the practice of separating the male and female slaves, which resulted in the children living with their mothers. More often than not, as is the case with Sila, Mina and Lys, one woman would take care of another’s children should the mother be unable to care for her children, whether as a result of illness, some form of incapacitation or even death.

Adding to the already fragmented and unstable family life of slaves was the constant, and sometimes illegal, separation of mothers and children, more often than not in an

attempt to pay off debt. This was usually done without the consent of the mothers and, as was the case with her daughter Meisie's separation from Sila, the mother was not even informed of the impending separation.

Sila views her body as "her very own burden in this world" (*Unconfessed* 21), because of constant sexual abuse. Despite the fact that most of her children were born as a result of rape she still loves her children and brings them up to the best of her ability. In Baro's case, however, her status as a slave forced her to revert to infanticide in order to protect him. Sila sees herself as a failure as she is unable to create a stable family life for her children. Sila expresses her frustration with her inability to protect her children by describing how she would "punish" her enemies:

"No mother wants to know that her generations are condemned to the life she despises. I have been despised and I have opened my mouth and spoken the language that this has taught me. I have wanted to send fleas into their sores and the soft folds of their bodies. I have wanted to send locusts and flies that would carry their cattle away with diseased blood. And now, it is us who have been condemned for generations. Perhaps it is us who have an agony of plagues that will take generations to cure (*Unconfessed* 268).

This creates in her a feeling of guilt and regret, which leads to her questioning of herself, her behaviour and her pride (*Unconfessed* 238). She does, however, seem to realise, to a certain extent, that her "failure" as a mother is not as a result of her own inability to care for her children, but the burden of "*mothers in this country of people with stomachs full of irritation and eyes that always watch us*" (*Unconfessed* 84). Despite the often violent ways in which their children were conceived, slave mothers still loved them and Sila addresses this when she says, "My children came into my body whether I liked it or not, but I love them" (*Unconfessed* 319).

Although Sila does not have one definite answer to the question, "*Who is Sila?*" (*Unconfessed* 127), it becomes quite apparent during the course of the novel that Sila never really succumbs to the institution of slavery. What is perceived to be her reluctant submission to her circumstances and her oppressors is, in fact, nothing more than a silent rebellion against an unjust system, a silence which is never confessed publicly, but only to Baro, Johannes and Lys.

You see these huts? That one with two doors is where I live. It is two huts joined by one wall. One is empty. Meisie and I live in this one with Lys and Mina and Mina's girl, Flora. It takes time to see when you come inside, but I see everything I need to see here. We live where they put us (*Unconfessed* 58).

Sila's silent rebellion against slavery is further illustrated in the fact that she still clings to the hope that she will escape her circumstances:

There is another Sila that moves around and around me. I try to find my way back to her. I think she is back but of that I am not sure. I am not sure if I ever arrived at her, or if I even had a chance, but I know she is there and her other name is Chance. Ja. She is the chance I have not had. Maybe. Maybe. She is there. And I am here (*Unconfessed* 322).

Sila's suffering, like her oppression, finds expression in two ways, which Mason (104) refers to as "physical and emotional violence". Slave owners and slave traders used physical force to subdue and gain control over slaves. Mason (105) notes that "violence was essential" for slave masters to ensure that they instil a measure of discipline in their slaves. Slaves were beaten for the smallest of indiscretions and their punishments were either carried out in private or in public, in front of witnesses (Mason 144-145). For those slaves who broke the laws of the Cape Colony, especially severe and public punishment awaited.

Although Sila was fortunate enough to be spared severe beatings on the Neethling farm and Oumiesies's farm, she had to bear the full brunt of Theron and Van der Wat's physical abuse. Sila suffered her most severe beating at the hands of Van der Wat, who "took the hearing" (*Unconfessed* 324) from her one ear. This beating was the result of Sila's futile attempt to stop her children, Carolina and Camies, from being sold and taken away from her. Mason states that "[t]he whippings and beatings were physical acts with psychological consequences" (146), however, often times, as is the case with Sila's hearing, acts that were psychologically motivated had physical consequences.

It was the day I shouted at him, you cannot sell Carolina and Camies, they are the children of a free woman. I am a free woman. He took care of this ear for good. He hit me all around my head with open hands and with a knobkerrie. He hit and hit and shouted and my hearing was bursting and spraying away. The pain! Even now I can feel it (*Unconfessed* 324).

Apart from the severe physical abuse, slaves also had to live with the knowledge that they would most probably never be free to do as they please and return to their families and place of origin. For parents, especially mothers, this knowledge was even worse, as they knew there was absolutely nothing they could do in order to save their children from suffering the fate of a slave. Like a lot of slave women, both real and fictional, such as Sethe (*Beloved*) and Margaret Garner (*The Cincinnati Enquirer*, 1856) who is said to have inspired *Beloved*, Sila saw death as the only release for her child. The anguish of knowing that her son suffered the same abuse as she did motivated her to take his life.

Baro was a good boy, Johannes. They said he was a bad child. They sent him – Van der Wat and his wife – to do the work of a man. They beat him as they beat me. And I was a grown woman and he a child. And what had once been a light in him went dull. And it was as if he could not understand me when I spoke to him sometimes (*Unconfessed* 312).

Although her act of infanticide was motivated by love, kindness and compassion, she still felt the need to atone for “sending” Baro away (*Unconfessed* 155).

Sila recaptures some of the freedom she enjoyed as a young girl through her imagination and alternatively, through her dreams and memories.

#### **4.3 Society**

In society, boundaries are, for the most part, determined by the status of an individual, or group of individuals. This separation or segregation by means of classification can be ascribed to the need for human beings to associate with those similar to themselves. There are, however, countless cases where this “natural” segregation was distorted to serve the purposes of an ideology. One such instance was the institution of slavery.

The most prominent structure or relationship that existed in the era of slavery was that of master and slave. The status of slave was not a favourable one, and saw those who were classified as such being “subjected [them] to a broadly common experience of extreme privation and degraded social status” (Adhikari 99). In society, slaves were not human beings, but a source of labour, which made freedom unnecessary for them in the eyes of their oppressors. As a slave, Sila also experiences the “denial of freedom” (Van der Ross, 52) that her fellow slaves had to endure. As a result of her status as a woman, and later as a prisoner, Sila’s freedom was limited even further. She was not

only denied the right to spend her time as she wished, but was also denied the right to have control over her body.

