

Narrating the 'nation':

Cultural production, political community and young Afrikaans readers

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¹ Information obtained from Steyn (1992:10).

² Data from Steyn (1992: 9-10) and based on articles that appeared in *Die Volksblad* on 4 April 1936, *Die Burger* on 2 December 1935, and *Die Vaderland* on 21 June 1935.

³ Malherbe 1932: 132

⁴ Ibid, p. 131-135

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between literature and society against the background of the emergence in the 1930s and 1940s in South Africa of a form of Afrikaner nationalism that was spearheaded by members of the Afrikaner petty bourgeoisie and intelligentsia and a subsequent expansion in Afrikaans literary production. It addresses problems of explanation in Afrikaner nationalism by focusing attention on the question of culture, the field of imagination and the domain of everyday life. In particular, the study examines the *Keurboslaan* series - a series of schoolboy stories aimed at juvenile readers - by Stella Blakemore, and traces the production, circulation and critical reception of the twenty titles in the series. The first title in this series was published in 1941 and the series has been reprinted several times over a number of decades and as recently as 1997.

Drawing on the work of Benedict Anderson, this study illuminates the link between the emergence of print capitalism and the production of popular fiction on the one hand and nationalism on the other. Whilst this is a link that is not often explored, an analysis of the *Keurboslaan* series illustrates that the study of popular fiction can illuminate the practices through which nationalism gains popular support.

It is argued that the *Keurboslaan* series produced a narrative of the Afrikaner 'nation' in popular fiction, but that this narrative was not authenticated by the intelligentsia and petty bourgeoisie who were the driving forces behind Afrikaner nationalism and its contents. It is further argued that this 'narrative of nation' circulated alongside more official narratives of the 'nation' espoused in discourses of religion, science and literature published in Afrikaans. The narrative of 'nation' in *Keurboslaan* – whilst sharing many similarities with official narratives in other discourses – but also differs from those discourses in important respects. It is argued that the popular series was influential precisely because it imagined the Afrikaner 'nation' in very different ways and on different terms from those discourses. Moreover, the form in which this narrative was produced, that is popular youth literature, appealed to readers of Afrikaans who were in search of escapist fiction. For these readers, the *Keurboslaan* series helped to give shape to and created new possibilities for interpreting the world that they inhabited.

Reading the school as a corollary of the 'nation', it is argued that the narrative of the nation in *Keurboslaan* series explores the boundaries between the self and the other

and posits the self as a danger to the self, resulting in an emphasis on the need to discipline the self. This kind of analysis also creates the space for examining in what ways ideas and identities about 'race', gender, sexuality, class and 'nation' are constructed in the texts.

Yet, the study maintains that whilst the *Keurboslaan* series contributed to creating a space in which a particular understanding of the self and the world becomes possible, and whereas the reader is not conceived of as a completely free agent that can derive simply any meaning from the text, the study and its theoretical underpinnings do not fully account for individual readers' engagement with popular texts and the ways in which reading strategies and habits can generate different, ambiguous or inconclusive meanings for readers. It is suggested that a study of popular texts and Afrikaner nationalism employing theories of reading and the reader will complement this analysis.

Key words: youth literature, children's literature, popular fiction, Stella Blakemore, Afrikaner nationalism, J.L. van Schaik publishers, apartheid, class, Pierre Bourdieu, Antonio Gramsci, Benedict Anderson, Louis Althusser, Charles Taylor, Michel de Certeau, organic intellectual, Maasdorp series, Keurboslaan series, sexuality, race, gender, formula books.

Opsomming

Hierdie studie ondersoek die verband tussen literatuur en samelewing teen die agtergrond van die opkoms in die 1930s en 1940s van Afrikaner nasionalisme, aangevoer deur die lede van die Afrikaner *petit bourgeoisie* en intelligentsia, en die gepaardgaande uitbreiding van Afrikaanse literêre produksie. In die besonder het hierdie studie dan ten doel om probleme wat bestaan met betrekking tot die verduideliking van die verskynsel van Afrikaner-nasionalisme die hoof te bied. Dit word gedoen deur die kwessie van kultuur op die voorgrond te bring, en deur die alledaagse en die verbeeldingswêreld te belig. Die studie handel oor die *Keurboslaan*-reeks, 'n reeks skoolseunstories, gemik op die jeugdige Afrikaanse leser, geskryf deur Stella Blakemore. Die studie speur die produksie, verspreiding en kritiese ontvangs van die tekste na. Die eerste titel in die reeks het in 1941 verskyn, en die reeks is telkemale heruitgegee, tot so onlangs as 1997.