The combination of being denied her freedom, both with regard to her geographical location and her body, incited her act of infanticide, which led to her classification as a prisoner, which limited her already minimal freedom. Sila was not just a female slave anymore, but also a murderer, which only served to motivate society to impose stricter boundaries on her, in the form of imprisonment.

In the beginning of the novel, the reader is introduced to a cynical Sila, where she is awaiting trial and sentence for the murder of her son, Baro, in a prison in Cape Town. Her distrust in the law of “the country of lies” (*Unconfessed* 9) seems to mirror her distrust in religion, especially Christianity, which is the religion of her oppressors. The source of Sila’s apparent disdain for religion seems to originate from what she views as the hypocrisy of religion, which she describes as “the minister” who “comes in black, clutching his bible, and – look there, see? – his wooden heels are worn. His clothes stink of tobacco and too much wine. His face glows” (*Unconfessed* 78-79). This hypocrisy which Sila observes is also extended to other professed Christians, such as Van der Wat and his family, whom she imagines in church:

swaying away as one with the rest of the congregation, while secretly trying to shift against their clothing for the tiniest bit of relief. The hymn ended and they had to sit, Van der Wat so stiff and righteous in daylight and public, beside his fish-belly wife and their greedy children (*Unconfessed* 10).

Sila’s disdain for religion is justified by the fact that so-called Christians and “men of God” treat her and her fellow slaves in a harsh and cruel way, citing the word of God as a motivation and justification for their actions<sup>15</sup>. Taking into account Sila’s observations with regard to religion and the hypocrisy of Christians, it comes as no surprise that she assumes that only a cruel and unkind god will allow the atrocities that she has survived and witnessed.

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<sup>15</sup> The curse of Ham (Genesis 9) is often cited as the reason for the belief that black people are inferior to white people and therefore should be enslaved.

She does, however, as time passes, seem to entertain the idea that a higher power does exist, in the form of “Allah Hoo Akbaa” (*Unconfessed* 208) revered in the Islamic faith. Although she is still wary of relying wholly on human beings, much less an unseen being, her tentative steps towards religion indicates a change in her identity, moving from the obstinate, cynical young Sila towards a more open-minded woman who, although still very critical and wary of those around her, is able to overcome her past in order to attempt a new way of life, one which includes religion.

Sila’s most significant struggle or confrontation with religion can be found near the conclusion of the novel, where she is overcome by longing that “knocks at my heart like the wind at the door” (*Unconfessed* 296). It is here that she, in a desperate plea for peace reaches out to Christianity, or more specifically, Jesus, to “put that lamb’s wool over my eyes so that I can have peace” (*Unconfessed* 296). This plea that Sila makes comes at a time in her life where she is exhausted from fighting an unjust system, one that she realises she will still have to contend with until the day of her death. Taking into account the fact that Sila never openly converts to either Islam or Christianity, it can be said that her distrust in a higher power, which developed as a result of the hypocritical and contradictory behaviour of Christians, ultimately triumphs over any need she might have had, however briefly, to practice religion or to pledge loyalty to and faith in a higher power or being.

During the era of slavery, whether it was in Europe or South Africa, it is clear that society was under the impression that the ability to create and master certain fields of study was an inherent part of the “civilised” human being, which is why Africans, who were not perceived to have made any significant contributions to these fields were viewed as lesser human beings, who had the sole purpose of serving “civilised” humanity. This notion as well as the apparent need for the Europeans to be in a position of power led to the creation of a society and a justice system that functioned on the premise of assumptions rather than on fairness and equality, which would be the ideal components of any such system.

Since it was argued that slaves were not civilised human beings capable of making a meaningful contribution to society except, as labourers for Europeans, it was probably also argued that such slaves did not deserve any rights or protection from the law.

This attitude was apparent even when a Protector of Slaves was appointed to assist slaves with legal matters, because it proved to be a conciliatory gesture by the government that, at least in the minds of slaves, was intended to distract attention from the atrocities that were still being committed against them. To Sila, the Protector of Slaves is nothing more than a contradiction, as “he has slaves of his own” (*Unconfessed* 106).

Sila’s distrust of the justice system also extends to the law, which she views as nothing more than “paper” that “burns” and “is blown away” and “can be folded like eyes that close from things they do not want to see” (*Unconfessed* 100). The main reasons for Sila’s distrust in the law is not only the contradiction of the Protector who also owns slaves, but the fact that Theron finds it so easy to circumvent the law when it comes to fulfilling the conditions of Oumiesies’s will, which expressly states that Sila should receive her freedom. The law is therefore nothing more than a system that can easily be thwarted by allowing “real murderers” to walk “free with the right to real buttons, and fancy dresses, and cream neckties, waistcoats on Sundays” (*Unconfessed* 10).

Although there are laws in contemporary society that protect women from engaging in sexual acts without their consent, there are still a lot of practices within society that reflect the belief that many still have, namely, that women should submit to men, especially with regard to sexual matters. Practices such as sex trafficking and *ukuthwala*<sup>16</sup> clearly illustrate the notion that women have no right over their bodies, especially in societies that are patriarchal in nature.

#### **4.4 Self and identity**

Displacement forms a major part of Sila’s life and as a result of being constantly moved from one place to another and one owner to another, her surroundings become part of and shape her identity. Each place Sila finds herself in marks a major event or change in her life. Sila even defines herself in terms of her surroundings, as is evident in her differentiation between Sila van Mozbiek and Sila van den Kaap. According to Margolin (361) the autodiegetic narrator can adopt the epistemological position of himself at a different time, whether in the past or whether a “projected future version of himself”.

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<sup>16</sup> In his article, *SA se wette te sag*, André le Roux describes *ukuthwala* as the practice where girls as young as 12 years old are forced into marriages with adult males.

This is also the case in *Unconfessed*, where Sila van Mozbiek and Sila van den Kaap represent Sila, respectively, before and after she was completely disillusioned by her life as a slave.

As a young girl, Sila enjoyed a life of simplicity and innocence, free from the oppression and abuse of slavery. After being kidnapped from her home in Mozambique and transported to South Africa in the hold of a ship, or as Sila calls it, “the demon’s belly” (*Unconfessed* 15), she realises that her past and who she was and what she believed in no longer mattered (*Unconfessed* 115). This violent rupture with her family and home has a profound effect on her identity formation. She learns that as a slave, she is nothing more than a commodity. Initially, Sila is hopeful that she will be able to procure freedom for her children and herself but, after working tirelessly for Hancke and Theron, who promises her freedom but never delivers, Sila realises that freedom will never be hers. This does not prevent her from dreaming about freedom and living in “a small house up there in the Bo-Kaap, on Signal Hill” (*Unconfessed* 101).

Although Sila knows that her chance to be free is very slim, she refuses simply to surrender her identity to slavery. Sila describes herself in many ways: “Sila van Mozbiek” (*Unconfessed* 19), “who was taken from Cape Town to Van der Wat” (*Unconfessed* 9), who is “mother to children who carry the weight of the world on their faces” and “prisoner” (*Unconfessed* 339). Displacement, motherhood and imprisonment dominate Sila’s descriptions of herself, which points to what she deems important. She is, however, careful to keep her innermost thoughts and dreams to herself in an effort to retain a measure of hope. On account of her insistence to hold on to her identity, Sila testifies to her life as a slave and the oppression and abuse she has had to endure. Although she only relates her life story to three people, two of whom are deceased, her very act of testifying defies the oppressive institution that is slavery.

In an attempt to preserve the innocence, hope and vulnerability of Sila van Mozbiek, Sila adopts the identity that slavery gave her,

Sila van den Kaap, slave woman of Jacobus Stephanus van der Wat of Plettenberg Bay in the district of George. A woman moved from master to master, farm to farm, from the district’s prison to the big town’s prison. A woman fit for hanging. Child murderer (*Unconfessed* 19).

Sila van den Kaap is the identity that was created by society for Sila, an identity that was based on her race, social status and crime. Sila van den Kaap was not considered a human being and was therefore defined by nothing more than her purpose, monetary worth and actions. Sila never accepted this identity for any purpose other than protecting what little she had left of her own identity, as she was very much aware of the futility of fighting the system of slavery:

There should be a time for one cool, clear, steady breath. I want to inhale air that does not come through this world where everything has a name, whether that thing deserves that name or not, whether that name *is* a name or just a big bucket that they put over all kinds of different things to be sure there is nothing that has not been given a name. A name, I am learning, all over again, is like a place. When you have a certain name, you can be like Missus Minister. Things can be sent to you. But, as I learnt from the day I was taken onto that boat, even before I went into that great hole where we had to lie down like people not yet dead but dying, I knew that who I was, who my mother was or my father, did not matter. None of that could help me. Everything that was part of the who that made me – my bowl, cracked as it was, the place where our headman sat, the place where the boys went to become men – nothing mattered. And it matters less now. There is no going back. There is only my forehead and where it points me (*Unconfessed* 115).

Sila's dual reality is testament to the fact that she is aware of society's perception of her. To society she is Sila van den Kaap and to herself, Baro, Lys and Johannes, she is Sila van Mozbiek. Throughout the novel, Sila not only defines herself in terms of society, she also defines her identity and who she truly is.

To Sila, motherhood is the most important facet of her identity. Despite the fact that some of her children were the result of sexual abuse, Sila still loved them very much (*Unconfessed* 319). Most of Sila's actions are motivated by doing what is best for her children, regardless of the cost to herself. This is especially evident in her murder of her son, Baro, an act that was committed in order to protect him from a life of harsh beatings. Although Sila's intentions were good and she does not seem to regret sparing Baro the life of a slave, she still feels the need to confess to her act and atone for it. She does this for the sole purpose of explaining her motivations to the one person it affected the most, her son.

When Sila is imprisoned on Robben Island for murder, she experiences a freedom that transcends her physical imprisonment. Her solitude on the island allows her to dwell on

the past and come to terms with it. The time that she spends talking to Baro, Lys and Johannes brings her great comfort, even amidst the unpleasant circumstances on Robben Island. Although Sila is physically imprisoned and still has to contend with sexual abuse from the guards, she is able to affirm her true identity, even if only in silence. Sila's refusal to allow slavery to take away her identity together with her freedom, is what enables her to bear her burdens, be it sexual abuse or imprisonment. She holds on to her identity, by constantly reminding herself of the person she was before slavery:

I am not like this, Johannes. I am not a bad person. I am not this Sila who cuts people, or who hits people. This is not me. I want to be ... I feel I am ... A person who is me hides nearby. She is my companion, Johannes. I wonder how many times she almost leaves me. I do not want to lose that me, the one I want to be, the one I know I can be, that I am. And there is another Sila. I do not want to be her. It is her whose name has changed so many times. There are so many of her. She is the woman who looked up at hills and saw them as the horizon rushing away and she is the woman who was made to live like a dog. She is a woman who kills and who has been made to lie in the dirt with men. She is the woman who looked at the hills and forgot everything but being heartsore. That Sila scares me, Johannes. You did not know her, she is also here. I am not her. I am not a bad person. There is another Sila, the one you knew (*Unconfessed* 321).

Sila's dual reality is characteristic of the testimonial, which underlines the possibility of multiple realities (Jehenson 76). These two identities represent, respectively, Sila's internal reality, where she still has a certain degree of freedom and her external reality, where she is nothing more than a slave woman, subject to the will and whims of her masters. According to Amar Sanchez (450) the subjectivisation of persons and characters places them both in reality and fiction, which makes it possible for them to alternate between internal and external points of view. Sila started to distinguish between Sila van Mozbiek and Sila van den Kaap after she arrived on Van der Wat's farm, which is where Sila van Mozbiek ceased to exist (*Unconfessed* 303, 309). Sila's internal reality functions as a defence mechanism against the dehumanising institution of slavery, as it preserves Sila van Mozbiek, the person she was before slavery.

By functioning within her dual reality, Sila manages to create a place where she is not only able to speak her mind and nurture thoughts of revenge when she schemes: "*I will call up bad things and send them there and they will crawl into Van der Wat's ear and scream at him until he runs into a wall, head first, until he breaks his head open the way*

*he broke our lives*"; (*Unconfessed* 47) (Italics of the text). In this place she can be vulnerable and confess her insecurities; "*I am useless, useless as a mother. I am not the woman I want to be*" (*Unconfessed* 46). Sila's possessive protection of her internal reality proves that she is aware of how the institution of slavery functions and what effect it has had on her and what it might still have, should she allow herself to be completely exposed. The author realises that in order to maintain some sort of freedom, Sila needs to remain somewhat mysterious, hence the employment of the first person narrator in the fragmented form (Nieuwoudt 12).

Sila's dual experience is not the result of two separate personalities vying for attention, but rather, two facets of one individual who is desperately trying to maintain her sanity in terms of her environment. She protects her internal reality, by confiding only in Lys, Johannes and Baro, her son, whom she killed in order to prevent him from becoming, like her, a victim of merciless slave owners. When addressing Baro in particular, the reader sees glimpses of a vulnerable Sila, when she confesses to the wrongs that have been done to her, as well as her insecurities. In order to atone, Sila needs to place her story in the context of slavery, as it was slavery that motivated her act. She believes that Baro would understand, but reliving her past and relating it to slavery is also necessary in order for her to completely come to terms with it.