Na aanleiding van Benedict Anderson se werk oor die nasie as verbeelde gemeenskap, fokus hierdie studie op die verband tussen die opkoms van druk-

kapitalisme en die produksie van populêre fiksie aan die een kant en nasionalisme aan die ander. Hoewel hierdie verband nie dikwels die fokus van ondersoek is nie, wys die studie van die *Keurboslaan*-reeks dat akademiese ondersoek na populêre fiksie ons kennis van die wyses waarop en praktyke waardeur nasionalisme populêre steun verwerf kan verdiep.

Die argument wat in die studie uiteengesit word is dat die *Keurboslaan*-reeks 'n narratief van nasie geproduseer het, maar een wat nie goedgekeur is deur die intelligentsia en lede van die *petit bourgeoisie* wat die beweging rondom Afrikaner-nasionalisme aangevoer het nie. Hierdie narratief van nasie het dan naas ander, meer amptelike, narratiewe van nasie gesirkuleer. Hoewel die narratief van nasie soos vergestalt in die *Keurboslaan*-reeks in groot ooreenkomste getoon het met meer amptelike diskoerse oor nasie, het dit ook in belangrike opsigte daarvan verskil. Die argument word gevoer dat die reeks populêr was juis omdat dit die Afrikaner 'nasie' verbeeld het op maniere wat anders was en wat in terme van die grondliggende aannames verskil het van die meer amptelike narratiewe van nasie wat in diskoerse van wetenskap, godsdiens en literatuur geproduseer is. Die spesifieke vorm wat hierdie narratief aangeneem, naamlik populêre fiksie vir kinders of jeugdiges, het lesers wat juis op daardie stadium 'n behoefte gehad het aan ontsnappingsliteratuur aangestaan. Vir hierdie lesers het die *Keurboslaan*-reeks daartoe bygedra om moontlikhede te vorm en te skep om die wêreld waarin hulle leef op nuwe maniere te interpreteer.

Die skool word gelees as die simboliese teenhanger van die 'nasie' en daar word daarop gewys dat die narratief van nasie in die *Keurboslaan*-reeks die grense tussen die self en die ander ondersoek, en dat die self voorgestel word as 'n gevaar vir die self, wat dan lei tot die beklemtoning van die belangrikheid van self-dissipline. Hierdie tipe analise skep ruimte om die wyse waarop 'ras', gender, seksualiteit, klas en 'nasie' in die tekste gekonstrueer word te ondersoek.

Hoewel die studie voorhou dat die *Keurboslaan*-reeks bygedra het om 'n ruimte te skep waarin 'n spesifieke perspektief op die wêreld en die self moontlik word, en hoewel die leser nie nie voorgelou word as 'n radikaal-vrye agent wat bloot enige betekenis uit die teks kan ontsluit nie, kan die studie en die teoretiese basis waarop dit gebou is steeds nie genoegsaam verduidelik hoe individuele lesers met populêre tekste omgaan en hoedat verskillende leesstrategieë en -gewoontes verskillende betekenis vir lesers kan ontsluit nie. 'n Studie oor die verband tussen populêre tekste en Afrikaner-

nasionalisme wat gebruik maak van teorieë oor lees en oor die leser, sal die argument wat hier uiteengesit is dus op besondere wyse aanvul.

Sleuteltermes: jeuglektuur, kinderliteratuur, kinderlektuur, populêre fiksie, Stella Blakemore, Afrikaner-nasionalisme, nasionalisme, J.L. van Schaik-uitgewers, apartheid, klas, Pierre Bourdieu, Antonio Gramsci, Benedict Anderson, Charles Taylor, Louis Althusser, Michel de Certeau, organiese intellektueel, Maasdorp-reeks, Keurboslaan-reeks, 'ras', gender, seksualiteit, reeksboeke.

I never can thank Providence enough for the Maasdorp and [Keurboslaan] characters, who found me rather than I found them. With all my faults as a writer, the characters live for us all.

Stella Blakemore, letter to Jan van Schaik dated 7 February 1959

Merkwaardig hoe al die volke wat eers nooit met mekaar in aanraking gekom het nie, hul emosionele ondervindings in byna dieselfde woorde uit.

[Remarkable how nations that have never had any contact with each other express their emotional experiences in almost the same words.]

Mr Schoonbee, *Jong dr. Serfontein*

Nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of that word's multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind...

It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion (1991:6).

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*