At times, Sila also addresses Lys, her friend, a fellow prisoner on Robben Island and "the one who is closest in my heart" (*Unconfessed* 108). Lys is the only living person who Sila addresses, until her death, after which Sila continues to speak with her. In Lys, Sila finds a companion and friend, who understands the plight of the female slave:

Sila, do you have a special man here?

She stares at me. What would I do with those feelings? You have those feelings and you lose your body to them. What does this stupid woman think? Who does she think is on this island? These men do not even see my face, or Lys's, or Mina's. So why would I want to think of a special man when my body is being made strange to me? Lys will agree with me (*Unconfessed* 222).

Sila shares her concerns and fears for her children with Lys, as well as her dreams of being trapped and her longing to go "home" (*Unconfessed* 206). Sila also shares with Lys her disgust with those who regard them as possessions, "who say we are theirs to do with as they will" (*Unconfessed* 205). It is necessary for Sila to recall the bad times in

her past, as she can only truly come to terms with her present if she recognises her suffering (De Kok 71).

Johannes is another friend whom Sila addresses, one of the slaves on Oumiesies's farm and the only man who never "tried his luck with her" (*Unconfessed* 14). Sila mainly shares her past with Johannes and the oppression and abuse that she suffered at the hands of Theron and Van der Wat. She also shares her concern for Lys, who is suffering from leprosy, with Johannes.

According to Felman (68) "[t]he absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story". Sila chooses to address the absent Baro, and her fellow slaves, Lys and Johannes, for the simple reason that they are the only people she truly trusts, who will do her no harm and will understand her actions, as all of them experienced the oppression and cruelties of slavery. Unlike them, the reader might not necessarily be as familiar with slavery and its practices. The reader, much like Sila's oppressors, does not share her circumstances and are therefore not as compassionate or understanding as Sila's listeners.

Although slavery was abolished in South Africa in December 1834, the Cape society in particular still had to cope with its repercussions. Even though the end of slavery was welcomed by many, there were a lot of obstacles to overcome. Slave owners had to learn to cope without slaves or pay their servants a wage. In many instances, slave owners depended on their slaves for companionship and to reaffirm their identity as much as slaves depended on them for food, clothes and shelter. Mason (251-252) identifies this dependency

In the relationship between Katie Jacobs and her owner

Her mistress may have believed that she was about to lose [sic] a companion as well as a servant. It would also have occurred to her that there would be more work for her to do if Katie moved on. She was as dependent on her servant as her servant was on her. Race and class informed her sense of herself, as they did most masters and mistresses at the Cape. She must have wondered who she would be if she were not the mistress of non-white servants. The passion with which she pleaded with Katie to stay indicates that her dependence on her servant was as psychological as it was material. The questions confronting everyone at the Cape

were of both the body and the spirit. Neither can be ranked above the other (Mason 251-252).

Former slaves had to learn to care for themselves and could no longer rely on their former masters to feed, clothe and house them. They had to decide whether or not they wanted to continue working for their former owners or seek alternative employment. For some former slaves this decision was not easy, especially if their former owners had treated them well and if they had built relationships with those around them. For others, however, the decision was informed by the realisation that

it was their mobility that made freedom meaningful. It allowed them to reunite their families, seek better conditions of labor, carve out a measure of independence, and establish some physical and psychological distance from their masters. They had escaped social death and saw no reason to turn back the clock (Mason 262).

The most difficult obstacle to overcome was, however, discrimination on the grounds of race and social status. After the abolition of slavery, the division between races and social classes did not simply break down. Mason (275) notes that “[t]hough the law was now formally color blind, no one at the Cape doubted what was understood: in practice, masters were to be white and servants coloured.” This principle which dominated race relations in South Africa long after slavery, was later entrenched by the system of apartheid. Although many differences exist between the system of slavery and that of apartheid, both were founded on the principles of oppression, racial and social discrimination and segregation. Yet, the similarities between slavery and apartheid indicate that society had merely changed on the surface after slavery, because racial and social boundaries and race relations still remain a contentious issue in South African society.

## Chapter 5

### Silence as language

#### 5.1 Sila and expression

The emotions and opinions of slaves were not something that was considered by their oppressors and the members of society who advocated the institution of slavery. Slaves were not recognised as human beings, or even servants, but as property that was recorded in the same books that were used to keep track of cattle. These records serve as proof of the dehumanising nature of slavery.

I knew those books. He put us in there with his horses and cows, the carriage and horseshoes. Ja. The day after Carolina and Camies were sent away and my heartache was still fresh, that stupid daughter Susanna called to me. She said to me, you say you are a free woman? I was careful, but I would not hide the truth. I said, Oumiesies gave me freedom if I worked the price off and that is what I did for more than eight years with Hancke.

She said, come with me, and we went to her father's workroom. When we were there, she asked, Sila, do you understand about writing? I made my eyes dull. What did she think? I am not a stupid woman. I knew. But I was not prepared for what she told me. She made my name come out of that book like a crazy thing lost in a big wind when everything is throw up in the air and spins around. There we all were, the cows and you and me and Carolina and Camies and Pieter (*Unconfessed* 255).

Sila's silence speaks of her refusal to become a prisoner and a victim of slavery. Her physical imprisonment in the system of slavery and on Robben Island never hinders her from dreaming about one day experiencing the joys of freedom:

The superintendent will come and Pedder will have to say sorry and I will set off from this place. I will say Lys must come too. It is the price I ask for all the years that the Orphan Chamber did nothing for me and mine. And I will go and find Camies and tell him, you see, your mother never forgot you. Perhaps I will get a small house up there in the Bo-Kaap, on Signal Hill (*Unconfessed* 101).

Sila's dreams and hopes for the future and for her children, however futile they might be, indicates the failure of slave owners and supporters to prevent slaves from having any dream or aspirations at all.

If Sila's silence was a silent rebellion against the "law" of the Cape Colony, that was pro-slavery, then her narration of her life as a slave and details of the atrocities committed against her and other slaves, serves as an outright denunciation thereof. Her narration, which is not the product of another individual's observations, but that of her own experiences, breaks the silence that characterised the lives of slaves in general, but also those of female slaves. The brutal beatings, sexual abuse and haggard living circumstances that female slaves had to endure, no longer manifested in scars, pregnancies and diseases alone, but in the honest words and thoughts of a woman who was taken from her home as a young girl and whose value was measured by the quality of her labour and her ability to bear children.

Silence, in *Unconfessed*, is not merely the absence of words and sound, but the absence of the basic human right and need for expression, something without which a person can easily be ignored, dominated or oppressed. Whereas slaves could usually only express the silence of their oppression and imprisonment through their "battle scars" and the occasional rebellion, Sila manages to express her enforced silence, as a slave and as a woman, by narrating her life story to Baro. His presence is audience enough for Sila to feel that she has finally broken her lifelong silence on both the atrocities committed against her, and her own indiscretions and errors, much like the protagonist, Hanna X in Brink's *The Other Side of Silence*.

Throughout *Unconfessed*, Sila's distrust of the language (its manipulation and the shades of meaning<sup>17</sup>, not the language itself) used by her oppressors, becomes clear. She associates this language with confusion, trickery and dishonesty: "What was this? This language was like too much cream on the top of milk – pretty, tasty, but even with the first taste it was making you sick" (*Unconfessed* 23). This distrust of language extends to her distrust in the law: "And do I not know of the thinness of laws and the words that speak them?" (*Unconfessed* 77). Sila comes to the conclusion that she will never be able to express herself clearly to her oppressors.

It was like this. They asked me to speak for myself, me who was so offensive to them. They wanted to come inside my heart. It was not an entry I could permit. I

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<sup>17</sup> In his article "John Ross and Slavery", Stephen Gray examines the important role of language between oppressor and oppressed.

searched for words, but what came was a new knowledge. For one moment I thought, I, Sila van den Kaap, slave, as they called me, I could keep them from coming inside my heart if I could find words that would make them stop. I thought, oh, that it could be in wonder that they would listen to me if I had words that they understood. But, no, Baro, your mother is not a fool. There is no language to make them ashamed. Nothing I had to say could be beautiful. Not after things done. Not for me. Not for them (*Unconfessed* 240-241).

This knowledge motivates her to revert to silence and confide only in Baro, Johannes and Lys. By isolating herself in this manner, she creates a space for herself where she is free to speak her mind without the risk of being misunderstood.

In *Unconfessed*, silence becomes a language, one that criticises the institution of slavery. This “language” is expressed by the attitudes of the oppressors and the oppressed, the masters and the slaves. In the case of the oppressors, silence serves the purpose of ensuring their power over their subordinates, whereas the slaves use it as both a physical and emotional/mental defence mechanism and mode of withdrawal. In many oppressive institutions, silence aids in prolonging oppressive practices, as it prevents the voice of the oppressed to be heard and acknowledged. Oppressors are well aware of the fact that allowing their subordinates the freedom to express themselves may reflect badly upon themselves and lead to financial (and other) losses, therefore they do their utmost to prevent them from speaking out. The oppressed are well aware of the fact that disobedience can cost them dearly, therefore very few are willing to risk further oppression by drawing attention to themselves. Silence is oppression’s biggest ally, and although it is a stumbling block to the oppressed, it can also secure another type of freedom: one that allows the oppressed to maintain a sense of privacy in a society where the oppressed have no rights.

Although Sila refers to her childhood in Mozambique a few times (*Unconfessed* 290-292), it doesn’t feature as prominently as her life as a slave. The memories of her home, to which she will never return, remind her of how her life turned out and how little she can do to change it: “For a long time she did not want to remember the years before arriving at the Neethlings and let herself live only in the stories that Ma had told. It hurt too much to remember her own mother and father, and each time she did there was nothing that would make her move, hear, speak, eat” (*Unconfessed* 16). Sila’s silence not only preserves the little she remembers of her life before she became a slave, it also

helps her to continue with her daily tasks and take care of her children, instead of becoming so despondent that she is unable to function.

Sila's most notable act of expression (or rebellion) is the murder of her son, Baro, whom she kills in order to spare him the life of a slave. Where Sila's words failed to gain attention, this act did, albeit for the wrong reasons. Once again, Sila's act is not seen as an act of mercy, but as murder (*Unconfessed* 19), which leads to a court case. The court proceedings, in which Sila says very little (she maintains her silence, as words were unconvincing), highlights the hypocrisy of a society who condemns a mother for infanticide, while ignoring the motivations for her action. Her refusal to say much is viewed as obstinacy, while in actual fact, she does not believe that her words will mean anything or truly connect with anyone:

I told myself, say nothing because nothing you say will mean anything. If only I could tell you how well I made a closed gate of my speech.

It was ... Well. This is not easy. But. It was like this. They asked me to speak for myself, me who was so offensive to them. They wanted to come inside my heart. It was not an entry I could permit (*Unconfessed* 240).

Although Sila is sentenced to death, she is sent to Robben Island instead, as a result of her pregnancy.

Sila's new status as murderer leads to total isolation from society when she is taken to Robben Island as prisoner. Although her physical freedom is restricted and she is isolated from society even further, Sila finds freedom on Robben Island. Her isolation allows her to dwell on the past and break her silence, if only to the presence of her deceased son.

Throughout *Unconfessed*, the inner turmoil that Sila experiences is highlighted by presenting her consciousness to the reader in a silent dialogue that highlights the irony of her confession. The contrast between the Sila the world sees (Sila the slave/Sila van den Kaap) and the true Sila (Sila van Mozbiek) is visibly highlighted by the use of regular text (Sila the slave/Sila van den Kaap) and italics (Sila van Mozbiek). In *Slow Man* (2005) by J. M. Coetzee, this technique is also used to juxtapose the consciousness and character of the protagonist, Paul Rayment.

The text in italics presents Sila's consciousness and that which she, as a slave, woman, and prisoner will never be allowed to utter, such as her thoughts of revenge: "*Ah. Dear ladies, how kind of you to think of me. I serve the law. Hold my tongue! Hold me, keep me from growing ten times my height and taking their heads off as if I pluck dead blooms from the bush as Van der Wat's wife taught me*" (*Unconfessed* 81). Her consciousness is a store of questions, dreams and opinions that she cannot reveal to the world, as it will disregard it as the ramblings of a mad slave woman. While Sila's status as a slave is what prevents her from having the freedom to express herself and voice her opinions and thoughts, it is, ironically, her status as a prisoner that affords her the opportunity to give free reign to her thoughts and experience a type of freedom that she has never experienced before.

Although the reader becomes a witness to Sila's testimony and gains access to the thoughts, opinions, fears and dreams that she, as a slave, may never utter, her testimony remains a silent one. While the reader is allowed a glimpse into her consciousness, the fragmented narrative does not allow the reader to form a complete picture of Sila. She remains out of reach and her story remains incomplete and fragmented. In a sense, this enables her to experience true freedom; freedom from being constrained by conventions and rules.

While the reader is privy to some of the feelings, thoughts and opinions that Sila never reveals to society, such as her insecurities and thoughts of revenge, there are still things that Sila keeps only to herself. Sila's apparent refusal to reveal every detail of her life leads to a fragmented and somewhat disordered narrative, which the reader might find difficult to follow. Her narrative, however, is not merely geared towards giving the reader information about her life, it also serves the purpose of revealing the inner turmoil she experiences as a result of slavery and its many oppressive practices. Silence, therefore, also serves the purpose of revealing more about Sila's character.

The reader can use Sila's silence to gain insight into her character, as she always remains silent for a specific reason. What she doesn't say, reveals just as much about her as what she does say. The use of silence, together with the use of italics and the stream of consciousness technique, creates a very vivid illustration of the effect that

slavery has had on Sila. In many ways, the use of these techniques describes the effect of slavery on Sila much better than words could ever do. In *Unconfessed* then, silence should never be disregarded as a lack of information, but as an effective technique of characterisation.

## **5.2 Metaphor as language**

As a result of her distrust of the language of her oppressors, Sila creates a narrative by piecing events and memories together using silence, metaphor and wordplay. By using metaphors, Sila lets “words address their objects in dialogue with other words” (Sanders 109). Her use of metaphors, as well as wordplay, to describe events and experiences reveals much of her personality and “innocent” view on life. Despite everything that she has had to experience, she is still able to appreciate and commune with nature and to recognize honesty and good intentions in people. Despite her lack of education, she coins metaphors in terms of society, boundaries and language.

As a slave, Sila’s life is not her own but is, instead, governed by a society that considers her a lesser being because of her race and social status. Subsequently, her freedom is severely restricted and she has no say in where she goes or to whom she is sold. Sila is not only restricted by social boundaries such as laws, she also has to deal with natural boundaries, such as the ocean and Robben Island.

As a slave, Sila’s freedom of movement was severely impaired. She was compelled, by law, to remain on her owner’s property at all times, unless ordered otherwise. Together with this, there existed more physical boundaries, such as boats, prison, walls and locks.

Sila refers to the ship that brought her to South Africa as “the demon’s belly” (*Unconfessed* 15). This metaphor aptly describes how Sila was “consumed” by slavery; a force much stronger than herself. Later in the text, she once again uses the metaphor of a boat, this time to describe Robben Island: “This island is a ship on which I have been sailing across the years to you. And look how it is that I sail so grandly that the world draws to me and not I to it” (*Unconfessed* 55-56). Both of these metaphors convey the restriction of freedom that was slavery. In the second instance, however,

Sila's development is evident, as she manages to transcend the boundary of imprisonment and use it to gain a measure of freedom.

In another instance, Sila uses the metaphor of a boat to express the idea of freedom from slavery. When Sila thinks of Hester, a slave woman who attempted to kill herself and her children on Robben Island (an indirect reference to Sila's own act of infanticide), she is sympathetic, as she understands Hester's motivation:

*Kom, Hester. I am your boat. I will take you up. I will talk of what it is to be mothers in this country of people with stomachs full of irritation and eyes that always watch us. And I will take you to wherever you want to go, even to your god even though I have no god of my own and do not want another's. So step inside, Hester. Take hold of the sides, I am your boat, I am your friendly little boat. I will point my nose into that line where the sky takes up the earth like coins placed in the plate by the congregation of fancy white ladies who hide the fleabites under their high tides of skirts. Climb in, climb in. We are bound for the place where sun and sky hide a gate that only we will be let through. Come, Hester. Come, come (Unconfessed 84, italics of the text).*

By using boats as both negative and positive metaphors, Sila points out her negative circumstances and the boundaries that restrict her freedom, but also illustrates her ability to transcend it and use it to her advantage.

Nature features very prominently in *Unconfessed* and elements such as the ocean and Robben Island serve as metaphors for isolation, imprisonment and freedom. Sila derives courage from her interpretation of natural influences on her spirit. Nature touches her soul and heals her broken spirit. It evokes a kind of poetic appreciation and awareness that, ironically, transcends her apparent silence and distrust of language. In terms of nature, Sila also refers to time and the passing of time in terms of the seasons: "December again. How did that happen? How did this year become a mouse that slips under a door before you can catch it?" (*Unconfessed* 237).

Despite the fact that both the ocean and Robben Island play such an immense part in Sila's isolation and imprisonment, she doesn't resent either of them, but finds freedom in her imprisonment and isolation. Sila sees the ocean as a symbol of purity, and while watching ships off the coast, she remarks that

[s]ome days I make my eyes reach far, further still, and I tell you I see the anchors splash into the water off that coast, there, that Cape of Tears, Cape of Death, Cape of Struggles, whose contagion will spread up, into land far from the sea – a dry land (*Unconfessed* 74).

Despite the fact that Sila was taken to the Cape via the sea, she does not resent the sea for her life of slavery, but, rather, resents those who used the sea to further their agenda. Instead, her references to the sea or the ocean seem to be devoid of any hatred or contempt. This is because she does not consider the sea to be complicit in her fate, but as a path, or a form of travel that allowed her captors to convey their “cargo” to their country. Sila also uses the word “place” very often (especially when she directs Baro around Robben Island in Chapter 3) and when she becomes more despondent and claims that she doesn’t long for her childhood, “but the years before *this place*” (*Unconfessed* 342, italics added).

Baderoon’s observation that “[t]he Atlantic that imprisons Sila on Robben Island also promises to release her from slavery by carrying her memories back to Mozambique, her place of origin in another ocean,” (Baderoon 95) offers a very concise explanation of Sila’s apparent lack of animosity towards the sea. Sila realises that although the sea was the pathway to her life of slavery, it is also her path to freedom and would one day separate her from “that Cape of Tears, Cape of Death, Cape of Struggles, whose contagion will spread up, into land far from the sea – a dry land” (*Unconfessed* 74). Whether the sea will carry her away from South Africa and the Cape in a boat or in “a *long and narrow box*” (*Unconfessed* 350) is not of great concern to Sila, as she knows that eventually she will experience freedom and that the sea will, once again, return her to her place of origin.

Sila’s metaphors not only address certain events or objects, they also address the way in which she (both aurally and visually) observes events around her. Throughout her life, she had to witness many unpleasant and distressing things. Everything that she observes she interprets and relates as she understands it. In Chapter 4, she continually asks Baro if he can see her; “*Can you see me? What do you see when you see me, my son?*” (*Unconfessed* 68). As Sila is speaking to the presence of her son, it can be assumed that she means if he sees the true Sila, Sila van Mozbiek.

Sila also relies on her sight to tell her what words can't (and to compensate for her damaged hearing) such as the indifference of society to the suffering of slaves, "*paper can be folded like eyes that close from things they do not want to see*" (*Unconfessed* 100); the hypocrisy of religious leaders, "The minister comes in black, clutching his bible, and – look there, see? – his wooden heels are worn. His clothes stink of tobacco and too much wine. His face glows" (*Unconfessed* 79) and the effects of slavery on slaves, "*Look at Matroos, Soldaat, Keizer and Vigiland. They are telling us something*" (*Unconfessed* 205). She also uses her sight to describe her environment, such as changes in weather, "The sky gets that look again" (*Unconfessed* 196); and "The sun jumps off the river like silver frogs" (*Unconfessed* 244). At times, however, it seems that everything she sees and witnesses becomes overwhelming: "Some days I do not want to open my eyes and some days not even that saves me" (*Unconfessed* 83).

Together with her sight, Sila also relies a lot on her hearing to tell her more about the people and places around her. Unlike her sight, however, her hearing is impaired, as a result of a beating she suffered at the hands of Van der Wat (*Unconfessed* 324). Despite this, she still uses her hearing to draw conclusions about her environment, such as the roof of her hut on Robben Island: "And all the time the rain is running down the edges of the roof and through the roof. It is a sound that means neglect" (*Unconfessed* 147). There are, however, also times when she is grateful for her impaired hearing, such as the day she was taken to Robben Island: "She was thankful for her damaged hearing. Things were being said and they were behind a thick wall" (*Unconfessed* 26).

Sila's observations of her environment and the people around her not only describe events, they also give the reader insight into the way Sila perceives her environment. This, together with the various other techniques employed in *Unconfessed*, such as the fragmented narrative, aids in creating as complete a picture of Sila as possible.

### **5.3 Words**

There are many instances where wordplay is used in *Unconfessed*, more often than not to criticise something. However, this aptitude of hers also displays her wry sense of humour. When the minister's wife tells Sila about a "family tree" she observes: "Well. If you look around this island you will see. There are no trees worth mentioning"

(*Unconfessed* 213). Sila also makes the ironic comment that the warden “does not care about us women. The guards care too much about us” (*Unconfessed*, 46).

Religion and hypocrisy are usually at the receiving end of Sila’s criticism, especially when Sila mixes up biblical or other religious texts when referring to specific people or incidents, such as “that swine Van der Wat and his family pronking off to prayers at a neighbour’s farm with their pious stout faces served up on the platter of their holy words like vet little piglets snorting in the Lord’s trough” (*Unconfessed* 10); or her statement, “And dust will be all that becomes of their offspring and their offspring’s offspring. I say it so that it will go down as if it is writing on paper” (*Unconfessed* 161). Sila was constantly exposed to religion and religious ceremonies, especially during her time on the Neethling farm. She simultaneously witnessed the hypocritical nature of religious people, which nurtured a strong distrust of religion in her. It can be argued that Sila’s limited knowledge and understanding of the Bible and religious practices, together with her distrust of religion led to her sometimes critical, although unintentional, wordplay. In one such instance, when she contemplates revenge on Van der Wat, she says, “*Dear right hand, wicked right hand. Let them see you. Knock three times on their walls and let their walls fall down*” (*Unconfessed* 326). Sila also often refers to “dreams”, “stories” and “lies” (she seems to connect the last two as synonymous).

Apart from the wordplay, there are also numerous images or themes that present themselves throughout the novel, the most prominent being the images of stones and snakes. Throughout *Unconfessed*, the image of snakes has negative connotations, such as danger, betrayal and jealousy. Sila describes her jealousy of Mina’s happiness as “a small snake in my heart” (*Unconfessed* 238) and she describes herself as “the woman who will spit like a snake if they do not take me off this place with my girls” (*Unconfessed* 133). Sila also often dreams of snakes, which predicts danger: “The nights before our world ended, I dreamed of snakes. There were many of them and they were all of a colour I had never seen. They were pale, like a past. They had no nature that I could tell of” (*Unconfessed* 292).

Whereas snakes symbolise danger, betrayal and jealousy, stones usually refer to burdens and difficulties. Much like the carrying of stones from the quarry on Robben Island, so Sila carries many burdens with her. When she thinks back to the day Carolina

and Camies were taken from her, she uses the image of stones to describe her emotions: “*Something heavy sits in my throat when I look at this place. Stones in my throat. Stones in my stomach. I have been swallowing stones for years. I am sick of stones, but they are not done with me*” (*Unconfessed* 75). She also uses the image of a stone to emphasise her humanity: “My heart is not a stone. If it were, I would be, yes, comfortable” (*Unconfessed* 202). The use of this image contradicts what society believes slaves to be – heartless and cruel.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to establish the significance of the revival of the female slave narrative both in South Africa and in other countries; to analyse the representation of the autodiegetic narrator, Sila, in *Unconfessed* in terms of the traditional autobiographical genre, as well as the confessional and testimonial modes of narration; and to indicate how the protagonist transgresses and transcends the physical and social boundaries imposed on her.

In a country where very few factual slave narratives exist, fictional slave narratives address both the slave question in South Africa, as well as the issues that those slaves who were afforded the opportunity to recount their experiences in other countries (such as Frederick Douglass, Olaudah Equiano and Linda Brent) were wary to address, as their audiences might have been offended. This in itself makes *Unconfessed* a notable text, as it addresses a part of South African history that seems to have been forgotten, or rather, overshadowed by a more recent oppressive practice: apartheid. Apart from the practice of slavery, women of all races also had to contend with a patriarchal system. In this context, the recent revival of female slave narratives is quite significant (in South Africa in particular), as slave women, who suffered a double oppression (Lenta 2010:100) are finally given a voice. It also points to a change in society, as there finally seems to be a willingness to bear witness to the atrocities committed in what seemed to be a long-forgotten part of history.

Although the mixing of genres is not uncommon, *Unconfessed's* structure is notable in that its combination of autobiography and the testimonial and confessional modes aids in the reinforcement of the themes of place and crossing of boundaries, which are two prominent themes in the text. Sila's ability to create a provisional freedom for herself by transgressing the physical boundaries imposed on her by society, is embodied in the merging of genres and modes to create a hybrid text, which enables Christiansë to represent Sila's resilience and courage to transgress physical and social boundaries.

Furthermore, Sila is allowed the additional freedom to develop and express her identity by making her the narrator of her own story. As an autodiegetic narrator, Sila's story is

related purely from her point of view. Albeit fragmented and wanting in chronological order, Sila's narrative style can be considered effective, as it reflects the effect that slavery, imprisonment and oppression have imprinted on her. It also is a reflection of her disordered thoughts and confusion regarding certain issues/events. The first and the last chapters of *Unconfessed* are narrated by an unknown heterodiegetic narrator. Unlike Sila's narration, this narration is structured and not fragmented. This further aids in emphasising the devastating psychological effects of slavery.

Nieuwoudt (12) argues that by granting Sila this freedom, the author, Christiansë, attempts to avoid making her a representative of all female slaves. However, even though the text focuses exclusively on Sila's life, it does still, to some extent, reflect the plight of all female slaves, especially with regard to sexual abuse, infanticide (Hester's story) and motherhood.

The fragmentary effect of slavery on Sila's psyche is further illustrated by the use of regular, as well as italicised text. These two "opposing" types of text represent the two different Silas; Sila van Mozbiek and Sila van den Kaap. By making a distinction between the two Silas, Sila acknowledges the boundaries placed on her by society, but also shows her resolve to transcend these boundaries by creating another persona, one who is free from the restrictions of slavery. Sila van Mozbiek is not only able to defy her oppressors by escaping her external reality, she also gives herself the opportunity to come to terms with her past, her present and her uncertain future.

Sila addresses three different people or presences during her narrative: Baro, Lys and Johannes. She does not tell every one of her listeners the same thing or give them the same details, which points to Sila's possible manipulation of the reader. This possibility becomes especially clear when her narrative to Johannes is compared with that to Baro and Lys. When she speaks to Johannes she seems almost polite and vulnerable and keeps the "distasteful" information to a minimum (*Unconfessed* 301-329). As a result of her distrust in the language of her oppressors (*Unconfessed* 277), she relates her story with the use of metaphors, similes and silence. Sila creates her own type of language, which might create confusion for the reader. For this reason, language cannot be considered a dependable intermediary between silence and the reader.

When relating her story, Sila has to rely on her memory in order to create a whole. She has to fit all of the pieces of the puzzles together in order to create a complete image. This relates to the concept of photorealism, which

may be regarded as one manifestation of a larger concept – the idea that a representational image is brought into being by the combination of a vast number of tiny pieces, each of which is representationally inert except in relation to the other pieces with which it combines, according to specific rules (Sanders 113).

At times, however, even Sila seems to doubt the accuracy of her memories (*Unconfessed* 271), which calls into question the accuracy of her narrative.

Christiansë's interview with Nieuwoudt (12) raises the question if Christiansë truly manages to afford Sila some freedom, or whether Sila is still used to represent the thousands of others like her. Apart from this, the fact that Christiansë also experienced oppression under the apartheid regime probably influenced the narrative, which means that the author, at times, might have served as an amanuensis between Sila and the reader. The possibility that Christiansë serves as an amanuensis is hinted at when Sila says "I need to sleep, but not to dream" (*Unconfessed* 208), which resonates with a section from Hamlet's well-known soliloquy in Act three (Scene I) of Shakespeare's play titled *Hamlet*: "To sleep! perchance to dream".

Sila's internal reality allows her to develop her identity, come to terms with her past and develop as an individual. As a slave, a woman, and prisoner, Sila's freedom is severely restricted and she has to endure constant physical and sexual abuse, and movement from one owner to the next. Together with this abuse, she also has to deal with the deception of authority figures, such as Missus Neethling, Hancke and the justice system. Although she often dreams about the future and freedom and refers to herself as a free woman (*Unconfessed* 266), Sila realises that freedom is nothing but an impossible dream.

The only way in which Sila is able to transcend these circumstances is by creating a reality for herself, one which is not bound by the laws of her oppressors. She manages to do this by embracing the harsh environment on Robben Island, which she also associates with the harsh realities of a slave's life. In the process of accepting her fate, she confronts her guilt and remorse about Baro's death, guilt that she feels in spite of

her contention that she had no other choice, but to “send” Baro away (*Unconfessed* 155), much like Hester (*Unconfessed* 84) who walked into the sea with her children.

Despite what she might claim during her narrative, the closest that the reader comes to Sila’s true self is towards the end of the novel, where her narrative seems to gain an even more fragmented effect. It is during these chapters that Sila’s true feelings and regrets come to light, where she no longer seems to see the need to be strong and composed.

Although Andre Brink’s slave woman, Philida, in his recently published eponymous novel (2012) experiences similar issues and also shows a spirited personality, she seems less convincing with regard to creating her own story. This could be attributed to the effects of confessional and testimonial literature that create an aura of authenticity in Sila’s accounts. The dual personas of Sila van Mozbiek and Sila van den Kaap clearly separate the past from the present and allow her to take stock of her position. Both novels address infanticide, however, Sila’s account of Baro’s death seems much more authentic and vivid than Philida’s account of her son’s death. This can be attributed to the fact that Sila’s relation of Baro’s death is related in the confessional mode, whereas Philida’s relation of her son’s death seems to be related more matter-of-factly. Together with this, Sila’s entire narrative seems to centre on her act of infanticide, whereas Philida’s story seems to revolve more around her romance with Frans Brink.

*Unconfessed’s* focus on a part of South African history that seems to have been forgotten, is relevant for modern audiences, as it relates to the practice of human trafficking, which is rampant in many parts of the world today. Apart from human trafficking, various countries (especially developing countries) still employ oppressive practices, which affect women in particular<sup>18</sup>. Although the wrongs of slavery cannot be corrected, revisiting this part of South African history will serve the purpose of creating a dialogue in society, one which might shed light on the motivations behind oppressive practices. While this might not necessarily lead to the eradication of these practices, it will create an awareness thereof.

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<sup>18</sup> Nicholas Kristof, a well-known *New York Times* journalist, does a lot of research on oppressive practices. His recent publication, *Half the Sky*, addresses the oppression of women in developing countries.

In conclusion, the generic transgression and notion of transcending boundaries bring a welcome angle/slant to first-person narration and introspection which have become more prominent in South African writing in general.

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